

FORMATION, INITIAL AND ONGOING

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Introduction

When we, in the CIB, were asked to submit topics for the break-out sessions during the Abbots' Congress, I had so many topics in mind, relevant topics, and I settled to write: **"Formation, Initial and Ongoing."** I was happy that this topic was chosen and I did not know that it would fall on me to give an introduction about this in this group. I am not an authority in this matter but I have accepted the challenge and I know that it would be a great chance for sharing and for growth.

I would like to situate this introduction on "Formation, Initial and Ongoing" in the general context of Monastic Formation reflecting on the challenges of Formation, the Formators and Formands. Monastic formation has developed significantly to include the ongoing formation. J. Rippinger, OSB, pointed this out in an article on ongoing formation that Monastic formation referred to formation of novices and juniors for many years but now have stretched to include ongoing formation for all monastics.¹ This signalled the increasing complexity of formation as life-long process, an intertwining of both initial and ongoing formation. Apparently, monastic formation became vulnerable to influences of compartmentalization, specialization, competencies, psychological screening, and technological skills, etc. These improvement do not guarantee a crisis-free pursuit of monastic vocation.

There could be a number of specific motives for which a monastic could have difficulties with monastic vocational call. They could be on account of the problems confronting a monastic in living the monastic life and in the practice of the monastic vows of stability, conversion of life (fidelity to monastic life) and obedience. There could be problems in community life and interpersonal relationships and perhaps from some doubts about one's calling to belong to Christ. And there are many more challenges along the process. These are specific issues that ask for proper interventions, direct or therapeutic, that includes spiritual direction, psychological counseling, personal or group therapy, dialogue and the like.

I would like to give short introduction to the three elements of the topic: Formation, Formands and Formators. Short clarification of terms, and sharing some challenges and few dynamics inherent to monastic formation and its transformational character will mainly be done through small group sharing and a big group sharing. I am presenting two cases of real experiences that will serve as the diving board for the group to engage themselves in finding a

¹Cf. Joel Rippinger, OSB, *Ongoing Formation: Retrieving A Tradition for Contemporary Monasticism*, (Marmion Abbey, Aurora, Illinois), p. 1.

common ground for discussion. It is hoped that it will generate interest among us to identify the present challenges of Formation, both in the initial and ongoing formation, and articulate some possible ways and means to address them.

Clarification of terminology

Etymologically, the word formation comes from the latin word "formare" which would mean "to mould". In pedagogical literature, there are three words that should not be confused with formation because of the similarity of its meaning and action: *education*, *instruction* and *learning*. These three are part and parcel of formation but not limited to it. Formation is much more demanding. It is not a particular act that has a time frame nor is it a communication of any particular content. "Formation" should be understood as a process that brings about a transformation in the person and that affects the persons' entire mode of existence.² Thus, "formation is a life-long process." It lasts all through one's life and it can be said that formation ends in death, when we are already "six feet below the ground."

The process involves the task of integration which is a constant that leads to organizing, reorganizing and restructuring one's self modified by various events, happenings and relationships. It involves a development toward attaining a sense of responsibility in the use of freedom. Growth is the key: growing in the life of the Spirit, in faith, hope and charity through seeking God in community, to follow Christ and to strive in constant conversion of the heart. There is need for a continuous learning in order to advance in awareness to better serve the Lord. This calls for a real commitment to develop the various aspects of life: human, spiritual, intellectual, cross-cultural, formation for mission; theoretic, academic, and practical aspects, etc. Formation never ends and takes into account all dimensions and stages of the person, and gives priority to life in the Spirit as an aspect that structures and gives meaning to others.³

After the Council, Roman documents would distinguish among pre-novitiate (aspirancy, postulancy), novitiate, first profession up to perpetual vows, "ongoing formation of the mature years," and the "time of diminishment," when one prepares to meet the Lord.⁴ Two distinct phases of Formation: Initial and Ongoing formation in communities have flexibility challenges because of the diverse backgrounds of those undergoing the initial formation. We can expect the same flexibility to take root in the ongoing formation.

²Cf. SACRED CONGREGATION FOR RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR INSTITUTES, *The Religious and Human Promotion* (12 August 1980), St. Paul Editions: Boston 1980), n. 33.

³Vita Consecrata # 65.

⁴"Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life," Sacred Congregation of the Religious and Secular Institutes, (Rome, 1983), n. 83.

The Formands

"Where do I begin?" An existential question for all those who seek God. Describing formation as a life-long journey, a process and a journey towards transformation, it always begins with the first step, Initial Formation. This is the first step of a process destined to last a lifetime. This makes the task of formation undeniably urgent. It all began in "Galilee" as Peter tells us in his first discourse. We have our own "Galilee" experiences...of encountering the Lord.

The formands begin their journey of seeking to discern God's will. This discernment should lead the candidate to embrace the monastic life, to the following of the Gospel, to the ideals set in the Rule of Benedict and to the charism of the specific community they felt they are called to. It follows several stages before they are fully immersed in the community by profession. These are the inquiry stage or observation stage or getting to know you stage. At this point in time, their experience is crucial and will be the basis of their decision to request to enter to the next stage. The substance of the formation program shared to these Seekers are important to further their quest to live the monastic/religious life. Every community has something unique to offer to every unique candidate. The Sisters/Community in walking and discerning with the candidate contribute to the decision whether to move forward or to pursue another plan. At these stages, it is important to see some indicators: joy instead of fear; attitude of openness and listening; the ability to make a commitment and to remain open to the working of the spirit in them. As the Postulant asks for entry to the Novitiate, she is driven by the determination to truly seek God in the particular community. This is a time of transition and she will undergo an intense formation and guidance to determine readiness for the next stage.

The Novitiate is a time of deeper immersion into the monastic community where the formands experience the life and prayer of the community. This is the time that they strive to deepen their relationship with God; to be able to listen to God's voice and to strengthen oneself in the pursuit of God who invites the novice to live the monastic life more fully until they are ready to commit themselves through Monastic Profession.

The Formators

The formators play a very important role to sustain the desire of the formands. At the initial formation, formators may not be able to overwhelm the seeker by the many concerns in the formation: the balance of Ora et Labora and studies. This is a fragile stage where "witness" is necessary to enrich the Galilee experience. Often, in communities, where the Novitiate is not separated from the Priory (in our case), I would say to the Sisters, particularly the professed, "Please take care of this gift of vocation of these young ladies who expressed willingness to follow Christ through our community."

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Do not go ahead of God to test the vocation of the young."⁵ His holiness Pope Francis, highlighted this during his address to the formators in April 2015 that "there is no vocational crisis where there are consecrated persons able to transmit, by their own witness, the beauty of consecration. And it is a fruitful witness. If there is no witness, there is no coherence, and if there is no coherence, there will be no vocations." He added, they are "not only teachers, but above all witnesses of following Christ is their own charism. The task and mission of the formators is to "truly mould the heart of Jesus in the heart of the young, so that they have the same sentiments."⁶

A few years ago, I met a formator who asked me how many formands do we have. I answered eight and she grasped my hand filled with awe because they do not have one for the last two years. When she asked how we did it, I told her that these are young ladies who came to know us through the internet, who, afterwards, came regularly to visit and join our prayers. Hospitality especially in prayers made a difference to them and they made their decision. And she asked: "Where have they and the formation gone wrong?"

Let us take note that there are direct formators, those tasked to be formators, and there are indirect formators. Both, the direct formators and the members of the community as indirect formators truly witness to the young. Their witnessing have a great impact to encourage, nurture and enrich the vocation of the candidates. What becomes of the young candidate depend largely not only on the formators but on the community itself. When something goes wrong, it is unfair to point a finger to the formators. It is not surprising that less and less religious are open and excited to take the reins of formation in communities. Michael Casey puts forward one comforting assurance that the one goal of formation is to convince people that they are normal and that the formators, despite the particularity of experiences, are approaching normality. He hopes that despite the failures, pressures, difficulties in carrying out their tasks/mission, they will know that those are not uniquely theirs but are shared by others.⁷

⁵This is my personal observation. Most of the young seekers get discouraged by older monastics who treats and challenges them for reasons of testing their vocation. In the past, the young tries to hurdle these kinds of treatment because they want to persevere. However, very few did it.

⁶VIS News, Holy See Press Office: To formators of consecrated persons: not only teachers, but also witnesses of following Christ." (April 13, 2015), accessed 24 November 2015.

⁷Michael Casey, OSB. *The Art of Winning Souls*. (Cistercians Publications: 2012), p. xi.

Ongoing formation

From the time of Vatican Council II, we have received the call for new ways of priests, religious and consecrated life formation. The concept of formation in general and the notion of ongoing formation have evolved according to the various formational experiences that the very same Council had begun.⁸ From the two distinct phases i.e. Initial formation and ongoing formation, the concept of ongoing formation is not understood as remedial measure due to problems in the Initial formation. It is not its complement, perfection, adaptation or fulfillment. On the contrary, Initial formation must be ordered toward ongoing formation. It is a preparation for a life of ongoing formation, but Initial formation has a relative autonomy and its own requirements since it is a stage of initiation into religious life. Initial formation is the first stage of a life of ongoing formation. This is an opportunity to develop and nurture the spiritual and intellectual senses and acquiring and growing in right attitudes and skills that lead to a continuous change and growth. Fidelity to Monastic life is one of our particular Benedictine vow that acknowledges that life by its very nature is continuous and changing - *conversatio*. The various interventions and elements in the monastic life, when harmonized, guarantee maturity and development of the person. Ongoing formation enables the person to open up to change and continuity and continuity amidst changes. This is the dynamic behind the word *fidelity* that implies constant adherence to the Gospel values and their appropriation and incarnation in the diverse circumstances and stages of life.

Understanding formation as ongoing refers to the fact that it is a constant personalization or interiorization of Christ's life. It is a learning process which involves change, growth and the transformation of the person. From the point of view of Canon Law, "perpetual profession [is] the point of arrival, and at the same time it is the point of departure in religious life, integrally and progressively lived in the institute, and calls for the continual deepening of formation by responding to ever new necessities, thus rendering the religious capable of dynamic fidelity to God's design in the ever-changing circumstances and needs of the Church and world."⁹ In line with this, ongoing formation begins only after the initial formation is completed and when maturity, clarified motivation and the desire to renew and perfect oneself permanently becomes

⁸cf. Perfectae Caritatis (PC) 18. There had been various documents (e.g. *Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life As Applied to Institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate; Basic Norms for the Formation of Priests, and Vita Consecrata*) on formation since Vatican II which insist on developing the integral, global, and ongoing concept of formation.

⁹E. Gambari, *Religious Life, According to Vatican II and the New Code of Canon Law* (St. Paul Editions: Boston 1986), p. 250.

obvious indicators for readiness to start the ongoing formation. However, as I have mentioned earlier, ongoing formation starts right at the onset of the Initial formation. The different stages at Initial formation already address the total approach of formation as the candidates begin the process of learning, acquiring skills, discovering talents, abilities, competencies and opening themselves to embrace the specific spirituality of the life they choose to live from now on. Even though it is pursued by stages, formation as ongoing starts. The first step defines the next and so on. There might be some internal and external factors that will shake these steps, but a religious who reached a level of spiritual maturity is able to carry out what is asked of her/him. The religious, upon knowing the situation and the various challenges and demands of vocation will now, filled with enthusiasm, freely enter into the process of becoming more and more like Christ. It is a continuous process of conversion and transformation. Continuing conversion is a challenge the person/candidate faces moving forward toward the full realization of the fullness of the person of Christ within oneself.¹⁰

It is worth mentioning that the Community is a privilege place for ongoing formation.¹¹ In it, each member finds the necessary support and motivation. The religious community is the natural setting of the process of growth where everyone is asked to provide chances and the right environment for the growth of others. Each community with the aid of the international community in the spirit of solidarity ought to intensify the simple and accessible means for ongoing formation i.e. the daily Eucharist, personal and community prayer, lectio divina, retreats and recollections, spiritual direction, sacrament of reconciliation, *ad intra* and *ad extra* mission, etc.

As we move on now to the small group sharing, I wish to conclude that the very limited practical aspects presented here will find a more fruitful synthesis in the sharing. Initial and Ongoing formation are integral realities in the life-long process of "becoming more aware of God's redeeming love"¹² or interiorization of Christ's life.

¹⁰Cf. K. McAlpin, "Conversion. A Summons from the Word of God," in *Review for Religious* 61 (2002) 1, p. 49.

¹¹Vita Consecrata, 67.

¹²Taken from the message of Pope Benedict XVI for Vocation Sunday, 12 April 2006. *Osservatore Romano*, p.5.