

The Monastic Formators' Program:
an introduction for a workshop at the Abbots' Congress
September 2016

In 1996, Prior Emanuele Bargellini, the then General of the Camaldolese, offered a challenge at the Abbots' Congress concerning the program of monastic studies offered by Sant' Anselmo. The academic approach of the Monastic Institute at that time, he said, failed to meet the needs of many who came for help as formators faced with the task of initiating candidates to the living monastic tradition. In his view a wisdom and experience based course was essential in order to provide a serious and practical training for formators. The importance of Prior Emanuele's words was underlined by Dom Bernardo Olivera, the retired Abbot General of the Trappists, when he said "formation is the future of monastic life".

As a result of this challenge, Abbot Primate Marcel Rooney set up a working party to research the possibility and practicality of establishing a monastic formators' program. The fruit of some 4 years of study and preparation was the present Monastic Formators' Program which has run eleven 3 month sessions in English since 2002. There has been a total of some 330 participants from more than 40 countries.

Fr Brendan Thomas of Belmont Abbey (England) and I, Fr Mark Butlin of Ampleforth Abbey, have directed the Program from the outset, supported by a faculty of about 16 highly qualified lecturers able to draw on a rich personal experience of the monastic and Benedictine tradition. It has become very clear to us that it is of key importance to have teachers who can share not just solid academic knowledge but also the lived reality of monastic life. The full content of the course and details concerning those who teach on it can be seen in the presentation booklet for the 2015 session.

The multicultural nature of the Program allied with the diverse backgrounds of the participants presents a particular challenge as well as giving richness. Furthermore they come from different traditions

and expressions of monastic living of both men and women belonging to the worldwide Benedictine- Cistercian family. To benefit from this diversity necessitates a sensitive and creative approach at all levels which includes adaptation to a wide range of intellectual ability. One of the most successful aspects of Program has been its capacity to bring about a genuine experience of Christian community among such a diversity of people in a matter of 3 months. The openness and depth of personal sharing has been a particularly significant feature of this achievement.

What we, as the organizers, have discovered over the period of the last 14 years is reflected in the main features of the Program we offer. We have learnt that shared experience based on community life and common prayer provides the key foundation for discovering the real value and richness of our monastic tradition. Experience, insight, and expertise are shared and deepened by means of a process that starts with lectures, is followed by personal study and reflection, and leads into group discussion. Each participant is invited to make a personal journey which can lead to a deepened understanding of their own vocation. Unlike the time of their first novitiate and initial training, they are now able to build on what they have learnt from their actual experience over the years of living as monks and nuns. Amongst the areas covered in the course, human development and spiritual accompaniment have proved to be of particular interest and value.

We have observed that many of those who have attended the Program have come with a feeling that their own monastic formation was somewhat patchy and at times even weak, thus failing to equip them for the task of formation. This has resulted in a serious lack of confidence and hesitancy in taking on this key ministry in their community. The Program has helped to re-ignite their initial enthusiasm for their monastic vocation through discovering a new depth of meaning and value in monastic life. Frequently participants have described the Program as a second novitiate or as a time of depth conversion in their lives, leading to them to take responsibility for their monastic vocation in a new way. This in turn has created a

conviction and enthusiasm to communicate what they have personally discovered.

Monastic formation seems at times to have fallen short of its aim to communicate a clear integrated vision of our life and its purpose. This is reflected in a tendency to concentrate on teaching a way of life based on practices and observances and on communicating theoretical rather than experiential knowledge about a series of topics such as obedience, silence, the liturgy and psalms, community life, and monastic history. It would appear that there has been a failure to impart a sufficiently theological understanding of monastic life rooted in the reality of everyday living. Hence we have sought to build up an overall view of monastic life as a faith journey for disciples of Christ shared in a communion of life. Once again to quote Dom Bernardo Olivera, who contributed to the Program on several occasions, the starting point for all monks and nuns must be the call of the Gospel and a process of depth re-evangelization. Our life has to be a response to Jesus's first call: "Be converted and believe the Good News" (Mk I.14) which Benedict interprets as a "processu fidei et conversationis" - a process of faith and conversion - for which we enter the School of the Lord's service (Prologue 49,46). The structure and content of the Monastic Formators' Program is geared to presenting and nurturing this integrated vision of our monastic journey.

The seven weeks spent in Rome and the six in Assisi, and in particular the pilgrimages and excursions to Christian and monastic sites, provide the opportunity for giving a new perspective to the participants' faith and for "earthing" Benedict and bringing the whole monastic tradition to life. Alongside living and studying together for three months, their sharing of such concrete experiences is of immense value in fleshing out their faith.

It has been remarked by many participants that there is little or no opportunity in their home communities for sharing their motivation for monastic life. During the three months of living together on the Program they have learnt how important it is to talk and reflect with

one another in an honest way. Their concern in returning to their monasteries is that they may not have the opportunity to share what they have discovered during the course because of a lack of interest in the community. Not infrequently, formators find themselves isolated and feeling unsupported in their ministry. The key role of the community itself as formator is not appreciated by many of its members. Every formator needs the interest of the community as well as its active support and encouragement. Therefore the follow-up within communities when participants return home is a determining factor with regard to the fruitfulness of the Program both for the formator and the community itself, not to mention those to be formed.

In conclusion, I offer two assessments of the Monastic Formators' Program made by former participants:

"I would not hesitate to highly recommend the MFP to men and women preparing to assume the role of formators as a profound and essential experience. The quality of content and wisdom shared out of lived experience by masters of the monastic tradition moved and inspired me, giving me confidence for the task ahead. The experience filled up gaps in my own formation and offered valuable tools and methods for communicating the tradition. The Program leads to personal renewal, offers valued interaction with a diverse group of monastics and a unique experience of community life and lifelong friendships. Don't miss it!"

(Sr Colleen Leonard, Good Samaritan Sisters, Victoria, AUSTRALIA)

I find the Program very thorough and comprehensive, enriching and challenging; it was refreshing as well as reclaiming our monastic heritage by journeying into the past with an eye on the present and the future, not leaving out modern trends and heading such as Spiritual Direction and Human Development. The community experience itself was a miracle - formative and transformative while the lecturers are all men and women already taken over by the fire for Christ and for the monastic life.

(Prior Peter Eghwrudjakpor OSB, St Benedict's Priory, Ewu-Ishan, NIGERIA)

Questions for discussion

- 1) What are the key challenges and difficulties in formation that your community has to face at this moment?
- 2) What are your needs and priorities as a community in the area of formation?
- 3) What form of training and preparation for the work of formation do you have in your community?

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