



“Formation of the Heart:” An Essential (But Ignored) El- ement in Priestly Formation

P.T. Mathew, SJ

*Professor of Theology (Emeritus), Vidyajoti College of
Theology, New Delhi*

Abstract: Formation of priests was a major theme in the writings of Kurien Kunnumpuram, and the book *Called to Serve* is particularly noteworthy. In it Fr Kurien discusses four aspects of the formation of priests, viz. human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral. In this article, the author continues his reflection on aspects of priestly formation. It particularly focuses on a grossly neglected area, viz. formation of the heart. The first part takes a look at the emerging paradox in priestly formation in the present-day context, and the second part reflects more in detail on some key elements in the formation of the heart! “What do I still lack?” was a question coming from the heart of a young man, and it required an answer from the heart. Hearing Jesus’ answer, the young man went away sorrowful, for he expected an answer from the head, not the heart. Apathetic theology cautions us about the limits of answers from the head, whether in written word or spoken word. There is the ‘empty space’ beyond words, and that is the

space occupied by the heart. Formation of the heart enables a pastor to be ‘large-hearted’ and ‘broadminded’ reaching beyond the realms of words and reason. It means conscious effort to create space for others and their concerns, expanding one’s horizon of relationships to welcome even the excluded. We need pastors with transformed hearts and are capable of transforming the hearts of men and women today.

Keywords: Formation, Heart, Pastors, Justice and Discernment.

Introduction

Fr Kurien Kunnumpuram SJ spent most of his active life in the formation of priestly candidates and in teaching them systematic theology. Both demanded of him a creative mind and an emotive commitment. Any thought of him brings up to my mind images of priestly formation with its multiple dimensions and contemporary challenges. Formation of priests was a major theme in his writings, and the book *Called to Serve* is particularly noteworthy.¹ In it, Fr Kurien discusses four aspects of the formation of priests, viz. human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral. In this short paper, I would like to continue his reflection on aspects of priestly formation. I would like to particularly focus on a grossly neglected area, viz. formation of the heart. In the first part, we shall take a look at the emerging paradox in priestly formation in the present-day context, and in the second part, we shall reflect more in detail on some key elements in the formation of the heart.

The Emerging Paradox

Seminary formation can never remain insulated from what happens in the wider society and the changing cultural scenario. Most of the young men entering the portals of

seminaries today are products of the new-gen culture. How do we mould such men as authentic pastors, equipping them with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes for effective apostolic commitment is the critical question before us. The sudden explosion in the field of media and communication keep the new-gen people ‘engaged’ 24x7. Our society is becoming increasingly noisy (and colourful) with little space or time for silence and solitude. Religious worship and celebration do not lag behind! Young priests take pride in displaying their eloquence from pulpits and at conventions adding to the noisy world around. Such is the real context in which priestly formation takes place today. The discrepancy between what is taught in formation houses with the insistence on intellectual formation, on the one hand, and the complexity of challenges in actual pastoral settings leave many young priests confused or disheartened. It is in such a context of paradoxes that we need to speak about the formation of the heart.

Deus Caritas Est, the first encyclical letter of Pope Benedict XVI (2005), underscored the importance of professional formation in the practice of charity. At the same time, it states that professional competence is not of itself sufficient. “Practitioners of Love require not only professional training but also the *formation of the heart*”, he wrote.² Modern secular professions rarely speak of the dimension of the heart and its training. There is a growing awareness that this aspect can no more be ignored in professions that deal with human issues. Priestly training also has to face the apparent incongruity between the language of the heart and the language of secular professions, between cool heads and warm hearts. An untrained heart can talk volumes with little content! After all, “the heart has its reason which reason knows nothing of We know the

truth not only by the reason but by the heart” wrote Blaise Pascal, the 17th century French thinker.

Give Us Pastors with a Heart!

What else can the message of Christianity be except the message of the heart! We live in a world where ‘heart’ gets sidelined in the rush for heartless technology and soulless development. The world is witnessing more and more bleeding hearts – in broken families, old-age homes, communal riots, political rivalries, and urban anonymity. Troubled hearts and fractured world! The need of the hour is more and more merciful hearts. It is most unfortunate if pastors too ‘lose heart’, which is not uncommon. The world is in need of pastors who are able to hear the heartbeat of the ‘sheep’, and transcend the frame of mere rational logic. Recently while addressing the participants in the plenary assembly of the pontifical academy for life, Pope Francis said:

Science and technology are not enough: doing good requires wisdom of heart.... Virtue is the best that the human heart has to offer.... Therefore, I encourage universities to consider all this in their programmes of formation, so that the students can improve those dispositions of the heart and mind, which are indispensable to receive and take care of human life, according to the dignity that belongs to it in any circumstance.³

What the pope said applies equally or more to priestly formation today. A priest is called to live a life with an awakened heart when he can say “I know my sheep and they know me” (John 15).

Apophatic theology or ‘*via negativa*’ was always part of the Christian tradition, and it underscored the limits of a purely rationalistic approach in matters divine. Pseudo-

Dionysius the Areopagite, the anonymous Syrian monk of the 6th century is mostly associated with the development of apophatic theology. It reminds us of the provisional nature of all knowledge about God and matters of faith. He looks at *via negativa* as a plunge into that darkness beyond intellect where we not only run short of words but also remain speechless. Conceptual thought is built on binary logic (either this or that) while *via negativa* frees us from the burden of binaries (neither this nor that). This is true freedom of the heart. Wendy Farley argues that the practice of apophatic theology transcends the limitations of conceptual thought and operates at the heart level, thus contributing to a deeper knowledge of matters divine.⁴ A theology of negation is necessary for a proper theology of affirmation.

Probably this is the wisdom that we get from the Buddhist tradition which speaks of ‘empty heart’; it is empty of evil but filled with wisdom! Whatever is done is done with this divine wisdom. That is why Buddhist masters emphasize training of the heart and suggest various ways of training it. Ajahn Mun, the renowned meditation master from Thailand, speaks of ‘reading one’s own heart’ and ‘listening to one’s own heart’. He writes: “Listening to your own heart is really very interesting. This untrained heart races around following its own untrained habits. It jumps about excitedly, randomly, because it has never been trained. Therefore, train your heart! Buddhist meditation is about the heart; to develop the heart or mind, to develop your own heart.... You must discipline it with meditation, with *samādhi*. This is called “Training the Heart”. Buddhism is the religion of the heart.”⁵ Meditation and awareness are at the centre of this training; it is nothing but training in compassion. The message to priestly formation is self-evident: in a fractured

world, with many people with troubled hearts, a pastor has to be a messenger of a healing heart. No wonder, the Jesuit tradition labels the third and final stage of formation before final vows (*tertianship*) as ‘school of the heart’!

Some Dimensions of Formation of the Heart

a. *Human Heart as an Organ and as a Symbol*

Proper formation of the heart has been a focal point in the biblical tradition from the very beginning. The term heart occurs over one thousand times in the Bible. It is the anthropological term the bible uses to denote a person’s centre (core) not only physiologically, but also emotionally and morally. In the OT view, the heart is meant to understand, to discern and to give insight, just as the eye is meant to see, and the ear to hear. Heart is the inner forum where discernment takes place, decisions are arrived at, and commitments are made. ‘Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart’, asserts Prophet Samuel (1Sam 16:7). Jeremiah and Ezekiel were proposing a new heart that the Lord would give human persons (Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:26). David prays for a pure heart to replace his defiled conscience (Ps 51:10). The metaphor of writing on the tablet of the heart is also inspiring (Prov 3:3; Jer 17:1). Heart needs to be educated by filling it with God’s heart (Prov 22:17-18). Jesus is unambiguous: “Where your treasure is, there your heart will also be” (Mt 6:21). He sums up the law with the call “love the Lord your God with all your heart...” (Mt 22:37).

The Lord promises through Jeremiah, “I shall give you shepherds *after my own heart*, who will pasture you wisely and discreetly” (Jer 3:15). It is the right of the people of God to have shepherds after his own heart. It affirms that

the ability to pasture the flock ‘wisely and discreetly’ as essential to this pasturing. Every formation programme must be geared to preparing pastors who are wise and discreet. That is why Pope John Paul II chose this text as the title of his post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*.⁶

b. Restlessness/Discontent as Valuable Resource

All pastoral engagement assumes human situations that demand urgent human/divine intervention. Only a person who is disturbed by a situation can creatively intervene in it. We have an excellent example in Jesus himself. After going around towns and villages in Palestine at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus felt deeply disturbed, “because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt.9:35-38). This discontent becomes the beginning of an expanded form of ministry involving selection of a group of disciples, as narrated by Matthew in the following chapter. Jesus’ initial focus was on the proper formation of his disciples, thus indicating what it means to be ‘pastors after His own heart’.

Restlessness or discontent is not necessarily a negative quality; the heart looks at it in positive terms as a valuable virtue and as goal-oriented. The human heart is inherently restless, as St. Augustine spoke of. “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you”, he wrote.⁷ It can become a spiritual power behind committed action. Late Julius Nyerere, former president of Tanzania and a devout Catholic, understood its value when he named it *Divine Discontent*. The conviction that we are transforming human discontent into divine discontent is at the core of genuine pastoral engagement. Unless guided by this vision, discontent can quickly degenerate into selfish

aggression or irrational reaction. Resistance and conflict are inevitable in any action, but the heart prompts us to see them not as disasters, but as opportunities for renewal and enrichment. A formed heart prompts a pastoral worker never to be disheartened, however alarming the situation be.

c. The Heart Promotes Human Solidarity

“We must learn to live together as brothers, or perish together as fools”, said Martin Luther King Jr. years ago, indicating the importance of human solidarity. Solidarity is the contemporary term for the classical Christian virtue of ‘mercy’, later called ‘charity’, and then ‘commitment’. Pope John Paul II defines solidarity as “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, that is to say, the good of all and each individual, because we are all responsible for all.”⁸ Solidarity consists of two essential components: *inter-dependence* (awareness that I am deeply dependent on others), and *mutual responsibility* (that I am responsible for my brothers and sisters). Solidarity is an attitude, a commitment to participate in the life of the community/society to promote the common good. Theologically it rests on our identity as living images of the Trinitarian God, and in professing the mystery of the incarnation that our God is present in human history in the person of Jesus Christ to give us dignity as his children, as brothers and sisters.

Any pastoral engagement devoid of a sense of solidarity can easily degenerate into mere administrative strategies or political manoeuvring. The result would be the misuse of authority and neglect of the weaker members of the Christian fellowship. Today we witness many pastoral situations facing group conflict and power struggle, often becoming

a public scandal. The strength of a chain is determined by the strength of its weakest link; the health of a society is determined by the wellbeing of its weakest member. Only a properly trained heart can perceive the weakest link and attend to its concerns. Pastoral formation is to be oriented not only in cultivating this sensitivity in pastoral workers, but also in enabling them to be promoters of the spirit of solidarity in pastoral situations.

d. Restorative Justice that Goes Beyond Distributive Justice

The contemporary world is characterised by growing awareness about the cry for justice and is proactive in its response. At the same time, its preoccupation seems to be with *distributive justice*. No doubt, distributive justice is crucial in a world marked by uneven access to resources and a widening disparity between classes. But the heart says that we need to go beyond distributive justice. The heart impels us to shift our focus onto *restorative justice*. Archbishop Desmond Tutu gives us valuable insights based on his South African experience. As a strong advocate of restorative justice, he incorporates the love principle taking justice beyond punitive or retributive justice. He affirms the centrality of restorative justice drawing from the African religious tradition of *ubuntu*; the core concern here is “the healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances, the restoration of broken relationships, a seeking to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given the opportunity to be reintegrated into the community he has injured by his offence.”⁹ Here justice is not sacrificed, instead is affirmed in its fuller sense. It builds up the community, and avoids creating victors and losers. All are destined to become victors.

Pastoral workers cannot but be messengers of restorative justice in human situations marked by an urge for vengeance and retaliation. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that Christ has given us the ‘ministry of reconciliation’... ‘entrusting to us the message of reconciliation’ (2 Cor 5:18-19). So a pastor is an ‘ambassador’ of reconciliation. The ministry of reconciliation can easily get reduced to the ritual of confession, as history tells us, unless pastors are formed in the school of the heart. Pastors are called to be ambassadors of reconciliation and restoration, and so are to be trained accordingly.

e. Faith in the Power of Resurrection

Resurrection is the affirmation of life in the midst of misery and death. That is the meaning of Easter. Moments of discouragement and frustration, helplessness and hopelessness, of allegations and betrayals, are inevitable companions of pastoral workers at all times. Pastors may recall the cry from the cross, “My God, why did you abandon me” (Mk.15:34), as reflecting the agony of the heart in moments of utter frustration. We are reminded of the scene in the Old Testament where Moses hits the hard rock to produce water for the belligerent people of Israel in the desert (Exod 17:6; Num 20:10-11). Pastoral engagement often would lead us to the hard rock of the wilderness, asking us to work miracles. Archbishop Tutu would tell us how to make possible what appears impossible; after the collapse of the regime of apartheid, reconciliation of the white minority and the black majority appeared impossible. But the conviction that there is *no future without forgiveness* made the impossible possible through the work of the *Commission for Truth and Reconciliation*, of which Tutu was the chairperson.¹⁰

It also throws light on the meaning of success and failure in pastoral engagement. The heart would tell us that it is only when a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies... it bears much fruit, and that “he who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life...will keep it” (Jn.12:24-25). Obviously, it goes contrary to the logic of the head and of a world that upholds rationality as of supreme value.

f. The Heart Can Teach Us the Art of Discernment

The secular world currently presents before us two dominant systems of decision making: *autocratic* (decision by the one who has absolute power), and *democratic* (decision by the majority). The majoritarian principle has been sanctified by the ideology of parliamentary democracy and contemporary political systems. But the heart shows us a third alternative: the *discernment approach* (decision guided by the Divine Spirit).¹¹ The assumption is that the discerning faculty rests with the heart. This approach has deep roots in the Christian spiritual tradition. We have the prayer of King Solomon asking Yahweh for a discerning heart (1Kgs.3:9). We see the early church practising it in their everyday life and ministry, in the election of Mathias (Acts 1), in the appointment of the deacons (Acts 6), and in the council of Jerusalem while settling disputes (Acts 15). Unfortunately, we have lost this rich heritage of the discernment approach. The attraction of centralised authority and power is too tempting in today’s world. The majoritarian principle is often prone to manipulation to serve vested interests. We need to recover the spirit of the discernment approach in pastoral engagement, and it has to begin with priestly formation. A pastor has to guide people to walk with the Spirit while dealing with complex problems or while taking difficult decisions. “Be wise as

serpents and innocent as doves”, we are told (Mt.10:16); both are essential requirements for a pastor.

We can look up to the Ignatian spiritual tradition to learn more about the effective use of discernment approach in pastoral ministry. The dynamics of the *Spiritual Exercises* manifest consistent emphases on formation of the heart in the one making a retreat. The first introductory explanation states the goal as “preparing and disposing our soul (heart) to rid itself of all its disordered affections, and then, after their removal, of seeking and finding God’s will in the ordering of our life.”¹² It further explains the reason in clear terms: “For what fills and satisfies the soul consists, not in knowing much, but in understanding the realities profoundly and in savouring them interiorly.”¹³ This emphasis is kept alive all through the Exercises, particularly the contemplation on *Call of the King*, the application of the senses and the colloquy. The Ignatian insistence on the heart is most evident in the exercises on ‘discernment of the Spirits’ paying attention to the inner movements of the heart.¹⁴ Ignatius was convinced that true transformation of persons consisted of transformation of their heart.

g. Pay Attention to the Language of the Heart

“Where words fail, music speaks,” wrote Hans Christian Andersen, the well-known Danish author of the 19th century (1805-1875). He is reminding us that music is one mode of the language of the heart. The same is true of silence and dreams. To experience the power of silence in a noisy world is becoming more and more difficult. But it is inevitable for an effective pastor. “When we dream alone, it is just a dream; but when all dream together, it is the beginning of Reality”, said Archbishop Dom Helder Camara. To pay attention to the dreams of oneself, and of others, demands

of our facility with the language of the heart. Do we, in our pastoral engagement, enable people to dream together? Do we share our dreams with them? Do we let ourselves share in their dreams? Lord Buddha soon after his enlightenment rushed to Sarnath, near the holy city of Varanasi, to share his dream (his first sermon) with a group of disciples. Jesus' work among the dispirited people of Israel lasted only a short time, yet he succeeded to share his dream of the Reign of God with the small band of companions, and it flourished and reached the ends of the earth. Pastors are sharers and promoters of that vision, and formation programmes must enable trainees to be committed to that vision in pastoral settings entrusted with them.

Conclusion

“What do I still lack?” was a question coming from the heart of a young man (Matt 19:20), and it required an answer from the heart. Hearing Jesus' answer, the young man went away sorrowful, for he expected an answer from the head, not the heart. Apophati theology cautions us about the limits of answers from the head, whether in written word or spoken word. There is the ‘empty space’ beyond words, and that is the space occupied by the heart. Formation of the heart enables a pastor to be ‘large-hearted’ and ‘broadminded’ reaching beyond the realms of words and reason. It means conscious effort to create space for others and their concerns, expanding one's horizon of relationships to welcome even the excluded. We need pastors with transformed hearts and are capable of transforming the hearts of men and women today. Let us hope that those responsible for priestly formation will take these to heart.

Notes

1. Kurien Kunnumpuram, *Called to Serve: Indian Christian Reflections on the Priesthood and Priestly Ministry in India*, Mumbai: St Pauls, 2012. See also *Shaping Tomorrow's Church: Formation of Priests and Religious for India*, edited by Kurien Kunnumpuram (Mumbai: St Pauls, 2006).
2. Deus Caritas Est, No. 31
3. From “Address of his holiness pope Francis to participants in the plenary assembly
4. of the pontifical academy for life”, 3 March 2016.
5. Wendy Farley, “And what is a merciful heart?- Apophatic theology and Christian Ethics”, in *Theology Today*, Vol.67 (2011), 405-418.
6. Ajahn Chah, “The Training of the Heart”. http://www.ajahnchah.org/book/Training_Heart1_2.php. Accessed 20.08.2018.
7. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 1992.
8. Confessions, I.i.l.
9. Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, No. 38
10. Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, New York: Image Book, 1999, 54.
11. *No Future without Forgiveness* was the title of the book he wrote after completing the work of the Commission (New York: Image Book, 1999).
12. Pastores Dabo Vobis speaks of ‘Gospel Discernment’. See no. 10.
13. George E. Ganss (Tr), *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1992, Introductory Explanation, no. 1, p.22.
14. *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, Introductory Explanation, no. 2, p.22.
15. For more details on this, see *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, nos. 313-336 [Rules for the Discernment of Spirits].

Article Received: November 11, 2019

Article Accepted: January 1, 2020

No of Words: 3890