

**RELIGIOUS FORMATION:  
A CALL TO A RADICAL FOLLOWING OF CHRIST**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Vocation is fundamentally the following of Jesus in his radical way of life unto the cross, in his total self-abnegation and self-sacrifice, in the use of freedom that is totally for the other person which is nothing else than pure self-giving.<sup>2</sup> Thus, vocational discernment and formation would have to centre on the potential capability of an individual to respond honestly and generously to the call to radicality, to what Jesus, himself, described as non-conformity to the values of this world (Jn. 11-16).

We should always go for suitable candidates no matter how few, who can be a creative minority, genuinely responding to the call to radicality and sacrifice. Correspondingly, they assume a lifestyle so totally free, so emptied of worldly attachments, a life so totally enamoured by the Lord Jesus. The call to religious life and the response to this call are to be seen as a gift of God for a specific mission in the Church and in the world. Hence, there is a need for us to go for suitable candidates.

**DISCERNMENT AND SCREENING OF VOCATION**

Wise and prudent vocational recruitment, discernment and formation are absolutely necessary.<sup>3</sup> The Church has often encouraged making proper use of medical and psychological tools in the screening of candidates to the priestly and religious life. It is, of course, imperative that psychological assistance has to be based on a Christian anthropology that is consonant with the teachings of the Church. The candidate's intellectual ability, marked with an enthusiasm for intellectual life, should be of an acceptable degree. Thus, screening should involve formal psychological testing, in-depth interview based on the behavioural patterns of the candidate, a review of candidates' personal history, his/her family background and relationships, over an initial exploration of conscious and unconscious motivations, and so on. The screening procedure is done so as to ascertain as far as possible the candidate's functional ability, availability for formation and suitability for priestly and religious life, and also to verify if the candidate is humanly healthy, psychologically whole and, has the capability of being committed to Christian

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<sup>2</sup> Benedict xvi, *Deus Caritas Est.*, Nos. 6 & 12.

<sup>3</sup> Pastoral Dabo Vobis, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*. The Directory of the life and Ministry of Priest; *Perfectae Caritatis, Renovationis Causam, Evangelica Testificatio, Vita Consecrata*.

discipleship. Though, candidates are not expected to be completely mature at the beginning of their formation, but the above-mentioned procedure is a demand accepted of the entire process of priestly and religious formation, both at the initial and the on-going level.

## FORMATION TO MATURITY AND RADICALITY IN CHRIST

Initial and on-going formation should aim at a holistic and a radical formation of vocation. Candidates for the priesthood and religious life are to have an integral, human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation. The integration of all these aspects is very important to prevent disintegration or compartmentalism and reductionism. Besides, formation should be understood as a gift not only of instruction but, most importantly, as an integral education of the candidates. Thomas Aquinas takes this idea of integral education a step further, by asserting that “the purpose of education is to lead the child to the perfect state of man.” This is the essential purpose of education and what it does to the candidates.

The essential goal of vocation formation is the integral maturity of a candidate who is being formed in the pattern of Christ’s own authentic humanity so that the candidate might participate in Christ’s mission of salvation through self-sacrificing love. With regard to what human formation of religious is all about, Finkler defines maturity “as a manner of thinking, feeling, being and acting suitable to the age and situation of the normal person.”<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, maturity according to the Council Fathers should be evident, especially in a candidate’s stability of mind, and in one’s ability to make weighty decisions, and in their sound evaluation of the person and events. Integral human formation necessarily involves self-transcendence and mission. This apostolic and pastoral goal, including *missio exteris*<sup>5</sup> is a fundamental dimension of vocation and its formation. This entails forming one with a goal and a view of a true knowledge of religious life in general and in particular.

The spiritual formation of the candidate is very essential. O’Malley affirms that authentic spiritual formation permeates all personal and human dimensions including the celibate state of life, seeking Christ in others and growing into human maturity, that is, into the image and likeness of God that we are all created to be. Sasi and Costello avow that “spiritual formation aims at a personal relationship with God, through which one is able to engage in pastoral ministry as well as in a pastoral charity, discovering the deep meaning of poverty, celibacy and obedience. It lays emphasis on prayer and contemplation and thus enriched in the awareness of God’s presence.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, a formation process in a community context, a context of communion is imperative; if our brother and sister are the sacrament of acting with Christ, if love is the Christian’s “way,” if in the mutuality of love there is the possibility of

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<sup>4</sup> Finkler, “Maturity in Religious Candidates” *Visa Bulletin* 64 (1984): 28.

<sup>5</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, No. 44

<sup>6</sup> Sasi Vincent et Costello Timothy (2010) *Formation and Transformation*. Asian Trading Corporation: Bangalore, India

experiencing the Trinitarian God, then the community is the privilege place for living the Christian vocation in all its fullness. Billy affirms that community life gives a taste of God's triune love.<sup>7</sup> This is why the Eucharist, the builder of communion, is central to formation. Simultaneously, the community context requires the collaborative effort of the whole community of formators, priests, religious and communities where candidates have pastoral experiences. Thus, the specific identity of the religious life will be appreciated in all its dimensions: personal, mystical, ecclesial, and apostolic, and that it be radical and credible.

Moreover, we can assert that the aforesaid would imply an integral education of the candidate. For education addresses itself to the whole person, with regards to the person's sensibility, affectivity, sexuality, moral sense, community and social sense. Also it enables the candidate develop and come to fulfillment by having his whole behaviour shaped by the values. Specifically, education here would be to render those in formation open to the truth of what it means to be a religious. Hence, the formator has to know and understand the young people he is forming. Since, the role of the formator is to assist the candidate to regain his or her self-direction.

Finally, it is the Holy Spirit, the principal formator, who enables all other formators in the formation of candidates to the priesthood and religious life, not simply by teaching and exhortation, but by the *sine qua non* of human formation – the witness of authentic discipleship, that of radicality and sacrifice. For the active enlivening, integrating and uniting work of the Holy Spirit, the giver of charisms, and vocations is highly needed. As part of the formation programme, formators need to co-operate with the Holy Spirit in the aspects of healing and the correction of all the negative things and make provisions for all the deficiencies which may be carried in the candidates' hearts and which may spill over into affective relations and community life.<sup>8</sup> Since candidates are more likely to be bound to the order of the world, which they believe to be their world, they need the help of formators who must take the initiative with certain fairness and love for them to help them break through these obstacles. This is why the education of a candidate should embrace all the human dimensions (e.g. intellectual, human and spiritual) in view of helping the young person towards a religious life that is radical and authentic. Thus, in pursuing the educative dimension of formation, which consists in helping young people respond wholeheartedly to their religious vocation, our young people need also to see their formator imitate Christ in a radical way. For through that, the young people would be impelled to commit themselves to the same act they experience their formators witness.

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