

**Letter on Formation**  
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Formation in all its stages is of vital importance for the well-being of the Order and of each religious. Because it is so important and so complex there are probably as many opinions about formation as there are Dominicans. Yet there are certain truths about formation that can be stated and need to be reflected upon.

Formation is a process which must continue through our entire religious life. For many, formation ended with solemn profession or ordination. It tended to be equated with formal studies and not with a way of life.

Accordingly, importance must be given to all the stages of formation. Initial formation is only part of the process, yet with its, own unique and crucial role.

To make formation a reality at every stage in our lives there must be adequate structures that will enable religious to live their religious life in the circumstances of today: This demands clarity about the different stages of formation and a willingness "to determine according to local needs and available resources, the more important objectives for the brethren's ministry." (LC0 106, III).

**What is Formation ?**

There are four basic elements information - human, religious, intellectual and pastoral. These elements must be part of each stage of formation though one or other may predominate in a particular stage. Since one or other of the elements of formation can be emphasized to the exclusion of the others, we must realize that ideas alone do not effect change.

"We cannot say that experience alone is the only norm of truth but it is important that we realize the relevance of our experiences and the place of our feelings and emotions in helping, us to arrive at the truth about ourselves, others and God." (Relatio of the M.O. to the Oakland Chapter p. 112):

This implies a life-long journey through which we deepen our awareness of self, others and God. Are we convinced of the importance of formation as a life-long process - General and Provincial chapters speak often and forcefully about formation. Are the results commensurate with their concern ?

**Understanding Institutional Formation**

The most frequent topic on my visits to the Order has been institutional or initial formation. Some contrast present programmes of formation with those of the past. The judgments are both positive and negative. In reality there is no blue print valid for every age.

First, we must want vocations and welcome them. Our houses must be open to receive young people who will observe us as men of faith, helping each other on our pilgrimage, and being at the service of others. They must see us as men who are hopeful about the future of the order and its role within the Church. This will be true only if we appreciate the orientations given

by recent General Chapters. As religious we must be seen to believe in the power of grace to overcome human defects, and in the presence of the Spirit in daily life.

Secondly, it is important that we create suitable conditions for Institutional Formation. The work of formation must be primary and not just an appendage to another work of the community. The needs of the formandi must take priority over the needs of the community to maintain the choir or the work of the house. Furthermore they need companions going through the same experience. This cannot be over emphasized when there are big generation gaps in our Provinces. On the other hand, it is not helpful if those in formation are treated like fish in a bowl, under scrutiny from every side. Accordingly, the possibility of common Houses of Formation in the same country or region must be promoted when numbers are small. For this reason also the "structures of a formation community, while ever remaining sufficiently clear and solid, will leave ample room for responsible initiatives and decisions." (Directives on Formation in Religious Life, No. 15).

Finally, we must respect the stage that young people have reached and not expect, them to be at our own stage of development or conviction. "The essential reason for this is to avoid a multiplication of problems during a period of formation in which the fundamental equilibrium of a person should be established ..." (Directives, No. 47)

We sometimes even demand of them the same attitude to the apostolate, to the poor, to external things such as the habit, as we have ourselves after many years in Religious Life. The young must be given the freedom and the guidance to grow and to choose. Also they must be listened to. In Centesimus Annus, John Paul II makes the following observation:

"The heritage of values which has been received and handed down is always challenged by the young. To challenge does not necessarily mean to destroy or reject a priori, but above all to put these values to the test in one's own life and make them more real, relevant and personal, distinguishing the valid elements in the tradition from false and erroneous ones, or from obsolete forms which can be usefully replaced by others more suited to the times. (No. 50)

Our role is to accompany, them and help them to be disciples of Jesus Christ and Saint Dominic, not to control them, nor to try to make them disciples of ourselves.

The Constitutions are clear in stating that the ultimate authority in admitting candidates to the Order and to Profession and in presenting brothers for Sacred Orders is the Provincial. He is helped in his task by the Admissions Board and by the various Councils of Formation: It is important that the powers entrusted to the Admissions Board, the Councils and the Chapters concerning rejecting candidates be exercised in a responsible way. This means, particularly, paying great attention to what is best for the candidate and for the order and making one's judgment based on facts, and not whims.

The key figure in formation is the Master. The Order owes a great debt to Formators who accept this urgent and difficult task. Their difficulties are increased when we do not understand the requirements of the Church and of the order in formation today. One Notice Mistress wrote to me:

"I've had some really tough days but also marvelous glimpses of how God works so gently in souls. I've learnt much and appreciate the uniqueness of each person more than ever".

Would that we could all appreciate the difficulty of the task entrusted to our Formators and the uniqueness of each of God's creatures! It would help us to be less critical of them.

Finally we might reflect on what impact our lives as religious make on the young. Do they see any difference between Religious and Diocesan priests for example ? Do they see a Religious priest put his Religious Profession and the practices of community life as his first commitment ?

## **The Stages of Religious Formation**

I would like to reflect on four stages of formation: the stage before entrance into the Novitiate, the Novitiate and First Profession, the Years of Study - the Studentate, Permanent Formation.

### **1. Before Entry to the Novitiate**

Many provinces have implemented this stage of formation. In 1990 the Directives on Formation in Religious institutes explicitly stated that this was the first stage of formation and reasserted what was said in *Renovationis Causam*:

"Most of the difficulties encountered today in the formation of novices are usually due to the fact that when they were admitted they did not have the required maturity." (No. 42)

The Directives go on to point out that the requirements of the Church for entry to a Novitiate demand:

- a sufficient degree of human and christian maturity.
- a general cultural foundation that corresponds to what is expected "of young persons who have achieved the normal education of their country": It also mentions the necessity of attaining a "facility in the language used in the Novitiate".
- a balanced affectivity, especially sexual balance.
- the ability to live in community under the authority of superiors in a particular institute.

Can this be established in 3 months, 6 months ?

Even the most mature candidates will need the experience of Christian community living: Formation Directors often mention that older candidates need the experience of a "Pre-Novitiate" more than the younger ones.

Another important purpose of the Pre-Novitiate is to enable the candidate to clarify his thoughts on the various vocations open to him and for those who are interested in the Dominican way to be clear about the priority of our preaching mission.

The location of the Pre-Novitiate is important. As far as possible it should be in a place that will enable the Director to lead the candidate towards religious life. Accordingly, if possible it should not be in a religious house. The Pre-Novitiate is not religious life and it is unfair and unwise to expect candidates to live a life for which they have received no formation and to which they have made no commitment.

Living in a separate place, the Christian community nature of the Pre-Novitiate period can be emphasized as well as teaching the candidates a necessary independence from their natural and future religious families.

If I were to apply the four elements, human, religious, intellectual, pastoral - to this year, I would insist on its human and Christian character, rather than the religious character, and the

need to reach the cultural level of people going on for third level education and an openness to the apostolate of the Order, as well as getting help for the candidates to know themselves; their strengths and weaknesses better.

## **2. The Novitiate**

In many ways this is the most important year of formation when the candidate decides his vocation in as far as this is possible.

The directives of the Holy See are explicit about the nature of this year. It is one of withdrawal and not insertion: it ought to be an experience of solitude. Many young people are attracted to the order by a desire to preach the gospel and a love of study, but Unless this is rooted in the sustained practice of prayer, with the community and alone, then this enthusiasm may not be enough to carry them through the vicissitudes of religious life. We need to nurture that passion for God that stops us becoming merely word-mongers.

"Novices actually have a need of being trained in the practice of prolonged prayer, of solitude and of silence. For all this, the element of time plays a determining role. They can have a greater need "to withdraw" from the world than "to go" to the world, and this need is not merely subjective. This is why the time and place of the novitiate will be organized so that the novices can find an atmosphere that is favorable to becoming deeply rooted in a life with Christ. But this is achieved only by becoming detached from oneself, from all that which opposes God in the world, and even from the goods of this world that undoubtedly deserve to be highly valued. As a consequence, making the novitiate in an inserted community is completely discouraged. As was stated above (n.28) the demands of formation must take precedence over certain apostolic advantages, of insertion in a poor milieu." (Directives, No. 50)

Here, we must reflect on the phenomenon of the number of young religious who have had a Novitiate such as envisaged by the Directives but who leave a short time after making Profession! Some brethren believe that there is too much of a mystique about the spiritual nature of the Novitiate year that can carry a candidate through the year too easily and shield him from responsibility - for himself, for the community, for the future. They suggest that what is needed is a greater insertion in the world and its problems and a facing up to one's responsibilities:

For myself, I believe that this is the task of the Pre-Novitiate and not of the Novitiate. Unless there is absolute clarity about the distinct roles of the Novitiate and the Pre-Novitiate, these debates will continue and will not be resolved. Those in Formation will suffer in the short term and the Order will suffer in the long term.

We need unity in our understanding of formation, both for the good of those in formation and for our own future.

Most of the other matters mentioned in the Directives are well looked after in our Novitiates but there is not sufficient clarity about the role of the Novitiate in helping a candidate to test his ability to live alone with God, from whom only we can hope to receive wholeness and completeness. For that reason I believe we must insist that the Novitiate be somewhat a desert experience and therefore the religious element of formation will be the over-riding one. Involvement in the apostolate 'will not be omitted but neither will it be overemphasized.

One of the points mentioned in the Directives (No. 47) needs attention. It refers to "the celebration of the Liturgy according to the spirit and character of the Institute." I have come

across Novitiates where the whole Office is not recited because the entire community cannot be present or because it is not the practice of the Province.

I believe a Novice must be introduced to the heritage of the Church and Order in the matter of the entire Office and of devotions such as the Rosary. Both are centered on the person of Christ and on Scripture.

### **3. The Years of Study - the Studentate**

The intellectual element of Formation will receive due importance during the years the candidate spends in the Studium. Since the May Letter to the Order dealt with Studies it will suffice to focus on a few points:

1. In as far as possible, one should do one's institutional studies in one's own cultural milieu.
2. This will sometimes mean doing studies in a non Dominican Institute. In this case it is important that the students be accompanied in their studies by older religious.
3. On the other hand the possibility of entities coming together for at least part of the studies should be considered.

The role of the community in being an active Sancta Praedicatio is important so that the student will see the clear link between study and preaching. He must also appreciate the need for specialist preachers in the Church who preach with special authority and who, in a sense, have the same role as the Bishop to determine the faith of the Church.

The maturation of the student will continue through participation at the daily Eucharist with preaching and through the other elements of Formation.

The commitment to the Brotherhood and to celibacy needs to be stressed. The religious renounces any exclusive union of two persons and accepts the obligation to observe perfect continence as a celibate. (cf Canon 599)

In the Letter on the Common Life I reflected on aspects of obedience, chastity and poverty with reference to our day. Here, I confine myself to a word on celibacy: Writing many years ago a Fr. Sellmair reminded Directors of Students of the obligation to form students concerning celibacy :

"for however honest (the student's) intentions, and however pure his will, he may later in life meet some human being who strikes new chords in him, sets forces in motion which appear to be beyond his power to control and can certainly not be laid to rest by purely natural means. Whoever is concerned with training for the priesthood and fails to show this to his candidates assumes a heavy responsibility - or else knows little of human nature."

One of the great safeguards for celibacy is our community life where the life of prayer is nurtured, where friendship and companionship will enable the young brother to realize that difficulties are part of life and need not overwhelm us. If a brother fails to find that friendship within the community he will seek it outside, and finding it there will become yet more isolated from the community and so may be caught in a spiral of alienation.

### **First Assignations and Older Brothers**

There are two other stages of our lives that need particular attention, viz. religious in the first years of ministry and "the older brother who can no longer preach." (RFG, No. 9) Young and old must feel at home in our communities and feel that they have a valuable contribution to make. Some problems for young religious in their first assignments have been touched upon in the Letter of May 1990 and I intend to have a position paper on the care of our older brothers prepared for the General Chapter.

#### **4. Permanent Formation**

"If one does not keep up with the times, one lags behind and a person who lags behind becomes unqualified in his tasks, with disaffection inevitably following."

These words of John Paul II give us two reasons for continuing formation - the need to be able to fulfill our role within the Church or risk not only incompetence but also unhappiness and disaffection.

There are few of us who realized how much we had to learn when we left for our first assignments and there are many of us who have been afraid 'to update , ourselves intellectually, spiritually, tend psychologically. Community life is the way formation continues after brothers have left the studentate. "The word of God which abides in us, the studies which we pursue, the men and women we meet, the mentalities which challenge us, the places and events in which we are immersed, spur us on to permanent formation." (RFG, No. 12) A frequent convent we received on the Ratio Formationis Generalis was the reed of detailed norms for Continuing Formation (cf. Oakland Acts p. 13.3) .

"Throughout their entire life religious are to continue carefully their own spiritual, doctrinal and practical formation, and superiors are to provide them with the resources and time to do this". (CIC, 661)

"Each religious institute therefore has the task of planning and realizing a programme of permanent formation suitable for all its members: It should be a programme which is not simply, directed to the formation of the intellect, but also to that of, the whole person, primarily in its spiritual mission; so that every religious can live his or her own consecration to God in all its fullness, and in, keeping with the specific mission that the Church has confided to them." (John Paul II to the Religious of Brazil, 1986, no. 6)

Perhaps we do not need detailed norms but a new approach. Obviously, there must be some input by theologians and others. More important, perhaps, is our own contribution in the matter of discussing among ourselves experiences and difficulties (cf. LCO, 100) and ,a willingness to share our faith with one another.

Where it is possible we should get together with others - brethren, sisters, lay people - in the same city or region, so that we learn to be truly open to others - their needs, aspirations and fears.

In a document published by the Priestly Life and Ministry Committee of the U.S. Bishops giving reflections on the morale of priests, it is stated:

"Despite, clear church teaching, it must be recognized that a source of discouragement for some priests would be that some solutions to the clergy shortage are precluded from discussion and that not all pastoral solutions and options can be explored. Discouragement comes from the acute awareness of priests that some possible avenues of relief are not to be considered or discussed. Those most commonly; referred to are the ordination of married men, effective use of laicized priests and expanded roles for women in ministry."

We must not be afraid to touch on matters such as these. To be unable to discuss them among ourselves may be more a sign of fear than of obedience. True obedience means listening.

These meetings must also lead to a renewal of preaching and, for priests, to a better administration of the Sacrament of Penance. Pope Benedict XI on writing to his brothers gathered together in the General Chapter of Toulouse of 1304 reminded them of the importance of study and frequent preaching and of hearing confessions. Seven hundred years later this advice remains relevant. Together we can help each other to be better preachers, confessors and students.

On-going formation should be seen not just as the acquisition of new knowledge or skills for the practice of an individual apostolate, but the opportunity for a brother to share in new ways in the apostolate of the Province. It can be hard for someone who finished formal studies years previously to reacquire the habit of study and discouragement is frequent. The challenge of grappling with new ideas is more likely to be accepted if this is seen as opening up greater participation in the common projects of the Order. We must have confidence in each other's gifts and superiors may-often be called on to believe that our brethren have more to give than they themselves have grasped.

I renew my plea for sabbatical renewal. Without hesitation I can say those provinces and vicariates who have encouraged brothers to take sabbatical programmes are the healthiest in the Order. In this regard the 'needs of brothers are different. For some the need may be more spiritual than purely a year of study renewal. Many among us fear the demands of renewal and their ability to cope with such a year. Have faith in yourself, you do not journey alone.