

**SESSION FOR NEW FORMATION
PERSONNEL
1996-1997
SOME CONVICTIONS
(1/2)**

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Religious life is going through the tensions, problems and challenges of contemporary culture. At the same time we are experiencing in the Church a privileged moment of the outpouring of the Spirit which, in spite of the anticipation of further impoverishment and reduced numbers, makes us look to the future.

The “contingency” that can face the challenge of religious life as it confronts the future is the **integral formation** of persons. The apostolic exhortation *Vita consecrata* (VC) attributes a great deal of importance to Formation (VC 65). Also the Conference for men and women Superior Generals as well as General and District Chapters all are demanding new efforts in formation. This urgency is growing greater and greater.

In order to respond better to these challenges at the Institute level, forty-four Brothers and 3 Sisters were involved in the Session for new formation personnel which lasted for nine months in the Generalate. Some had prior experience in formation work. The group was predominantly made up of young persons.

During the last week of the session they were involved in their own personal synthesis of the program and they drew up some convictions with regard to Formation. Without the need to draw up a complete official document the group of formation personnel found enough in common to specify some essential aspects that the formation process should have in the life of a Brother.

1. Following Christ is at the center of all Religious Life.

In order to found Christian existence on its constitutive element it is necessary to reaffirm one fact: all decisions in our lives are centered and based in the “coming” of Jesus, the collective and personal Lord of history. Only those who put Jesus and his message in the center of their daily existence can be recognized as Christians. Everything else, important certainly, is a consequence of that radical decision.

The Synodal document shifts the accent of Religious Life from Ecclesiology to Christology and it affirms that the identity of consecrated life lies in “a living memorial of Jesus’ way of living and acting”. Jesus Christ is the first fundamental of consecrated life. This is one of the principal

affirmations of VC and this insistence is maintained throughout the apostolic exhortation and it is the central point on which one must base the identity of the consecrated life.

In this sense the religious that we should be preparing by means of a thorough formation program must formulate and realize the “memory of Christ” (VC 22); a relationship with the life of the Church (VC 29); the “witness of Christ in the world” (VC 40); a personal life-program (VC 93).

2. The Holy Spirit as well as those being formed are the protagonists of formation programs.

The Spirit is the author of the vocational call and as such is the principal protagonist (Rule 22) and is “always” at work in the accompaniment of those being formed as well as their formators. It is the Spirit who by grace gives us the possibility of interiorizing the values of Christian and Lasallian life. The one being formed, with the help of formation personnel and the rest of the formation community, decides really to give himself to the service of the poor, to freely follow Jesus’ lifestyle according to the model of the Founder. It is a decision made between the Spirit and the one being formed. The rest act as mediators.

3. To be formed is to help identify oneself with Gospel values. Significant experiences help to interiorize these values.

First of all, the values are not ethical principles nor are they a type of life philosophy that responds to every type of question, nor are they propositions that must be known and repeated. And it is not a case of living these values as alternatives to other values and neither are they autonomous values nor completely original but they deal with a central experience that has an orienting force and which completely reorganizes the program that each one of us has written for ourselves.

More than anything else these values are about a person: **Jesus of Nazareth**, whom we proclaim as Lord of life and of history. Jesus puts forward a message about life and its meaning. The message of the Gospel and the witness of the Church are always the face, words, life and person of Jesus of Nazareth. We can put only Him in the center of the building up and stabilization of our identity.

The **experience of faith** is another value and it represents an essential quality of formation. This is the experience around which the person chooses the important values in his life and organizes them in a stable and organic system.

The **faith-life integration** involves the reorganization of one’s personality around Jesus Christ and his message, within the current Church community. Jesus becomes the “determining factor” in any decision making process and in one’s *modus operandi*. In order to insure the faith-life integration evangelization is needed. Within this the content is just as important as the form of communication.

So that these and other values are experienced because of their intrinsic importance, the formation process provides formation experiences that help to discover these values and to assume them in the daily life of each person in formation and of each Brother.

4. Knowledge, esteem and love for Saint John Baptist de La Salle and his work are essential traits in the formation of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Some of the participants in the session said that it is necessary that the Brother become a lover of the Founder and that those in formation need to become one also. Clearly there is a deep significance in the term to love; it means that the affective dimension of the person is involved. That is important because the affective dimension normally is the determining factor in personal decisions and actions. Objective knowledge of the Founder's thinking is also an important factor because it gives more stability to the feelings of admiration and love toward him. These sentiments help to make ourselves ready to *saturate ourselves with the lessons of his life and to imitate his example*. Love will be made visible in the task of acquiring the spirit of the Institute, in the sense of belonging, in fidelity...

5. A personal encounter with God in prayer is a foundational experience in vocational growth.

A personal encounter with God occurs when I establish a dialogue with my own God in order to understand, admire and dialogue with him about myself, my needs or the needs and successes that surround me; or to converse with him about reality in general.

In the formation process, the personal encounter with Jesus and the decision to make him the radical fundamental of our existence is a situation that is continually repeated, especially in prayer, but also through relationships with nature and with persons and by other means. Those who discover the ultimate purpose of material things also grow in dialogue with persons and with God.

6. Formation is a continual process that is incarnated in the reality of the local Church and of the Institute.

What is "formation"? Etymologically, a formator is one who shapes, nourishes growth, organizes, imagines, one who allows another to acquire habits, skills, customs, methods. "Formation" means a unifying process that consists of joining elements and experiences that otherwise would remain separated. Creating, building, composing, imagining. "To form" means then a total and complete intervention, global in scope in which form and being are inseparable. In religious societies the power "to form" is reserved for the "Creator".

"Formation" is an action which is vital and essential which integrates aspects of training and education but includes more than just these. The semantic content of creation includes another meaning, another constitutive meaning which is that of integration, totality, globalization, unifica-

tion; in other words, creation by means of gathering elements together. Formation does not start from an empty slate but it joins together and binds things in relationship, uniting the different elements. Formation entails the putting together of these elements.

"To form oneself" is to recognize that there is never a "finished form" that is received from the outside. The building up of oneself is a "continuing" activity. It is necessary to continually fight to integrate the different influences and yet exist as a unit, a totality.

In terms of the ideal linking to the Pastoral Action Program of the Church, within the Institute's varied reality the articulation varies considerably according to the region and the model of the Church community with a long road to travel a little bit at a time.

The Guide for Formation attempts to offer guidelines to all the Districts in an effort to unify the formation of the members of the Institute. It is an instrument of identification and communion. Unity in formation is a condition, instrument and guarantee of the unity of the Institute. This unity today is being carried out within a decentralized Institute, which demands a concrete commitment for unity.

7. The formation team personnel experience their own vocations day by day authentically and they take on their formation work as a team.

Community is a constitutive element of the Brother's identity. It is also the place one's sense of consecration and charisma is experienced. Therefore the guide for Formation insists that houses of formation should be entrusted to teams and not just to one Brother. VC, in turn, insists on a spirituality of communion according to the image of an apostolic community (VC 45) in order to overcome a sense of aloneness, create a sense of co-responsibility, pardon, remaining faithful and orientation to mission; in dialogue for a common search for solutions (VC 74); in availability for working in common and in collaboration with lay colleagues.

The formation team member fully exercises his mission in the Institute in the work of formation ministry. The work is carried out as team. A formation team, under the personal direction of the person in charge of formation, whose members work together in common accord, conscious of their common responsibility and closely bonded in spirit and action, form among themselves and with those whom they are forming, a united family. A team like this offers those in formation the experience, at the practical level, of the demands of "Together and by Association", one of the traits of our spirituality which must be viewed as an objective to be attained, and which can help us to overcome the strong inclination toward individualism of the present day.

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