

A Gestalt Approach to Developing Emotional Maturity in the Emerging Priest

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Abstract

According to Christian anthropology, each human person is considered as a whole, as substantially one. This holistic understanding of the human person leads us to the conclusion that the different dimensions that belong to a human being are dynamic and interrelated. This article will explore how the Gestalt therapy approach with its emphases on holism, awareness, responsibility, and choice can be a very useful asset to the formator to promote the emotional maturity of the candidates to the priesthood.

Keywords: Gestalt approach, Emotional maturity, Formation

Introduction

Pope John Paul II in his post-synodal Apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* “On the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day” begins the document with the words, “I will give you shepherds after my own heart” (Jer 3:15)(John Paul II, 1992, p. 1). The primary fulfilment of this promise is in the person of Jesus Christ. That is why the Gospel of St. John gives us explicit accounts where Jesus himself witnesses the fact that he is the “Good Shepherd” (Jn 10:11).

The great Shepherd in turn appoints human shepherds to take good care of his flock as seen in Jesus’ threefold commission to Peter in Jn 21:15-17 to feed and tend his sheep. Jesus the ultimate paradigm of the good shepherd appoints his apostles and their successors as shepherds

of the flock that has been entrusted to him(John Paul II,1992). Further, we see the apostle Peter exhorting those sharing in this shepherding ministry to have some basic human qualities in carrying out their ministry. “Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock” (1 Pet 5:3). St. Paul exhorts Titus to appoint elders who have some basic human qualities (Titus 1:5-8).

All the above reflections indicate that a priest as a shepherd of the flock of Christ is required to have some basic human attributes and virtues that make his communication of the Good News credible. This creates the necessity of human formation. As part of human formation, it is the development of affective maturity in the candidates to the priesthood that has been emphasized in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*(John Paul II,1992). This affective maturity is attained by developing a healthy emotional life (Karimpanackal, 2012).

According to Christian anthropology, each human person is considered as a whole, as substantially one. This holistic understanding of the human person leads us to the conclusion that the different dimensions that belong to a human being are dynamic and interrelated. As a result, every aspect of the human person is important and affects the whole person (Bond, 2013). A block in one dimension of the person hinders and blocks the full flourishing of the person in the other dimensions also. This is the reason that psychological insights and techniques can be of great help to deal with the hidden blocks that hinder the full expression of divine grace (Costello, 2010). It is in this context that this article will explore how the Gestalt therapy approach with its emphases on holism, awareness, responsibility, and choice can be a very useful asset to the formator to promote the emotional maturity of the candidates to the priesthood.

A. Human Formation

Building upon the insights of Vatican II an important change that took place in priestly formation was the explicit acknowledgment and acceptance of human formation as a separate program in the seminary. This took place, “in response to the directives of Pope John Paul II in *Pastores Dabo Vobis (PDV)* issued in 1992.”Human formation is the process of helping the candidate to become a genuine human person. It involves, “adequate psychological, emotional growth, and socially acceptable character development, ability to accept oneself, capacity to build up a meaningful relationship with others and various other factors”

(D'Souza, 2007). Human formation enables the priest to develop his affective maturity so as to carry out his pastoral responsibilities in a balanced and free manner (John Paul II, 1992).

B. The Relationship between Affective and Emotional Maturity

Affective maturity is built on the foundations of a healthy emotional and sexual life (Karimpanackal, 2012). Affection is an emotion that arises in the context of interpersonal relationships. So affective maturity is emotional maturity which is aimed at forming intimate relationships with others (Srampickal, 2012). The core element for affective maturity is the capacity for healthy relationships (D'Sa & Pereira, 2012). Affective maturity helps the priest to deal with authority, his subordinates, those under his care, and those of the opposite sex with maturity. It also gives him the ability to deal with stress and conflict productively (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006). It is the ability to love others unselfishly without using them for the fulfillment of one's selfish needs. It involves managing one's sexual needs without in any manner compromising one's commitment towards chastity (D'Almeida, 2013). The following statement rings very true: "The choice of priestly celibacy does not interfere with the normal development of a person's emotional life, but, on the contrary, it presupposes it" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1974).

C. Childhood Attachment Style and Emotional Maturity

Emotional maturity can be blocked due to early childhood experiences in terms of the relationship of the person with their primary caregivers. People who in their earliest childhood days experienced their mothers as caring and loving find it easier to experience positive emotions such as love and trust later on in life and thus have a greater capacity to have intimate relationships with others. Those who experienced their mothers as rejecting, impersonal, and cold in their early childhood tend to have negative emotions such as jealousy and emotional instability that severely reduce their capacity to have intimate relationships. Those who experienced their mothers' love as fluctuating with their moods and needs i.e. unstable tend to later on in life experience obsession, jealousy, and excesses in sexual attraction in their relationships which severely diminishes their capacity for healthy intimacy (Srampickal, 2012).

D. The Concept of Emotional Maturity

Today there is a near-complete consensus that emotions help us to live more intelligently. At the same time, we cannot ignore the evidence from our daily lives that emotions have also caused people to do things that they later regret. Take for example the person who is scolded by their boss for a small infraction and in anger walks out of the job despite having no other means to provide for the family. In such a situation the intelligent decision would have been to bear with the emotional discomfort and continue the job until some other job opportunity was available. What is required for optimal functioning is a proper mixture of reason and emotion. It is this mixture of reason and emotion that leads to the concept of emotional maturity (Evans, 2019). A person is said to be emotionally matured when he/she expresses the capability of discerning when to control their emotions and when to be controlled by them (John & Thomas, 2012). Emotional maturity involves the ability to see life clearly and accurately and the capability to deal with life's ups and downs healthily. Persons with emotional maturity are capable of controlling their emotions. They take full responsibility for their life and actions and can handle their resentments, anger, insecurities, disappointments, fears, guilt, jealousies, and other painful emotions in a healthy manner. On the other hand, emotionally immature people are unable to cope with their negative emotions healthily and are more susceptible to the emotional disorders of anxiety and depression ("Emotional Immaturity Linked to Depression and Anxiety", 2019). Emotional maturity is accepting responsibility for one's feelings, behavior, experiences, and circumstances (Muk, 2013).

E. Emotional Maturity and Self Esteem

Healthy self-esteem is essential for a priest and is a characteristic of affective maturity (McClone, 2009). Scientific studies state that "a positive and significant correlation was found between emotional maturity and self-esteem which indicates that with the increase in self-esteem there will be an increase in emotional maturity" (Singh, 2011). Thus as one grows in self-esteem one will also grow in emotional maturity (Nnabuife, Chukwuemeka, Chinwendu, & Ikechukwu, 2018). A study published in the journal of psychology and psychotherapy in the year 2016 further states that "Interventions can be made to increase the self-esteem of students which will have positive effects on their emotional intelligence" (Bibi, Saqlain, & Mussawar, 2016).

F. The Gestalt Therapeutic Process

Gestalt therapy was developed by Fritz Perls along with his wife Laura Perls in the 1940's. Perls believed that therapy to be successful has to be done in the "now" (Perls, 2003). "Awareness, choice, and responsibility are cornerstones of practice" (Corey, 2013, p. 194). Gestalt therapy is concerned with the growth of the human person in the direction of more self-integration, aliveness, and freedom to make real choices (Renear, 1976). According to Gestalt theory, a healthy person is someone in whom awareness can develop without blocking (Enright, 2003). Healthy behaviour is integrated behaviour where one is not living in an uneasy truce between the warring factions of one's psyche. Health consists of possessing the ability to deal successfully with any situation one encounters in the "here and now." Healthy persons are those who have developed the confidence that they will be able to deal with situations as they come, with whatever abilities they have and that the resolution of the task will be as satisfactory as the situation permits and that they will be content with that (Latner, 1976).

G. Experiments/Techniques in Gestalt Therapy

In Gestalt therapy techniques are considered as experiments. Clients are invited to participate in these experiments as collaborators. Experiments are spontaneous, one of a kind, unique, and creatively tailored to be relevant in the "here and now." They are the cornerstone of experiential learning. They are to heighten the client's understanding and awareness through experience. Their purpose is to assist the client in active self-exploration (Corey, 2013, pp. 206-207). All experiments in Gestalt are the elaborations of two questions: "What are you aware of (experiencing) now?" and the instruction, "Try this experiment and see what you become aware of (experience) or learn" (Yontef, 1991, p. 151). Experiments are used to help clients gain fuller awareness, experience their inner conflicts, resolve inconsistencies and splits, and complete unfinished business (Corey, 2013, p. 210).

1. The Empty Chair Technique: The empty chair technique is a very important tool in exploring introjects, projections, polarities, and interpersonal dynamics (Joyce & Charlotte, 2018, p. 121). The empty chair technique aims to facilitate the integration of the splits in one's personality (Yontef, 1991, p. 162).

2. Exaggeration: Gestalt theory believes that body language such as movements, gestures, and postures communicate significant feelings

and inner meanings. Through the exaggeration of these gestures and movements feelings attached to these behaviours are intensified and inner meanings become clearer (Corey, 2013, p. 212).

3. The Reversal Exercise: Sometimes behaviours and symptoms represent reversals of underlying latent impulses. For example, a person suffering from excessive timidity may be suppressing an impulse of his/her “self” that he/she has disowned such as anger. In such cases, reversal exercises can be used which invite the client to reverse his/her typical style and be aware of what happens. Such experiments can help clients to make contact with those parts of themselves that they have disowned and rejected (Corey, 2013, p. 211).

4. Staying with the Feeling: When clients begin to grow in awareness, they find themselves trying to flee from uneasy frustrating feelings. To pass through the impasse the endurance of this psychic pain is necessary (Yontef, 1991, p. 80). In this technique, the therapist encourages clients to “stay with” unpleasant feelings through the continuum of contact. This can lead to the increased awareness of the various resistances that are being employed to avoid full contact (Gehart, 2016, p. 191).

H. Gestalt Principles Complementing Human Formation

1. Responsibility, Choice, Awareness, and Self Formation

Self-formation is one of the fundamental principles of priestly formation and emerges from a sense of responsibility. Only a candidate who accepts responsibility for his vocation will with awareness choose to avoid those things that may hurt his vocation. He will be diligent in his prayers, duties, and studies because he is aware that they are useful to his vocation and not because his superiors are forcing it on him (Maciel, 1992). The three cornerstones of the Gestalt approach are awareness, choice, and responsibility (Corey, 2013, p. 194). The principle of “Responsibility” in Gestalt states that one needs to own one’s responses, choices, and actions in any situation. One needs to always remain aware that one is not merely a victim of one’s past, other people, or of the system and that one can choose to do what one believes in or to give in to the demands of the environment (Philippon, 2001, p. 209). This matches quite precisely with what is required of a candidate to the priesthood.

2. Holism and Integral Formation

“Integral Formation” is considered as being fundamental to the training of candidates for the priesthood. This is because each person though being a complex reality is a single unit and God chooses the whole person to be consecrated to him and his service (Maciel, 1992, p. 43). The Gestalt principle of “Holism” is in alignment with this, acknowledging that all the aspects of the human person need to be taken into account while dealing with the person. “Holism does not split mind from body, nor does it speak as though there were a separate interior and exterior experience or see a human being as divorced from their environment.”¹ It has a holistic understanding of human beings and thus considers, “the physical body, emotions, thoughts, culture,” in a unified manner (Latner, 1976).

3. The I/Thou Relationship and Affective Maturity

The Gestalt approach influenced by the teachings of Martin Buber on relationships believes that interactions should be based on the I-thou relationship where we treat the other person as a human being and accept them for who they are (Clarkson, 2014). The primary aim of human formation is to help the priest to communicate the message of Christ effectively. And for this, the priest must develop relational capabilities that enable him to have a genuine dialogue with others. Gestalt therapy’s emphasis on the “I- Thou” relationship can significantly contribute towards the development of affective maturity in the candidate and thus achieve an important goal of human formation i.e to form a priest of dialogue (John Paul II, 1992).

I. Role of the Formator as He Integrates the Gestalt Perspective

1. Commitment to Dialogue

The formator must be truly committed to dialogue. This means that the formator has to communicate with the formee not out of a pre-conceived intention of manipulating, controlling, exploiting or conditioning the formee which is an “I- it” communication but out of a genuine commitment to understanding the formee (inclusion), communicate ones genuine feedback (presence) and be truly open to the creative solution that comes up. Thus solutions are not imposed ignoring the world of the formee but by taking into account the formee as a real person. This is an I-thou communication (Yontef, 1991, p. 220). A flow of affective energy can occur between the formator and formee only

¹Mann, *Gestalt Therapy (100 Key Points)*, 23.

when both can show and express their true selves by giving up the intention to control each other. This can lead to solutions that are based on love(Yontef, 1991, p. 221).

2. The Paradoxical Theory of Change

The paradoxical theory of change in Gestalt therapy states that “we change when we become aware of what we are as opposed to trying to become what we are not” (Roundy, n.d.). It believes that individuals have a natural drive towards actualization; but they first need to unconditionally, without judgment, accept all aspects of themselves for them to begin to change the aspects that are not in alignment with their actualization(Corey, 2013, p. 199). Thus the formator who integrates the Gestalt perspective will try to create an atmosphere in the formation house or at least in his interactions with the formee where the formee feels free enough to be who he really is without wearing any masks. Only in such an atmosphere can formees truly become aware of their own weaknesses and thus begin the first step towards change.

3. Phenomenological Approach

Gestalt therapy is a phenomenological therapy in that it concentrates on the world as experienced by the client (Korb, Gorrell,&De Riet, 2002, ch4). The therapist is concerned with the immediate, current experience of the client (Korb, Gorrell,&De Riet, 2002, ch6). The therapist approaches the person with genuine curiosity and an open mind(Joyce & Charlotte, 2018, p. 121). This involves “bracketing” i.e., temporarily putting aside one’s prejudices, priorities, values, and anything that colours one’s experience to understand the client’s experience (Sills, Lapworth, & Desmond, 2012, p. 91-92). A formator who adopts this approach in his style of formation will take the experiences of the formee who is put into his charge seriously. The formator will not dismiss the formee’s emotions of fear, anxiety, joy and happiness as completely irrelevant just because the formator himself does not experience these emotions. This is the first step that the formator needs to employ before any other intervention can be implemented. Only when the candidate feels that his inner world is understood by the formator will he be positively motivated to remedy the situation. Adopting the phenomenological approach leads to people experiencing that they are being listened to without judgment. This can have a great healing influence as people usually experience only blame and self-criticism for their weaknesses(Joyce & Charlotte, 2018).

4. Field Theory

Field Theory is one of the foundations of Gestalt Therapy. Field Theory means that the person must always be seen in his/her environment or in his/her context where changes in the environment lead to changes in the organism and any change in the organism leads to changes in the context. Everything is relational, interrelated and in flux”(Corey, 2013, p. 197). Field Theory believes that a person affects and influences and is also affected and influenced by one “Phenomenal Field” such as body, mind, emotions; “Relational Field” between the client and the therapist and also by the “Larger Field” in which they exist such as the cultural, political, economic, social and spiritual influences(Joyce & Charlotte, 2018). This perspective of Gestalt can contribute greatly to the attitudes of a formator as he comes to understand that the formee is not some isolated human being but is a product of his culture and generation. Thus a formee who is an expert in keeping up his presence on social media is not necessarily someone who is addicted to it but is a product of the environment that he comes from. In such a case the formator can be more compassionate and help the formee to wean away from this habit in more gentle ways and will not consider this as a severe hindrance to his vocation.

5. Verbal Language

Paying attention to verbal language in Gestalt is considered as an important way of increasing awareness of how one is either avoiding or supporting one’s autonomy, responsibility, and choice(Gehart, 2016, p. 191).

- **It:** When people use “it” instead of “I” they are disowning their sense of responsibility by using depersonalizing language. For example “It is difficult to study for the test.” Here the formator can help the candidate to become aware of their responsibility in the situation by urging them to substitute impersonal pronouns with personal ones. For example, “I find it difficult to study for the test” (Corey, 2013, p. 203).

- **Choose versus Can’t:** If there is an element of choice involved in a statement and the person uses the word “can’t” the formator can help the candidate to rephrase the sentence by using the word “choose” instead to help the candidate to grow in the awareness of his responsibility in the situation. For example, “I can’t come for morning mass as it is early,” can be replaced with, “I choose not to come for morning mass” (Gehart, 2016, p. 191).

6. Non-Verbal Language

According to Gestalt theory, every emotion has a physiological component. Emotions that are being suppressed, disowned, or not fully expressed create bodily changes that are quite explicit. They are expressed in various ways through the body such as body posture, tone of voice, fidgeting, tightening of parts of the body, or dysfunction of some part of the body. For example, when a person who is speaking to a superior is wringing his hands nervously, it could be an indication that the candidate is suppressing without his full awareness some emotion or tendency to act. The formator who is sensitive to these bodily clues could help the candidate to grow in awareness of his suppressed emotions. This will help the candidate to free up the energy that was being used to suppress the emotion and thus to be more productive (Gehart, 2016, p. 182-83).

J. Gestalt Approach and Emotional Maturity

Gestalt therapy gives great importance to attend to one's emotions (Sharf, 2004, p. 245). One of the primary concerns of the Gestalt practitioner is to help people mature emotionally (Latner, 1976). Gestalt therapy helps in dealing with anxiety as it helps people to focus on the present and to deal with the triggers of anxiety in the present moment. It has also been used successfully in the treatment of depression by effectively dealing with the factors that lead to depression. Gestalt therapy is shown to be of great help for people who have self-esteem issues. It helps such people to discover and overcome the underlying issues that lead to low self-esteem (Sippel, n.d.).

K. Gestalt Approach as a Contributor to Self Esteem

To encourage self-esteem in any group of people be it, school children, adolescents, or candidates to the priesthood implies creating a climate that supports and reinforces the following practices that strengthen self-esteem (Branden, 1994, p. 65).

1. The Practice of Living Consciously

The word “Consciously” in the “Practice of Living Consciously” refers primarily to “Awareness.” It is awareness of reality in its totality i.e both one’s inner reality consisting of emotions, values, attitudes, needs, and external reality. Living life with a lack of awareness will lead to a diminished sense of self-efficacy and self-respect. To live consciously means to strive to be always aware of everything that is intimately connected with one’s values, goals, purposes and to act following what

one has become aware of. Refusing to do the appropriate action means avoiding the practice of living consciously (Branden, 1994, p. 67-69). Sometimes candidate's unfinished business may consist of feelings of resentment towards their parents or some primary caregiver who may not be alive at the present moment. In such cases, the formator can first help the candidate "to know" their anger or other unexpressed feelings through the use of techniques such as exaggeration or reversal and then help the candidate "to do" the act of reconciliation by using role-play techniques such as the empty chair through which the candidate encounters and forgives the person.

2. The Practice of Self Acceptance

Self-acceptance in the simplest terms means being in a positive relationship with oneself. It is a choice to value oneself by not rejecting any part of one's self (Branden, 1994, p. 90). Low self-esteem is a very common problem in Indian seminarians as many vocations come from poor economic backgrounds. Candidates coming from communities who have been looked down on as inferior by the society based on caste, culture, and education tend to have a negative self-concept (D'Souza, 2007). By using the empty chair technique or by role-playing experiments the various negative toxic introjects that have been swallowed by powerful people in one's environment which degrade the self can be brought to the awareness of the candidate which then leads to change.

3. The Practice of Self Responsibility

The practice of self-responsibility implies that one is responsible for the achievement of one's desires and happiness through the exercise of one's power to choose and act. Denying responsibility for matters that are within one's control is detrimental to self-esteem (Branden, 1994, p. 105-106). One of the important goals of enhancing awareness in Gestalt therapy is to help a person to take responsibility for the choices that he/she makes for his/her life (Sills, Lapworth, & Desmond, 2012, p. 17). One way the formator can help the candidate to grow in self-responsibility is by helping him to pay attention to the verbal language that he is using. When the candidate is shirking self-responsibility by saying, "I bunked college because my friends were going for a movie," the formator can help the candidate to reformulate the sentence to, "I bunked college because I chose to go to the movie with my friends." Such kinds of interventions can help candidates to grow in awareness of one's self-responsibility.

4. The Practice of Self Assertiveness

Self-assertiveness consists in seeking to express and fulfill appropriately one's values, needs, and wants while at the same time being respectful of the rights of others. It involves being in intimate relationships without losing one's identity and cooperating with others without betraying one's standards and convictions (Branden, 1994). Confluence is the loss of one's identity where one person subordinates his/her preferences to another. It is a surrender to the sameness that tries to do away with the differentiation of self with the other (Yontef, 1991, p. 205). The formator by using techniques such as the empty chair can help the candidate to become aware of the introjects that cause him to be confluent with others. Such kind of awareness will help the candidate to discern his true values from introjected values. This facilitates the development of self-assertiveness as now the candidate will choose which values he needs to assertively pursue rather than merely follow the crowd.

5. The Practice of Living Purposefully

To live purposefully means to use our energies and resources for the attainment of goals we have selected. The goals can be material, relationship goals or spiritual goals (Branden, 1994). Based on *Perfectae Caritatis* article 2 and articles 14 to 17 in *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Rulla (1971) proposes that there are two objective terminal values of priesthood and religious life: The imitation of Christ and union with God. The instrumental values that help one to reach these terminal values are the evangelical councils of poverty, chastity and obedience. One can thus extrapolate that for priest self-esteem will result from living faithfully to one's vows or promises of chastity, poverty and obedience with the purpose of imitating Christ and growing in union with God. Here the Gestalt approach can be used by the formator to help the candidate to become aware of the various introjects that he has swallowed from the secular culture of his time that is blocked to the radical observance of the vows.

L. Gestalt Approach and Dysfunctional Coping Strategies

Although problems in early upbringing, stress, trauma, hormones, interpersonal conflicts, and genetics are factors that can contribute to the emergence of emotional problems yet the most determining factor for the rise of emotional problems is the immature coping strategies a person uses to handle emotional pain. Transdiagnostic Factors (TDFs) are common underlying factors that create and maintain all emotional

disorders. These are dysfunctional and immature coping strategies adopted by people to manage difficult situations. These coping strategies are adopted as they provide instant and immediate relief from emotional pain but in the long term only intensify the emotional pain and make it worse. They are the roots of all emotional problems (McKay, Fanning, & Ona, 2010). McKay, Fanning, and Ona highlight several dysfunctional coping mechanisms that when used in the long term lead to emotional disorders such as anxiety, chronic anger, and depression. Some of these are Experiential Avoidance, Short Term Focus, Rumination, and Negative Appraisal (McKay, Fanning, & Ona, 2010).

1. Experiential Avoidance

In experiential avoidance, one tries to avoid experiencing uncomfortable emotional experiences and situations by suppressing or numbing them. This leads to emotional problems (McKay, Fanning, & Ona, 2010). Gestalt theory in turn considers that for healthy living, the endurance of painful circumstances is a reality. Gestalt is an experiential therapy.² It emphasizes the importance of staying with feelings that are difficult and unpleasant.³ Endurance of this pain is necessary for clearing blocks and growing to newer levels of maturity (Corey, 2013, p. 212). One can thus consider the Gestalt approach to suffering to be in some small ways in alignment with the Christian understanding of it as a necessary phenomenon to be endured rather than to be avoided. To give an example of the Gestalt approach to uncomfortable feelings; in the case of candidates who due to stage fright avoid getting into situations where they have to be before an audience, the formator helps them to overcome these unpleasant sensations by encouraging them to participate in public events in a more controlled environment and motivate them to stay with the painful feeling.

2. Short Term Focus

Immaturity in this area consists of using short-term solutions to deal with emotional discomfort resulting in negative consequences in the long term (McKay, Fanning, & Ona, 2010). For example, a person loses his job and feels sad. To avoid the uncomfortable experience of sadness the person begins drinking and withdrawing socially. Such short-term creative adjustment to suppress and numb the feelings of sadness then leads to the development of an emotional disorder of

²Mann, *Gestalt Therapy (100 Key Points)*, 4.

³Mann, *Gestalt Therapy (100 Key Points)*, 133.

depression accompanied by alcoholism and isolation. The Gestalt approach considers that quite several maladaptive behaviours emerge as a result of one using creative adjustments that focus on short-term solutions as a child to deal with one's painful experiences of an unsupportive environment. The goal of gestalt therapy is to make the person aware of these short-term solutions and help him/her to be free to make better choices in the present. Gestalt theory thus encourages one to avoid using short-term solutions that can lead to painful long-term consequences.

3. Rumination and Negative Appraisals

The Gestalt approach places a lot of emphasis on the fact that for healthy functioning a person must deal with situations in the “here and now.” It believes that a person has a limited amount of energy with which he/she can address the present situation. Any rumination over the past or future which includes negative appraisals could reduce drastically the amount of energy one can apply to the present. At the same time, Gestalt theory believes that the present situation gets distorted and coloured by concerns of the past and anticipation of the future. Being in the “here and now” is the best way to deal with any situation (Korb, Gorrell, & De Riet, 2002, ch1).

During the time of theological studies, the researcher has observed that many candidates while preparing for the exams were extremely stressed and experienced insomnia or gastric problems. The formator can help such candidates to focus on the “here and now” aspect of what is in their control. Furthermore, the formator can help candidates to develop self-acceptance by helping them to become aware of the “top dog” aspect of their split personality that dominates their thinking with “shoulds” of the past or future, such as “You should have done better last time.”

Most introjection is done in the early years of childhood. These introjects can lead to functional or dysfunctional outcomes (Sills, Lapworth, & Desmond, 2012, p. 59). The negative appraisal can be considered as toxic introjects that may have been internalized from abusive parents (Clarkson, 2014). The formator can help candidates to become relatively free of negative appraisals by helping them to grow in awareness of the introjects that demand them to be perfect such as, “You have to be perfect in everything or you are worthless.” Once these introjects are brought to awareness the candidate is capable of choosing to discard them or keep them.

Conclusion

Gestalt Therapy can be very effectively used to enhance the human formation of the candidates to the priesthood. Its emphasis on the “I-Thou” relationship plays a major role in helping the formator to communicate with candidates effectively to help them to be formed into men of communion. Learning through modelling their formators the candidates can in turn engage with those whom they are called to serve, not as objects to be exploited but as human beings that need to be treated with respect and acceptance. Furthermore, the stress put by Gestalt on the concept of “holism” will help the formator to inculcate in candidates an integrated view of their personalities, where every aspect of their being; be it spiritual, pastoral, sexual, or physical are seen as contributing to their whole personality. This will lead them to understand the importance of not neglecting any aspect of their being as each one is connected and affects the other. Gestalt therapy’s insistence on resolving “unfinished business” will help candidates deal with wounds that they experienced in the past, wounds that prevent them from living in the present. Dealing with such wounds in the present will lead them to be free to be open to the formation process which is carried out in the “here and now.” The positive view of the human person as portrayed by Gestalt Therapy helps those in the formation process to look at candidates with hope, that they are capable of changing and thus of being formed into the likeness of Christ even in their humanity.

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