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**NOVITIATE FORMATION: A
THEOLOGICO-CANONICAL STUDY OF
CANON 646 IN CONTEMPORARY
RELIGIOUS LIFE**

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The dissertation on the nature and purpose of the novitiate formation centres its research on canon 646 of *Codex Iuris Canonici* (CIC) 1983. In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the topic, while treating the canonical aspects of the novitiate, the thesis also examines the theological importance of formation in religious life with a specific focus on the contemporary novitiate formation and its challenges. Using a narrative, analytical, synthetic, and interdisciplinary method, the study enquires into the purpose of the novitiate formation from the early history of religious life until the present day. The thesis is an attempt to understand the role and relevance of novitiate in the challenging situations of the contemporary religious life.

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The Reasons for the Choice of the Theme

Religious life, which is a historical and theological reality, has been in the process of evolution since its beginning. Today it is going through a period of changes and adaptations in response to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and under the effects of globalization and secularization. The fragility of religious life in the changing social environment shows itself in the decreasing number of vocations, mediocre lifestyle, ineffective testimony of community life and the desertions of members. Since the quality of religious life depends much on the formation of its members, an adequate response to the present challenges seems difficult except through personal formation, both initial and ongoing. Hence, the dissertation attempts to discover how the novitiate formation could help religious institutes to respond meaningfully to the challenges they face.

The new vocations knocking at the doors of religious life present great diversity and they require personal attention and methods that are able to respond to their concrete human, spiritual and cultural situations (cf. *Starting Afresh from Christ*, 18). Therefore, formation of its members has become a crucial challenge for religious institutes today. Recognizing the important role of formation in the challenging situations of religious life, this study examines the novitiate formation, which is one of the stages of religious formation. The life in a religious institute begins with the novitiate (cf. can. 646). Therefore, the novitiate training has an important role in forming religious to live the religious commitment in response to the signs of the times. Formation of the novices is a vast topic with innumerable questions, directly and indirectly connected with it. However, the study limits itself to examining the purpose of the novitiate formation.

Scope of the Dissertation

The study attempts to understand the place of novitiate in the context of religious life and the Church. Further, it strives to underline the Church's concern and interest in highlighting the role and relevance of the formation of novices. The study wants to bring to the fore that, despite the changing needs and challenging situations, following Christ (*sequela Christi*) through the specific way of the institute remains the primary goal of religious life (*Perfectae Caritatis* [PC], 2). Likewise, though the novitiate formation that has developed through the centuries is still in the process of evolution in response to the challenges of the time, it has not lost sight of its essential role of initiating the novice into the institute's way of

following Christ. Even though the changing needs of the time require specification and emphasis on various aspects of the objective of the novitiate, it has always been a time of probation and discernment. As a result, despite the varying structures and circumstances, the novitiate has an undeniable role and inimitable relevance in religious life.

Structure of the Work

With the specific objective of studying the purpose and importance of novitiate formation in religious life, this study reviews canon 646 by analyzing its historical, theological, ecclesial and canonical evolution. The dissertation is divided into four chapters. The Church laws grow out of historical contexts and a series of experiences that reflect the life of the Church. Therefore, the first chapter, using the narrative method surveys the development of the novitiate in the history of religious life. In the process, it attempts to discover how the novitiate, once a non-juridical entity, has become an ecclesial institution today. The chapter begins by focusing on the origin of the concept of time, mode and purpose of probation before the profession of the vows or admission to various monastic and mendicant groups. It further attempts to discover how particular laws regarding the novitiate helped pave the way for the universal legislation on the novitiate that was promulgated at the Council of Trent. The chapter concludes by studying the origin of canonical legislations on the formation of novices in the 1917 Code. Special attention is given to the study of canon 565§1 because it is the source of canon 646 of CIC/83.

The second chapter will centre its enquiry on the official teachings of the Church on the novitiate formation with special emphasis on the Second Vatican Council's documents and its insights. It attempts to see how ecclesiology, theology and spirituality could form the basis for the canonical legislation on the formation of the novices. The first part of the chapter reviews the Church documents on novitiate formation after the 1917 Code until the Second Vatican Council. The magisterial teachings during this period emphasize the selection of novices and the importance of having suitable formators to train them. The thrust of the second part is the study of the Conciliar proceedings on religious life in general and formation in particular. By recognizing religious life as an essential part of the Church (cf. *Lumen Gentium* [LG], 44), the Council provides a theological reason for the existence of religious life, which includes the novitiate, and thus justifies its purpose. Although *Perfectae Caritatis* was aimed at the renewal of religious life, it does not say anything about the

novitiate per se. Therefore, the study attempts to examine the reasons for this apparent omission by analyzing the Council proceedings and drafts. The chapter concludes by examining how the post-Conciliar teachings further developed on the legislation on the formation of novices contained in the 1917 Code, and in what way it provided a base for the revision of the 1983 Code.

After having explored the historical, theological and ecclesial development on the novitiate and its purpose, the third chapter proposes to analyze the novitiate formation in CIC/83 with particular focus on canon 646. It considers the purpose of the novitiate as to discern the divine vocation of a novice in the context of an institute. The chapter also briefly examines the canons on the nature and the purpose of the novitiate according to *Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium* (CCEO). Since the Latin and Eastern traditions of the Church constitute the patrimony of the universal Church, the study of the Eastern Code is aimed at acquiring a more complete understanding of the Church's legislation of the novitiate. It is striking that the CCEO which is promulgated after CIC/83 is more similar to CIC/17 in its view on the purpose of the novitiate. The study attempts to discover the possible reasons for this similarity.

The fourth chapter through an interdisciplinary method considers the post-Code magisterial teaching on the novitiate formation. The period since the Second Vatican Council and the CIC/83 saw extensive and rapid changes in religious life especially in the style of life, structures and apostolates that were stable and secure. On the other hand, the new vocations came with the riches and vulnerabilities of today's society. To respond to these situations meaningfully, the Church further adapted and applied in its teachings the regulations set down by the Code of 1983. The emphasis on "growing into Christ," as the goal of religious formation, is a specific feature of the post-Code period. These teachings place great emphasis on the integral formation of the novices. Besides the spiritual formation, the role of psychology and human development in formation process are considered essential by the magisterial teachings. It also highlighted the importance of selection and training of formators to achieve the desired purpose of formation. The chapter concludes with the analysis of challenges and tasks ahead in the novitiate formation.

Conclusion

The study brings to the fore that the consecrated life in the Church has its origin in the life and teachings of Christ (cf. LG, 43). Its

members aim at following Christ more closely under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The purpose of growing in union with Christ in configuration to him is attained through the process of formation (cf. *Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious life*, 45). Therefore, the Church takes great interest and care in the formation of the novices. The novitiate formation, which is central to religious life, aims at initiating the novice to a deeper understanding of the vocation in the context of an institute. It is a time of probation in which the suitability of the novice to follow Christ through the institute is tested and his/her call is discerned.

Although the basic understanding of the novitiate continues to be the same, the Church has specified, developed and adapted it in response to the needs of the time. Though the formation of the novices is a complex reality that involves very many factors, based on our study, we can identify three fundamental elements that are necessary in realizing the purpose of the novitiate. They are the structure of the novitiate that helps the formation process in the context of an institute, the novice master/mistress who implement the process, and finally the novice who is seeking the formation.

In the evolutionary history of the novitiate, it is worth noting the shifting emphasis in the novitiate formation. During the monastic period, the emphasis was on the monastery and its way of life. Probation was to prepare the candidates to fit them into the life of the monastery. Obedience to the rules and structure was the essence of formation. In the later period, the office of the novice master was institutionalized. He wielded total authority over the novices. The 1917 Code highlighted the program of formation. The goal of formation was to form the mind of the novice through the prescribed studies. The Conciliar and post-Conciliar period incorporates the novice and his/her development into the formation. "The gradual formation" that is proposed in canon 652§1 implies personal direction of the novices in response to their needs. The aspect of individual direction of the novices is further developed in *Potissimum institutioni* that recommends personal accompaniment of the novices because each one is at a different stage of growth and maturity (PI 52). A vocation is a divine-human engagement in which God calls the individual and gives the grace to follow him. The formation personnel and the institutional structures have an important role in helping the candidate to discern his/her vocation.