

## HUMAN FORMATION

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**Abstract:** Joe Mannath SDB deals with human formation. He begins the discussion with what formation means, who the stakeholders are and how their respective responsibilities need to be spelt out. He considers the three goals of religious life as personal growth, community life and mission. He discusses the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, pastoral and professional aspects as conditional for integral formation. A healthy enhancement of human formation must look into adequate health and capacity of the candidate for work, emotional balance, psycho-sexual integration, responsible use of freedom and contact with reality. Mannath also takes into consideration the role of the formator and how formators help in human formation. As qualities of a good formator, he looks into the integrated personal life, team work, sound judgement, effective communication, intelligence, academic ability, fidelity to the church, enthusiastic commitment, pastoral involvement and experience.

**Keywords:** formation, formator, formee, freedom, seminarian, priests, visionary, religious, candidates, community, experience, mission, diocese, superiors, novice-master, charism, priest vocation, methodology, context, awareness, languages, culture, skills, health, work, institutions, exhortations, emotions, relationships, colleagues, appreciation, multiculturalism, ministry, integration, celibacy, celibates, spinsters, bachelors, masturbation, pornography, friendships, fear, counselling, maturity, immaturity, honesty, integrity, values, prayer, team-work, judgement, communication, intelligence, fidelity, commitment.

The topic that we would like to discuss is human formation. Before we come to that, we would like to say a word on what formation means, who the stakeholders are, and how their respective responsibilities need to be spelt out.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The following articles of mine explore questions of formation in detail: Joe Mannath, "The Cost of Discipleship: The Challenges Facing Religious in

### 1. 'Formation': A Misnomer?

We are used to words like "formation," "formator," "formee," etc., as if these were self-evident terms. In fact, they are not. No one holds the key to a human being's heart and freedom. We can train a dog; we cannot really "form" a human being. For instance, if you have dogs, you can train them to do what you want them to do. They will do it exactly. We can train elephants to do what we want.

We cannot do that with human beings. Right now, for instance, I can talk, but you have the freedom to listen to me or not. And if you listen, I cannot make you agree with me, or do what I suggest. This is the mystery of the human heart. One person cannot make another do what that other person does not want to do. Under threats and coercion, many people do things out of fear, but, as soon as those external factors are removed, the persons concerned do what they really want. This can easily happen in formation settings.

I once wrote an article about the 70+20+10 formula. I first heard of this idea while talking with an experienced and much esteemed religious formator who later became the provincial. He told me: "In my opinion, formation depends seventy percent on the candidate, twenty percent on the formators and ten per cent on the programme." I would agree, though I am not sure of the percentages. A good programme does not necessarily lead to better priests or religious. More important than programmes are the formators. Most important is the person of the formee.

Once, when a former student of our seminary came back to meet us, I told him that I was happy to hear how well he was doing. His reply showed two strongly held convictions: (1) that it is not he who was doing great things, but God works in and through us. (2) that even when I was a seminarian, he was aware that you we could not form them; they formed themselves. True.

The formators can provide opportunities, can exhort, remind, correct and listen. They do not have the power to make anyone a good religious or priest. The seminary cannot make you good priests. This is

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India Today. Part I," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 64/7 (2000) 494-507; "The Cost of Discipleship: The Challenges Facing Religious in India Today. Part II," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 64/8 (2000b) 583-591; "Priestly and Religious Formation in India: The Rhetoric, the Reality and Some Proposals," *Sanyasa* IV/2 (2009) 193-218; "Happy and Inspiring Religious Communities: Essential Elements, Distinguishing Marks and Formation Issues" *Sanyasa* V/2 (2010) 121-141.

strikingly true when we look at exceptional individuals. A great saint or visionary or creative genius is not the product of a system. Don Bosco seemed to have learnt more from his semi-literate mother than from the professors in his seminary. Mother Teresa is not simply a product of her Loreto training. Steve Jobs was a college drop out. He had no engineering degree. If you see that very interesting movie, "Karol," about the life of the young Pole who was to become Pope John Paul II, you will see that he hardly had any seminary training. The Nazi government had closed the seminaries.

The one thing formators may do well to keep in mind is this: Their role matters, but is not central. Their impact on the formees is less than that of their families and close friends. What the formators do and say does matter, but they do not have the power to make or shape any human being according to their plans. That is between that person and God, whatever he or she considers deepest and most central.

## **2. The Three Goals of Religious Life**

When someone joins a religious order or seminary, this decision is very different from joining a club or some part-time activity. One is making this choice the central point of one's life. It becomes one's main commitment, even more important than family ties. If so, the congregation or diocese that welcomes this person has the duty of helping the candidate seriously to achieve his/her overall development.

A religious formation house or seminary needs to focus attention on three areas of the life of the candidates who aspire to become members of the community: personal growth, community life and mission.

### **2.1. Personal Growth**

When candidates want to join a religious community, they and their families have the right to check whether joining this group will help to grow up, and become better. Will they be looked after physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually? Will they become a better and more mature human beings, or end up immature and silly? Will they become a holy priests and religious, or become worldly and corrupt? While a setting does not have full control of the decisions of a candidate, it can influence him/her a lot. The candidates can become better or worse, more mature or more immature, in a formation house. Paul Parathazham's study on formees shows that a good number of candidates find themselves more immature than their age group

outside. So, too, there are seminarians and religious who find and admit that they were better persons before joining than after joining the community!

## **2.2. Community Life**

A candidate gets a sense of belonging only if he/she experiences a loving community. In community life we see whether the great theories we hear in conferences are actually lived in real life. In fact, the main contribution that the religious make to the world is not the external works like running schools or hospitals, or being engaged in social work that we do. For doing that, we do not need to be religious or priests. Our main contribution is the quality of our relationships, treating everyone, whatever their social status, or income, or ethnicity or gender, as God's beloved children, without prejudice or bigotry. This we need to experience in our community, before we preach it to others in ministry.

## **2.3. Mission**

The religious come together as a community, not just to crack jokes or have a good time, but for a serious and worthwhile mission. A candidate learns the mission of an order or diocese, not from talks about the founder, but by seeing their superiors and formators live the mission. When the candidate witnesses how their superiors or novice master or rector live the charism, he/she understands what the charism and the mission of the congregation is.

These three goals do not develop as parallel lines. At the beginning, it is important to take time and efforts to build a loving community. Unless the formees feel at home, and feel happy, they will not get a sense of belonging. If they do not feel loved and cared for, they will become cynical about the religious order and the mission. Hence, it is very important that the formators become good community builders.

## **3. The Stakeholders in Formation**

As I have explained in much greater detail elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> the three stakeholders in formation are: the formee, the formator and the

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<sup>2</sup>Joe Mannath, Formation for a Meaningful Celibate Life: Three Levels of Responsibility, in Jose Parapuully SDB and Joe Kuttianimattathil SDB (eds.), *Psycho-Sexual Integration and Celibate Maturity: Handbook for Religious and*

religious order or diocese. Each has a distinct set of responsibilities. The Church makes it plain that the main agent of formation is the formee. This responsibility should not be assumed by someone else (e.g., by a formator taking vocational decisions for the formee).

For reasons of brevity and clarity, I would repeat in a few words what I have explained more at length in the abovementioned article. The formee's responsibilities pertain to what, why, how. (1) *What* do I want to be? Do I want to be priest, or religious, or be part of this order? (2) *Why* do I want to join? Why do I want to be a religious or a priest? (3) *How* do I use the opportunities offered me. Only this will show how serious I am about my vocation.

The formator's role can also be summarized under three headings: Inspire, interact, instruct. (1) *Inspire*: The formator must be a person the formees can look up to, and feel inspired by. (2) *Interact*: As in parenting, the formator must live and interact with the formees, in all aspects of their life. (3) *Instruct*: The instruction comes within this life together.

The responsibilities of the religious order or diocese can also be summarized under three heads: Mission, Members, Methodology. (1) *Mission*: You will attract good young people if you have a relevant mission. (2) *Members*: Inspiring members will inspire younger people. (3) *Methodology*: A plan of formation.

#### **4. Aspects of Integral Formation**

Integral formation must really address all the aspects of a person's life. It includes the following eight areas:

##### **4.1. Physical Aspect**

(1) Food: learning to eat healthy and balanced meals; (2) Exercise appropriate to one's age and health; (3) Sleep: regularity; (4) Hygiene and cleanliness; and (5) Medicine: reasonable care, without being a hypochondriac.

##### **4.2. Mental Aspect**

(1) Adequate knowledge (languages, Bible, religious and secular subjects); (2) Learning to learn (Study skills, including memory, concentration, reading); (3) Learning to think creatively and critically; (4) Habit of reflection; and (5) Habit of reading and reflective writing.

**4.3. Emotional Aspect**

(1) Learning to relate at different levels (intimacy, friendship, kindness & courtesy); (2) Handling one's emotions (anger, sadness, fear, jealousy, facing criticism); (3) Psycho-sexual maturity: learning to see, and relate to, men and women with warmth, respect and proper boundaries; (4) Managing one's time and money; and (5) Taking decisions

**4.4. Spiritual Aspect**

(1) Acquiring Christ's values, esp. love and forgiveness; (2) Personal integrity (no lying, no cheating, etc.); (3) Justice, including rejection of discrimination; (4) Personal prayer that has an impact on one's life; and (5) Simplicity of life and detachment from power, pleasure and possessions.

**4.5. Pastoral Aspect**

(1) Compassionate concern for people, esp. the poor and the suffering; (2) Readiness to make sacrifices for people; (3) Interest in the mission of the congregation; (4) Effectiveness in working with people; and (5) Courtesy and good manners.

**4.6. Professional Aspect**

(1) Qualification/preparation according to the mission: e.g., medical or teaching degree; (2) Preparation for particular tasks and responsibilities: e.g., administration; (3) Readiness to keep learning: e.g., updating courses, reading, seminars; (4) Specialization when necessary for the mission: e.g., Doctorate or MS; (5) Joining and being active in professional bodies. For example, ITA, ACPI, CCPI.

**4.7. Socio-Cultural (Context)**

(1) Awareness of the context; (2) Realistic exposure in the context; (3) Familiarity with the languages, culture and needs of the area; (4) Critical appropriation of one's own culture; and (5) Openness to other cultures and groups.

**4.8. Skills**

(1) Speaking: both inter-personal and public; (2) Reading: e.g., how to read a book, a newspaper, etc.; (3) Writing: Good writing is correct, clear, concise, comprehensive, critical and creative; (4) Organizing: e.g., a sports meet, a drama, a feast, a liturgy, a seminar; and (5) Work-

related skills: computer-use, musical instruments, driving, first aid, swimming, cooking, art work, minor repairs and maintenance.

The last three (professional training, socio-cultural preparation and acquiring skills) are not generally considered separate areas of formation. They are elaborations of one's mental and pastoral formation.

## **5. Human Formation**

The church itself admits – and complaints from lay persons are many – that the weak part of priestly and religious formation is what is called human formation. It combines several aspects of formation and comprises the following six areas:

### **5.1. Adequate Health and Capacity for Work**

A candidate has to be sufficiently healthy to do all the normal duties without seeking exemptions, eat normal food, and fit in. It also means keeping oneself physically fit, so as not to become a burden for others. Care for one's physical fitness is not selfish or a fad. Our health is God's gift, and we need to take reasonable care of it. We do this by eating and exercising in a healthy way, by avoiding addictions, by practicing rules of hygiene, and having healthy habits of sleep and work. India leads the world in diabetes and heart disease. We need to do our part to stay healthy. Manual labour is a part of religious life, which all of us (formees and formators) are invited to do.

### **5.2. Emotional Balance**

For success in any area of life, particularly in leadership roles, emotional maturity matters more than intellectual brilliance. A person of average intelligence who is emotionally balanced will do more and better than a cleverer person whose moods and uncontrolled emotions cause unhappiness, both to the person concerned and to others.

It is by no means sufficient that a future priest learns much theory in philosophy and theology, or is an eloquent preacher. Not enough that a sister learns much manual work and keeps the buildings spotlessly clean. If we give into uncontrolled anger, we will spoil our life and relationships. Jealousy can ruin institutions. Inability to handle grief or moodiness, can make a person a burden in community.

While we tend to give formees exhortations ("Don't lose your temper," "You must be more cheerful," "Don't be jealous of others," etc.), we seldom offer effective help to the formees in handling

emotions. Or we propose unrealistic ideals as solutions, as if faith alone will help us master our emotions, or that feelings can be ignored. A feeling will not go away because someone says it is bad (e.g., jealousy). A person will not become sweet-tempered just by being told to control his temper. A timid person will not become confident by hearing, "Don't be afraid." No, people need help to manage emotions.

The main reason why formators are not very helpful in this area is not malice or lack of good will. The truth is, the formator has received very little help in this area, and hence does not know how to help. In this way, we can have a priest with advanced degrees who cannot control his temper and hurts people. Or another who destroys someone else's reputation out of jealousy; or, a sister who is regular for prayer, but very moody, or very harsh with the girls in the kitchen.

Many formators in seminaries are professors who can teach several subjects. They may not be mature human beings who have gone through a process of personal discovery and growth, and in a position to understand and help others in their struggles and growth.

### **5.3. Relationships**

Most of what we call ministry is about relationships. See the way Pope Francis has won the hearts of so many, inside and outside the Church by the way he relates to people. Good relationships are not something we put on for effect. They need to come from our heart. People can make out whether we are genuine or not.

Jesus did not teach us an ethic of cult, but an ethic of right relationships. Our faith is expressed best in the way we treat others. This needs no explanation here. A Catholic priest is not a *poojari*. He is a pastor, someone dedicated to serving the people. Correct and even devout celebration of the sacraments is not enough. We need make God real for people by relating to them lovingly and humbly.

In fact, I am of the opinion that candidates who repeatedly are a problem in communities, do not relate well, or treat people arrogantly or harshly, should be asked to leave. Such persons will do much harm. The quality of our relationships matters much more than raising and distributing money to the poor, or holding posts, or teaching great theories. For this, the formation house itself needs to be a happy and loving place, not one filled with fear or intrigue or politics. Only in loving and happy settings will people be themselves, learn with their whole heart and mind, and develop convictions. How we treat each other, how we deal with our workers or colleagues, with our students and patients, matters. It matters a lot.



Sadly, we hear of cases whether a formee or young religious, who is kind to a poor person (e.g., by giving them something to eat or talking to them kindly) gets a scolding rather than a word of appreciation. Or religious who are harsh with students or employees in money matters. We do not join religious life or the priesthood to make money for our congregation or diocese, but to be channels of God's love among people.

There are also cultural elements. Cultures differ in how people relate, and what is seen as proper behaviour. Two cultures will differ on people of different age groups relate, or how superiors deal with formees, or how men and women relate. Culture itself is an issue to be discussed responsibly. Multiculturalism is a huge factor in both society and Church. Some people relate mostly with those from their place, language group, caste or tribe. Others really have an open mind. In ministry, some tend favour one group over others. Others are comfortable with diversity.

The Gospels are basically counter-cultural. That is, they challenge us to treat everyone as beloved child of God, without dividing people into "our people" and "outsiders", or as higher and lower. This is a thorny issue, as well as a source of scandal, in the Indian church. Formation settings should help the formees to develop an open heart and mind, relate to people from different backgrounds, and be willing to work among others different from one's own background. They need to see this openness in the formators.

#### **5.4. Psycho-Sexual Integration**

Psycho-Sexual Integration is a huge topic, and we cannot even touch on the essentials here. The Church expects priests and religious to be celibate, but does not offer adequate and realistic training for living a happy and inspiring celibate life in today's world.

To indicate just one unhealthy sign of inadequate formation in this area is that sexuality is not something one discusses in an adult and responsible way, but more a matter for adolescent jokes and comments. As for women religious, many face real challenges in celibacy after their final vows, when they are in their 30s, 40s and 50s, rather than when they joined or were in initial formation. When in formation, a good number of women religious do not reveal their struggles or bad experiences to their formators, for two reasons: the fear of being sent away, and the fear that what they share will not be kept confidential. So, they either keep mum about it, suffer and do not grow up in this area, or they tell their confessor or retreat preacher.

If celibacy is not chosen from the heart, in response to a God-experience, or is simply seen as a way of getting work done, we will have unhappy and reluctant celibates, who become power-hungry and corrupt Church leaders or cranky, hard community members who are a pain to live with.

If you ask a young people to join your group, just to maintain your institutions, they will discover soon enough that, to do the work, they need neither celibacy nor a spiritual life. Then, gossip and politics will become the main interests, and commitment to God will be forgotten. As a sister who came across to her medical colleagues as a happy nun, said: "In every community, there are some celibates and some spinsters. The celibates are happy; the spinsters are not." The same goes for celibates and bachelors.

Celibacy makes sense, and is a happy choice, if Jesus and his message grip a person, and he/she sees this as one's way of living the gospel. To stay celibate just to do some work does not make sense, and, in most cases, would be an unhappy choice, often leading to double lives and bad example. In seminaries and religious formation houses, we need to provide a more thorough and more realistic formation for celibacy. Other countries, the United States, for example, started this after they were hit and shaken by the scandal of sexual abuse of minors by church personnel.

We need to learn, while in formation, to look at our sexuality with all its implications, see it as a beautiful gift from God, understand our dreams and struggles, and have people who help us in this area. Celibacy is not only or mostly about giving up marriage and abstaining from sexual relationships. It is about integrating – about bringing into our life the kind of love, sacrifice and generosity we have seen in our parents and married siblings. For this, we need inspiring examples of joyful and loving celibates.

Formators need to be aware of the sexual problems of young people. Masturbation is a commonly faced problem, especially in men's formation houses. Sexual abuse is an experience many candidates to convents have suffered before joining; some say more than fifty per cent of the candidates are young women with such experiences. Pornography is becoming a huge problem, spreading even to children, because of the Internet and smart phones. It has also affected a number of priests, seminarians and religious. This needs to be faced.

Another area that needs attention is celibate friendships. Healthy friendships between men and women can be a great help for growth;

unhealthy relationships do serious harm. We cannot train celibates today by teaching them to avoid others. We need to learn to relate to men and women in healthy ways.

### **5.5. Responsible Use of Freedom**

The formators are called to train a group of young people, so that they will choose and do what is right, not only when they are with them, but also when they are more on their own. This question is of particular relevance in diocesan seminaries, since diocesan priests are so much freer after ordination that they ever were in the seminary. A rule of thumb: Do not rule through fear. Win their confidence through genuineness and love. Fear filled settings will assure external compliance, but it will not last. Once they are free, people will do the opposite.

### **5.6. Contact with Reality**

Religious and seminarians, enjoying a cosy life with total final security, can become cut off from the needs and sufferings of people. This can also make us very demanding in matters of food, medical care, accommodation, etc. Hence formation years should include exposure to the lives of the poor, and ministry among them. Overprotection makes people childish and unrealistic.

The candidates also must be given some awareness of the political situation of the given country and the region, and instruct them to take their duties as citizens seriously.

## **6. How Formators Help in Human Formation**

Formators contribute to human formation basically by creating the right atmosphere. Creating a happy and loving atmosphere is the formators' main task. All the rest will depend on that. The atmosphere is made when the formators are genuine, when accept criticism, when they affirm and encourage, when they give opportunities and demand, when they give helpful evaluation and feedback and when they do not betray confidences.

## **7. Formee Can Help Himself/Herself**

Formees can help themselves when they are honest with themselves, when they can tackle their fears, when they get healed of their past hurts and wounds, when they make themselves fully known to someone, when they live meaningfully, not mechanically, when they

take responsibility for themselves, especially for their happiness and when they face their sexuality.

### **8. Training in Counselling and Use of Psychology**

I would consider training in counselling a must in all formators. The formators need to be aware of the church documents on the use of psychology in seminaries. They need to have some knowledge of psychology – normal and abnormal behaviour, signs of maturity and immaturity. They also need to be clear about the use, limits and ethics of the psychological screening of candidates.

### **9. Qualities of a Good Formator**

Unlike being a professor, qualities matter more than qualifications here. The following are the main qualities a formator needs to have.

**9.1. Personal Life:** The formator should be a person whom the students can look up to. The necessary qualities include: honesty, integrity, personal values, prayer life, simple life style and dedication to duty.

**9.2. Team Work:** The formator has to work well in a team. A good relationship to others (staff and students) is characterised by listening, sharing one's views, supporting as well as challenging others respectfully, accepting criticism, sharing the common work.

**9.3. Sound Judgement:** As someone called to assess and train candidates, the formator should show sound judgement regarding persons and situations.

**9.4. Effective Communication:** The formator should teach and preach well.

**9.5. Intelligence and Academic Ability:** This should be adequate for understanding and explaining the subjects to be taught clearly, correctly and with some ascendancy.

**9.6. Fidelity to the Church:** The formator's views and praxis should reflect a sound understanding of Church teaching and fidelity to it.

**9.7. Enthusiastic Commitment:** Adequate knowledge of the spirit and charism of one's religious order and an enthusiastic commitment to it.

**9.8. Pastoral Involvement and Experience:** Sensitivity to the needs of the people, especially the poor; availability for ministry.

**9.9. Preparation for the Ministry:** Training and periodic updating of formators are very much needed. The formator needs to be equipped with some theology and scripture, some training in spiritual direction and counselling, study of the congregation's charism and spirituality and some ways of praying.

## **10. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the following points may be made:

- a. Human formation is basic, crucial and worth the trouble – whether a formee stays or leaves.
- b. Formation takes place in joyful, genuine and loving settings of mutual trust and respect.
- c. Example and interaction are its main sources of formation.
- d. In formation, Jesus is our model, norm and master. Your founder and other inspiring members can also show the way.

India has the largest number of young people in formation. This is a tremendous wealth for the Church, as well as a huge challenge. We need to train our formators, so that the young person who joins the seminary or a religious order is not damaged, or left to stagnate in immaturity, but really helped to grow into an inspiring, loving, happy and Christ-like person who can help others in their human struggles and their journey with God: a great and lovely task!