

*Editorial***FORMATION****A Work of Art, a Police Action and the Little Monsters****Benny Paul Thettayil***Editor-in-Chief*

On 29 November 2013, Pope Francis met 120 Superiors General of congregations for men at the end of their 82<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly. On the occasion, he responded to a few questions they posed about formation. During the session, he spoke of his priorities, which were based on the living relations he had experienced in life: "The formation of candidates is fundamental. There are four pillars of formation: spiritual, intellectual, communitarian and apostolic. The ghost to fight against is the image of religious life understood as an escape or hiding place in face of an "external," difficult and complex world. The four pillars should be integrated right from the first day of entrance into the novitiate, and should not be arranged sequentially. They must be interactive."

The Pope recognizes the fact that the challenges of formation today are not easy to face. He compares the early days with that of today and holds that the daily culture is richer and conflictual than that which he had experienced in his days, years ago. The culture was simpler and more ordered. Given this change and all that it has brought about, he invites the formators to encounter the students because problems are not solved simply by forbidding doing this or that. Instead, dialogue and confrontation are needed.

The Pope who had headed the novitiate training programme in his native Argentina in the 1970s, backed by his experience, warned the superiors of some of the drawbacks of the contemporary formation. On the part of some of the students, in order 'to avoid problems, in some houses of formation, young people grit their teeth, try not to make mistakes, follow the rules smiling a lot, just waiting to be told that they have finished their formation.' This, according to the Pope, is

hypocrisy that is the result of clericalism, cronyism and careerism among the clergy, which is one of the worst evils. He strongly feels the need to conquer this propensity toward clericalism in houses of formation. What is to be avoided at all costs is this hypocrisy, which is one of the main causes of the lack of maturity and Christian freedom in the people of God.

The Pope is concerned mainly about three important factors in formation. They are the size of the formation house, the number of the students that are housed in there and the competence of the formators. He notes that if the seminary is too large, it ought to be divided into smaller communities with formators who are equipped really to accompany those in their charge. Regarding the modality of formation he instructs that genuine dialogue must be a regular feature of a formation house. Moreover, this dialogue that is going on in the formation house must be serious, without fear and sincere. He reminds the formators that the language of young people in formation today is different from that in the past. As we are living through an epochal change, "Formation is a *work of art*, not a *police action*. We must form their hearts. Otherwise we are creating *little monsters*. And then these little monsters mould the People of God. This really gives me goose bumps."

The objective of formation has always to be kept in mind when the formators carry out their duties. The Pope insisted on the fact that formation should not be oriented only toward personal growth but also in view of its final goal, which is the people of God. While forming the young people, it is important to think about the people to whom these persons will be sent. "The formator should keep in mind that the person in formation is called to care for the people of God... Just think of religious who have hearts that are as sour as vinegar: they are not made for the people." He warns the formators of the end product of the formation houses saying that in the end the formation house must not form administrators, managers, but fathers, brothers, traveling companions for the people travelling towards the Kingdom of God. These might or might not be engaged in administrative and managerial works as they are ministering to the people.

Concluding his informal question and answer session on formation of the future priests and religious, the Pope cautioned against accepting a candidate who has been asked to leave a religious institute because of problems with formation and for serious reasons. Receiving such a candidate, according to the Pope, is a huge problem. He concluded his exhortation with the advice to have the courage to

approach personal formation as a serious challenge, always keeping in mind the People of God. The protection of the faithful is of great importance.

The Congregation for the Clergy in Vatican issued an updated instrument for the formation of priests towards the end of 2017.<sup>1</sup> The document titled *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* or 'The Gift of Priestly Vocation', is meant to provide guidelines for the formation of priests, which is in need of a revamp, renewal, and restoration. The opening line of the document reads that the gift of vocation, placed by God in the hearts of some chosen people, obliges the Church to propose to them a serious journey of formation.

The new norms of the document, which are the updates on the ones given in 1970 and were reviewed in 1985, seek to take into account the rapid evolution in historical, socio-cultural and ecclesiastical contexts. Much of the inspiration present in the document was drawn from Pope Francis' teachings and spirituality, especially on "temptations tied to money, to the authoritarian exercise of power, to rigid legalism, and to vainglory."

The document takes up the content, methods and orientation produced up to this day in the field of formation. The innovations that are suggested are not separate from the tradition of the Church but, they integrate it and enhance it. The document also draws on *Pastores dabo vobis* (1992) to promote an integral formation, which unites the human as well as the spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral dimensions in a balanced way. One important innovation that the *Ratio Fundamentalis* proposes is a propaedeutic period upon entrance to the seminary not less than one year or more than two and is meant to validate the vocation of candidates.

*Ratio Fundamentalis* also emphasizes the need for dioceses and religious orders to guard against admitting potential sex abusers into the system. It notes that the greatest attention must be given to the theme of the protection of minors and vulnerable adults, being vigilant lest those who seek admission to a house of formation, is not involved in any way with any crime or problematic behaviour. The document

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<sup>1</sup>The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life issued the *Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes* on 2 February 1990. The document has the gravity of an instruction according to canon 34 of the Code of Canon Law. It deals with provisions approved by the Holy Father and proposed by the Dicastery with a view to clarifying the norms of law in order to assist in their application.

restates the instruction of the Catechism of the Catholic Church on the ordination of persons with homosexual tendencies:

The Church, while profoundly respecting the persons in question, cannot admit to the seminary or to holy orders those who practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called 'gay culture'. Such persons, in fact, find themselves in a situation that gravely hinders them from relating correctly to men and women. One must in no way overlook the negative consequences that can derive from the ordination of persons with deep-seated homosexual tendencies.<sup>2</sup>

The document has added three stages to formation: the stage of discipleship, stage of configuration, and pastoral stage, to each of which corresponds an itinerary and a formative content, orientated toward assimilation with the image of the Good Shepherd. This addition helps better human, spiritual and pastoral maturation in the candidates as they are guided in accompaniment.

*Ratio Fundamentalis* could be read in the light of Pope Francis' recent address to the Society of Jesus, in which he stated: "I am noticing the lack of discernment in the formation of priests. We are risking, in fact, becoming accustomed to 'black and white' and to that which is legal. We are quite closed, by and large, to discernment. One thing is clear, today in a certain quantity of Seminaries, a rigidity has been re-established which is not related to situational discernment." Out of the three stages of formation that the document deals with, in the present discussion, we focus on the first and early stage of formation.

Along with the young people in formation, their mentors are also invited first of all, to discern their own path as formators of the people of God, and with the purpose of preparing for ministry and of the initial and ongoing formation of the ministers and religious. They are called upon to deepen their own vocation, the fundamental motivations and the specific aspects of their own priestly and ministerial life. Finally, they are advised to grow by means of a thorough a careful review of life in the light of the gift of vocation received, to welcome the prompting of the Holy Spirit to develop their own life of discipleship leading towards a configuration to Christ (Rom 8:29). The release of the document is a valuable opportunity to stop, reflect, examine and assimilate the essence of the call and the intensity of the response. Moreover, it is a time for personal formation

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<sup>2</sup>cf. *Ratio Fundamentalis* 199; CCC 2357-2358.

and for formation oriented towards service of the people of God in the Church. Finally, the document is an invitation to have the joyful experience of a life lived in fraternity and sharing.

In the following reflection, we focus on the initial stages of the process of formation. The formal formation process begins with the vocation promotion of the young candidates to priestly or/and religious life. According to *Gravissimum educationis*, the Declaration of 1965, the young people are "the hope of the Church."<sup>3</sup> Although there are adult candidates who aspire to embrace religious life, the majority of candidates today are between eighteen and twenty-five years old in Europe and about 16 in India at the time of their entry in to a congregation. John Paul II notes that the Church has "so much to talk about with youth, and youth have so much to share with the Church."<sup>4</sup>

The Apostolic Exhortation titled *Christifideles laici* speaks highly of young people who aspire for religious and priestly life. The document admires their sensitivity that profoundly affects their perception of the values of justice, non-violence, and peace. "Their hearts are disposed to fellowship, friendship, and solidarity. They are greatly moved by causes that relate to the quality of life and the conservation of nature."<sup>5</sup> Likewise, the youngsters have a thirst for freedom and authenticity. Generally, and at times ardently, based on their home base, they aspire for a better world. Some youngsters are engaged in their struggle against political, social, cultural tyranny through charitable associations in their attempts to contribute to the betterment of humanity. The candidates who enter the religious congregations are generally helped to foster all their aspirations to engage in their struggle for a better world. However, this natural positive capacity in these young people could be stunted if adequate formation and accompaniment is not given early on.

At the time of the entry, to a great extent, the candidates today have been influenced thoroughly by what is conveniently called modernity. At this stage, experienced hands and keen eyes can identify some of their common traits with sufficient accuracy. If the religious congregations are not driven by the number factor alone, which is the predicament of some of the shrinking orders today. They would do well if their vocation promoters and the formators who

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<sup>3</sup>*Gravissimum educationis* 2.

<sup>4</sup>*Christifideles laici* 46.

<sup>5</sup>*Christifideles laici* 46.

guide the candidates initially have the right tools to identify and gauge these traits and help them choose their real vocation before it is too late. Since there is no universal model for selection, and each culture has to identify its strengths and weaknesses, and add touches to it that are required by its own uniqueness for the benefit both of the people of God as well as their own.

At least in some cases, as the congregations grab them, either they tend to lose these natural qualities or the communities smother their natural propensity to respond to these. Some of those conscientious candidates find these evils in the community they are called to be members of and either get institutionalized or get disillusioned. The challenge before the religious communities today is to prepare personnel, from the beginning, to challenge, enhance, and foster these qualities in the candidates.

Although some of the candidates are not always motivated by religious or philosophical principles, the sincerity of these young people and the depth of their generosity and commitment is to be taken into consideration. At least a few among them are marked by a profound religious sentiment, which itself is in need of evangelizing. It is incumbent on the initial formators to help them grow in their natural gifts and refine them, at the same time, augmenting what is lacking in their personality.

There are some others, and these are not necessarily in the minority in some countries, who lead a sufficiently exemplary Christian life and are courageously engaged in the apostolate, already experiencing what it means to "follow Jesus Christ more closely." Jesus Youth, Vocolare and Neo-Catechumenate and some of them, whose spirituality sometimes contributes to the spirituality of the community they come to be part of and some other times becomes a challenge for the religious community they come to join.

Although these young people have been practicing their particular spirituality in the places where they were active, their doctrinal and ethical frames of reference often tend to be relative since, in most of the cases, they do not know very well if there are solid points of reference for attaining the truth about humanity and the world. Usually, it is their training in philosophy lessons given in the religious houses and seminaries that make them put these into perspective. Philosophical lessons given to non-clerical candidates with right motivation enhance these natural gifts in them and consolidate them further.

The generation swing is another factor that the formators of our times are invited to cope with. In dealing with the natural gifts of the

candidates, the initial formators are invited to keep in mind the fact that some of the convictions of the candidates about the existence of good and evil, and the meaning of these words would seem to be at odds with respect to what it was for preceding generations or cultures to which the formators might belong. This is often the case with those religious communities which recruit their candidates from a place that has a culture foreign to theirs. Moreover, in the modern world, frequently there is a gap between the level of the secular knowledge of the candidates, which can be highly specialized at times, especially among the older recruits and that of their psychological growth and their Christian life.

In the modern urban societies, the young people are bombarded by consumerism, and many of them are saturated with the deceptions which it begets. Succeeding, often with much difficulty, in finding their place in the world, some let themselves be seduced by alcohol, violence, drugs, and eroticism especially in the social media. Certainly, there are those among the candidates who have had experiences of some of these and suffer from the hangover in various ways. These problems, which the variety and complexity of the modern human social and urban background poses for vocation promotion and formation demand urgent attention. Early detection of the traits, early help given, the psychological enhancement of personality and constant accompaniment of the candidates, especially the vulnerable ones are of paramount importance during the initial formation, both for the sake of the candidate and the institute to which he/she belongs.

The experiences that the candidates sustained in their family tell upon the time they take as they grow in maturity. The new Christian families and the *lapsed* Christian families are the ones in question. Not all may have had a happy experience within their family, considering the crises which sometimes afflict the institution of family in the modern times. This may be because the culture of the candidate has not been *deeply* influenced by Christianity, or where the culture is of a post-Christian type where there is an urgent need of a new evangelization, or even where the culture has long been evangelized. The candidates from these backgrounds, especially the tribal ones, learn more through images, and the present system of education encourages this at times, but they read less and write lesser. Hence, their culture is characterized by an absence of an historical dimension, as if their world began yesterday. In these cases, the initial formation system is to be revamped in order to accommodate these candidates

and to respond to their needs adequately until they are able to come to the mainstream.

Young people hesitate to say who they are and what they are called to become. Hence, the formator has to be equipped with effective tools for discernment of vocations. Some candidates for the religious life present themselves because of a more or less conscious search for social gain, professionalism and future security. Others look upon the religious life as an ideal place for an ideological struggle for justice. There are others of a more conservative nature who look upon the religious life as if it were a place for saving their faith in a world, which they regard as corrupt. In religious life they find an escape from the society. All of these vocations, irrespective of their initial motivation, could be enhanced provided the formation personnel have the right approach to formation, backed with prayer and discernment. These motives represent values, which need to be purified, corrected, directed and reoriented.

This stage, which comes before the entrance into the novitiate, is a crucial one because it is there that the foundation of the committed life is laid. In 1969, the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes issued a document titled *Renovationis causam* in order to make a better adaptation of the entire formation cycle. It dealt with the appropriate renovation of the training and preparation of persons for living the religious life and the immediate focus of the instruction was religious life. It makes a valid observation when it says: "Most of the difficulties encountered today in the formation of novices are usually due to the fact that when they were admitted (to the novitiate) they did not have the required maturity."<sup>6</sup> The rest of the difficulties, however, are caused by the lack of accompaniment by competent formators to help the candidates to come to this maturity.

It is not required and certainly not expected that a candidate for religious life be able to assume all of the obligations of the religious life immediately, but he/she should be found capable of doing so progressively. The formators are invited to prepare the candidates in such a way that this ability is either generated in them or encouraged in those it is found. This propensity has to be made visible in them in the years preparing for the novitiate. The possibility of making such a judgment justifies the time and means employed in reaching it. This is the purpose of the stage preparatory to the novitiate, no matter what name may be given to it: aspirancy, candidacy, postulancy, pre-

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<sup>6</sup>*Renovationis Causam* 4; Introduction, *Acta apostolicae sedis* 61 (1969), 103 ff.



novitiate, etc. It is usually left to the religious orders to determine the manner in which it is carried out, but whatever it may be, 'no one can be admitted to the noviciate without suitable preparation'<sup>7</sup> in the initial years.

Initial formation of the candidates depends to a great extent also on the quality of the community. This quality is the result of its general climate and the style of life of its members, in conformity with the particular character, charism and spirit of the institute. The community is formative to the extent that it permits its numbers to grow in fidelity to the Lord according to its charism. Confusion with regard to the charism or any ambiguity thereof would disorientate the new candidate. This means that a community will be what its members make it, that it has its own requirements, and that before it can be used as a means of formation, it deserves to be lived and loved for what it is in the religious life, as the Church conceives it. An ideal formation of the candidates is impossible unless it is given from the lived experience of the charism of a community. The history and the vision of the founders of the congregations, inspiring as they are, do not suffice.

In an ideal community, where the candidates are formed, the members have a clear idea of why the community exists, and what are its basic objectives. Their interpersonal relationships are marked by simplicity and confidence, based primarily on faith and love. The community is continuously shaped by the Holy Spirit, judged and converted by the Word of God, purified by penance, constructed by the Eucharist and vivified by the celebration of the liturgy. It strengthens its communion by generous mutual assistance and by an unceasing exchange of material and spiritual goods, in a spirit of poverty and with the help of friendship and dialogue. The community finds joy in living the spirit of its founder and the rule of the institute profoundly. Superiors consider it their particular office to seek to build a community of brothers or sisters in Christ. Each of the members, aware of his or her responsibility within the community, is moved to grow, for self and for the good of all.<sup>8</sup> It is here in such a community that religious in formation finds a spiritual atmosphere, austerity of life, and an apostolic enthusiasm, which are conducive to a joyful following of Christ according to the radicalism of their consecration. The community gives an impetus to the youngsters.

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<sup>7</sup>*Codex Iuris Canonici* 597.2.

<sup>8</sup>Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelica testificatio* 32, 1971.

John Paul II speaks of what he calls a complete formation in his message to the religious of Brazil. He suggests that the young candidates, during their formation, reside in formative communities with atmosphere required for a complete formation, which includes spiritual, intellectual, cultural, liturgical, communitarian and pastoral. The Pope also advises the formators to draw from the pedagogical experience of the Church and enrich formation, in a community suitable to the individuals and to their religious and/or priestly vocation.

The candidates becoming part of those small religious communities inserted in a working class district, or in the remote or poorer areas of the country, is a significant expression of "the preferential option for the poor." These social insertions bring the future ministers closer to the hard realities that the masses face in their world. However, ideally, it is not enough to work *for* the poor but there is also the question of life *with* them and, as far as possible, *like* them. In India, these radical steps are seen predominantly among women religious. In these situations, always, the requirements of formation should prevail over the apostolic advantages of a poor milieu. One of the possible dangers of this contextual insertion and a life of activity for the sake of the poor tends to detach the candidate from their interior life. The candidates also need to realize and maintain solitude and silence, which are indispensable during the initial formation. The active life must be an outcome of the interior life and their interior life must prod them on to commit themselves for the poor.

Certainly, the initial formation programme must contain periods of apostolic activities where the active dimension of religious life can find expression. In these cases, the communities should assure their religious authenticity and offer the possibility of living a truly religious life in harmony with the charism of the institute. Moreover, in these communities, personal prayer, times and places of silence are maintained. Taking these factors into consideration, the danger of dissipation and unnecessary exposure to unmonitored and undesirable situations has to be avoided.

The basic culture of the candidate is of great importance. The formators must take into account the conditions of certain countries or social environments where the level of schooling is relatively low. It is necessary to promote the original culture of the candidate carefully, and not to assimilate it into a foreign culture even if the latter would seem superior. It is within their own culture that candidates, whether

male or female, must recognize the call of the Lord and respond to it in a personal manner.

The preparatory stage of the early formation can be prolonged as individual cases demand. However, the time spent should aim at the preparation the candidate verifying and clarifying certain points, which will permit the formators to determine the advisability of and the time for the candidate's admission into the further level. Moreover, the primary objective of this extended time is not ministry of any kind, but formation. Care should be taken not to hasten their promotion, nor to defer it unduly. All these enable the candidate to determine his/her own call and the formators to arrive at a certain judgment on whether the person is a promising candidate in terms of religious life. One of the dangers that some of the shrinking congregations are facing is that they are in need of personnel to man their institutions that they are driven by number, in which case, the administrative calibre of the candidate is also given importance, thus the system ends up promoting undesirable elements.

With regard to the expected outcome of the initial formation before the novitiate, the Canon Law has a few points to make.<sup>9</sup> The expected outcome of this early stage of formation is a sufficient degree of human and Christian maturity for the entry to the next level (the novitiate). At least in some cases, it has been the experience that for the lack of the expected maturity in the candidates who are promoted to the higher level, the novitiate is reduced to the level of a course of general formation. Depending upon the formative system in place, the candidates of some religious communities are presented to the novitiate without adequate sacramental, doctrinal and moral Christian initiation. To avoid this tragedy, there has to be a criterion in place and common parameters have to be stipulated in this regard.

The emotional balance in a religious is of paramount importance. A balanced affectivity, especially sexual balance, which presupposes the acceptance of the other, man or woman, respecting his or her own difference. A psychological examination in the initial level was always highly recommended. This becomes mandatory today in the light of the events that in some quarters have become scandalous. This kind of psychological help certainly will increase the quality of the response that the candidate makes as he/she is freed from the shackles of the past negative experiences. Sometimes, it helps him/her choose another vocation which is better personally. These few years spent in the

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<sup>9</sup>*Codex Iuris Canonici* 641-645.

community give the candidates the preliminary lessons of religious life and enable them either to grow deeper in the conviction of their call to live and serve God and his people in the community according to its charism or discern that their vocation is to another way of life. Candidates should be made well aware of the fact that other ways exist by which to give all of one's life to the Lord, apart from entering a religious institute. However, the formators have to take into account the right of each individual to preserve his or her own privacy.<sup>10</sup>

The overall objective in the years spent in formation before the novitiate is to lead the young candidates to cultivate human social values and to consolidate them in Christian virtues. Additionally, the candidates are prepared to cultivate the right aptitude in the worship of God in the sacred liturgy. Great importance in this stage is given to the education given in discipline of the mind and body, a solid footing in the basic history of Church and a deeper knowledge of the history of the religious congregation that they belong to. Insofar as the matter of discipline is concerned, experience has shown that a mild 'police action' for the sake of discipline, given in love, is sometimes required. Call *it* a work of art, without which, given in time, the candidates run the risk of growing up unruly and turn into little and later great monsters, who will cause more goose bumps. In a conscientious process of screening, the intention and suitability of the candidates must be thoroughly tested for their own sake as well as for the sake of the people of God and the result of a genuine evaluation must be reflected back to them. In any case, the formators are called to encourage the candidates to follow their heart and to help them to direct their lives in such a way that they would bloom even if they choose another vocation.

The present issue of the HE is titled *A Closer Walk with Jesus* looks at the various aspects of formation in priestly and religious life. The rationale behind the issue is that Chavara, along with Frs Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukkara, his own formators and companions, was a formator *par excellence*. We also think that it is high time that we looked at religious formation at close quarters. The discussion is opened by Maria Anto CMC as she dwells on the scriptural basis of religious life, where she finds a filial model of intimacy with God. The second entry, by Joe Mannath SDB deals with human formation. He discusses what formation means, who the stakeholders are, and how their respective responsibilities need to be spelt out. He considers the

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<sup>10</sup>Cf. CIC 620.

three goals of religious life as personal growth, community life and mission. Antony Puthenangady CMI reflects on the ethical and legal issues involved in formation. Considering the ethical responsibilities of a formator, he calls the competence of today's formator in general into question.

Paul Kalluveettil CMI takes a fresh look at *Bes Rauhma* as a biblical symbol. The founding Fathers of CMI Congregation chose a hill to build up the first religious house. As heights generally evoke heaven, the abode of God, *Bes Rauhma* has a deep spiritual significance. Kuncheria Pathil CMI, reflecting on the ecclesial perspectives of religious formation, notes that in the period immediately after Vatican II, the Church faced a deep crisis in vocations and invites us into a spirit-filled *kairos*, which will lead the Church to ever new and wider horizons. Louis Malieckal CMI ponders on the CMI legacy of contextual priestly formation in the light of the vision of St Chavara, which finally leads to the CMI charism of contextual priestly formation, which the community inherited from its founding Fathers including Chavara. Finally, in a modern Indian religious community, which is a melting pot of various cultures and traditions, Christy Varghese CHF delineates a few strategies for a healthy multi-ethnic formation of the religious candidates and calls for a change in motivations and attitudes in the formation of candidates especially in the field of affective maturity.

The first three entries and the fifth are papers presented at a conference organized by Abraham Puthukulangara, a friend and confrere who lightens up the path of many a young Carmelite formees. We thank him for the permission to make these entries part of the present issue.

