

A HEALTHY MULTI-ETHNIC FORMATION OF THE RELIGIOUS CANDIDATES

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Abstract: In a modern Indian religious community, which is a melting pot of various cultures and traditions, Christy Varghese CHF delineates strategies for a healthy multi-ethnic formation of the religious candidates. As the number of vocations to religious life diminishes, the mono-ethnic religious congregations are forced to welcome and invite candidates from various cultures and become multi-ethnic groups, which demands a greater challenge both in formation and in ongoing formation. Those religious communities who have initiated the multi-ethnic communities struggle to cope with the different cultures and traditions coming together. For the sake of these communities, she suggests few creative ways and means to maintain healthy multi-ethnic communities in the future, especially in the missions. Beginning with the recruitment, initial stage, novitiate and post-novitiate stages of early formation, she foresees the possible struggle that a candidate can undergo. She also speaks of the role played by the community and the formator who is to be a role model. From practical tips such as the use of common language, she wanders into the higher objectives of the community like vision, mission and charism of the community. Spiritual direction given at this stage is a great emotional assistance, which would lead the formees to face challenging ministries with personal responsibility. She also looks at the ongoing formation where various virtues come to play their roles. She ends the reflection with a few practical recommendations for innovative formation. In conclusion, she notes that some of the probable solutions to the problems arising in the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural communities are in changing the motivations and in living as *alter Christus* and having shift in the formation of candidates especially in the field of affective maturity.

Keywords: vocations, cultures, formation, communities, traditions, missions, recruitment, candidate, maturity, admission, transcripts,

recommendation, candidacy, novitiate, history, traditions, spirituality, novice, temporary vows, poverty, chastity, obedience, maturity, insight, formator, community, patience, tolerance, selflessness, experience, love, freedom, peace, language, vision, mission, charism, confession, vocation, promoter, asceticism, austerity, radicalism, consecration, eroticism, consumerism, power, spiritual, direction, dialogue, psyche, ministries, exposure, transformation, emotions, counselling, responsibility, belongingness, *metanoia*, forgiveness, charity, humility, patience, sensitivity, loneliness, frustration, trust, creativity, initiative, dedication, diversity, gift, chastity, diversity, divisions, difference, indifference, appreciation, friendship, respect, festivals.

1. Introduction

As the number of vocations to religious life diminishes the mono-ethnic religious congregations are forced to welcome and invite candidates from various cultures and become multi-ethnic groups, which demands a greater challenge both in formation and in ongoing formation. Those religious communities who have initiated the multi-ethnic communities struggle to cope with different cultures and traditions. For the sake of these communities, we suggest few creative ways and means to maintain healthy multi-ethnic communities in the future, especially in the missions.

2. Recruitment

The quality of a congregation depends on the formation and the worth of its members. "Now the quality of the members will hang on how carefully they have been selected and recruited. We have to greatly consider the family and the faith background of the candidate. If the seed is not good, however hard one may try to cultivate it, one can never make it good. A coconut will not grow into a mango tree, nor will a mango grow into a coconut tree. The original quality remains. Postponing a problem does not solve it. If a disease is not healed, in course of time it becomes malignant and more troublesome."¹ Therefore the quality of the members is of paramount importance. A careful and selective recruiting should be practiced by all the religious communities. Points to remember in the process of recruiting are the

¹George Kaitholil, *Communion in Community*, Mumbai: St. Paul Publications, 2002, p. 30.

family background, faith practices, association with church, quality not the quantity, and motivation.

3. Initial Stage and Discernment

Since the candidates come from various cultures and traditions they require a quality time to form themselves. In some cases, sometimes it is necessary to prolong the period of formation in the initial stage. It is befitting that the promotion of the candidates should depend on their maturity and quality. The director of vocations or the formator will guide the candidate through her initial discernment. It is very important to check the motivation of the candidates when she enters into a congregation. Effective methods of screening will help to check the motivation of the candidates to a large extent. During this time, the following practices are desirable: The candidates will have regular meetings with a spiritual director or formator and they will experience some of the ministries of the Congregation at least in a limited manner.

During the admission of a candidate certain documents may be files for them individually. They include a completed questionnaire, a short autobiographical sketch, educational transcripts, medical/dental forms, letters of recommendation, results of psychological test and evaluation and a criminal background check.

3.1. Candidacy

Generally, the period of candidacy lasts three months to one year. The candidate lives in a designated religious house of the community. During this period, the candidate observes religious life in the community in an active discernment and members of the religious house might gauge the disposition of the candidate. The candidate is expected to participate in the prayer schedule of the house and observe the members of the house as they exercise their ministerial duties. The candidate continues to meet with the director of vocations and/or a designated member of the community to discern her readiness for novitiate. After consultation with the members of the house the director of vocations may recommend the candidate for the next step of formation.

3.2. Novitiate

Novitiate is the period of initiation into the institute and constitutes an irreplaceable and privileged stage in the formation. It is a time for the novice to prepare and deepen her commitment to Christ through the

profession of vows in the congregation. The preparation for this great commitment requires growth in self-awareness and self-acceptance. During this period, the novice studies the history, traditions and spirituality of the congregation. At the end of novitiate the novice professes temporary vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. As a vowed member of the congregation, the novice begins the last stage of formation – the post-novitiate.

3.3. Post-Novitiate

The goal of the post-novitiate formation is the personal development of the whole person, to help her grow in Christian maturity by becoming more aware of God's merciful love, to help her deepen her vowed commitment to the Risen Christ, to help her adapt her personal life in order to strengthen common life and to help her develop her gifts and talents so that she may use them in the apostolic work of the congregation. "Her spiritual life should not remain at the same depth, which is experienced during her initial stages of religious life. God should become more and more the one longed for."²

4. Formator

Formation is a process effected in the heart of the young candidate as she participates in the work of the Father who forms in her the attitude of the Son, through the Spirit. Religious consecration is in the call of God, who working through the Holy Spirit, is the principal agent in the formation. The same Spirit works through the formator. Hence, a great deal of humility and a penetrating spiritual insight are necessary to become a formator. Additionally, she should have much interior freedom. She is an elder sister in faith and in discipleship, who is prepared to give not only spiritual assistance but also psychological help. "In formation, the first factor is what the formator is, the second what she does, and the third what she says."³ A patient formator waits for God's hour and adapts to the rhythm of his grace, just as Jesus patiently educated the disciples during his public life. Formation depends largely on the formator. A formator has to be authentic, autonomous, secure, formed in spiritual discernment, firm but gentle, guided by the Holy Spirit, attentive to the candidates, serene, patient,

²Bhavya, *Indian Women in Religious Life: A Formative Approach*, Holy Family Publications, Thrissur, 2003, p. 179.

³Cf. L. M. Rulla, *Anthropology*, Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1980, p. 399.

available, pastoral, understanding, approachable, mature, impartial and broadminded.

5. Role of the Community

Formation depends to a great extent on the quality of the community. This quality is the result of its general climate and the style of life of its members.⁴ It is fitting to recall here the words of Pope John Paul II's message to the religious in Brazil: "It will therefore be good that the young, during the period of formation, reside in formative communities where there should be no lack of the conditions required for a complete formation: spiritual, intellectual, cultural, liturgical, communitarian and pastoral; conditions which are rarely found together in small communities." Community is the place that would help the candidates in their growth even though at times there are difficulties in adjusting certain characters and personalities. Candidates would learn from the members of the community many good things like patience, tolerance, selflessness etc., and experience love and understanding.⁵

6. Role Models

The present generation looks for models as they are very much exposed to perceptions that come to them from all directions. Generally, they look upon somebody in the community by whom they feel inspired and driven to the Lord. Hence, the religious who are in the formation houses are to be authentic and committed to the Lord in their life than in their words. Everyone in the community has to contribute her best to the growth of the community by playing the different roles assigned and fulfilling them with a sincere heart. Candidates would be able to learn important lessons of religious life from a community where the members love genuinely and accept one another, where all are treated like adults, where there is tolerance, patience, understanding and appreciation, where disagreements do not disintegrate the community, where there is a spirit of freedom and inner peace, where there is forgiveness, sense of humour and joy in living.

⁴*Directives on Formation in Religious Institute*, Mumbai: St. Paul Publications, 1990, pp. 25-26.

⁵Kaitholil, *Communion in Community*, p. 34.

7. Use of Common Language

In a multilingual community, all the members need to agree on one common language of the community. This could be the language of the locality or the national language. Where this is not practical, the best choice would be English, which all members of the community learn to follow. "People can easily fall into the temptation to form, almost unconsciously and probably without malice, language-based groups. Therefore we should diligently avoid speaking in the community anything other than the common language. That is an important, though often forgotten, way to build up community. To break this rule is to break many hearts and community. That makes real communion among the members impossible."⁶ Experienced formators warn strongly against this tendency.

8. Vision, Mission and Charism

The candidates who join the congregation must be made aware of what religious life is, and what the vision, mission and the charism of the particular congregation are. Because personally one of my candidates has told me sister "I did not know this is what the religious life all about. I think I am not fit to be here." I was so happy to hear her sincere confession. It is the duty of the formator or the vocation promoter to give a clear cut idea what this life is meant to be.

9. Ascetic Life

There is an indispensable need of moderate asceticism in formation and in religious life. "Religious in formation should be able to find a spiritual atmosphere, an austerity of life, and an apostolic enthusiasm within their community, which are conducive to their following Christ according to the radicalism of their consecration."⁷ In a world of eroticism, of consumerism and all kinds of abuse of power, there is a need for witnesses of the Paschal mystery of Christ. The formators are strongly advised to insert daily, personal asceticism into an integral programme of formation. Such a programme tends to be perennial and cannot go out of style. It is always contemporary and always necessary.

⁶Kaitholil, *Communion in Community*, p. 28.

⁷Directives on Formation in Religious Institute, pp. 26-27.

10. Spiritual Direction

The candidates who come to join a religious community may be compared to raw materials. They come from various cultures, traditions and levels of faith. It is only through frequent spiritual direction and solid dialogue that the candidate can grow in the love of Jesus and deepen their commitment to their vocation. Formators are invited to nourish the soul of the candidate solidly and assist them to discern their call.

11. Emotional Assistance

The candidates come from various family backgrounds which are nourished by various cultures. Often they carry several wounded feelings and scarred psyche, which only God can touch and heal. Hence, it is a must that they attend some inner healing retreats and sessions which would be a great help in their spiritual as well as community life.

12. Challenging Ministries

Direct exposure helps the young minds to capture the reality of life. Taking the candidates from multi-cultural background to various challenging ministries along with a reasonable input enables them to get a glimpse of the common issues faced by people. Additionally, this is an exposure to the vision and mission of the congregation. "Today Indian scene poses many challenges for the religious life. There are people around poor and struggling. The candidates lack knowledge about the world, its problems, evolutions and transformation, which are factors that necessarily influence religious life."⁸ If the congregation intends to serve people effectively, the candidates need to understand the forces that are shaping the society today.

13. Psycho-Education

The candidates who enter into a congregation are endowed with different skills, strengths and unmet needs. "Some have very little capacity for genuine freedom because they are always conditioned by their conflicts and needs. Unless help is extended to them, they are unable to grow beyond a certain point of maturity. However hard they try, they keep falling back on their maladjusted behaviour. The candidates who progress are ones who have problems but who are

⁸Bhavya, *Indian Women in Religious Life*, p. 213.

able to move ahead with human help together with prayer and grace of God.”⁹ Therefore, they should be given adequate psycho education. Of course, the candidates should get an opportunity to tell all their untold stories and give vent to their unexpressed feelings and emotions. Counselling is one of the means the formators might adopt.

14. Personal Responsibility

The candidates who are called by God give a response of love in their turn to Christ: “The candidate must not see herself as a passive, receptive object being moulded and shaped by outside forces; rather, she has a particular and very necessary role to play. She is the protagonist and the one responsible for her own formation, because she is the one called by God and who responds freely to the call of God.”¹⁰ She is therefore invited unceasingly to give an attentive, new and responsible reply. The call is not something forced, rather a personal loving response with a great responsibility. The journey of each religious will recall that of the people of God in Exodus, and the slow evolution of the disciples who were “slow to believe,” (Lk 24:25) but who, in the end were burning with fervor when the risen Lord revealed Himself to them. This indicates the extent to which formation of a religious should be personalized.

15. Multi-Cultural Festivals

Everyone loves and respects one’s own nation, state, traditions and culture. It would do good if the formators keep in mind the fact that once the candidates are in the four walls of the convent all their individual culture and traditions are forgotten. Hence, it is fitting to celebrate the festivals of states from where the candidates hail. This creates a feeling of welcome and the community becomes more homely.

16. Ongoing Formation

Ongoing formation is an intrinsic requirement of religious consecration, for God calls each one at every moment and in new circumstances.¹¹ It should not be forgotten that the Paschal peace and joy of a community are always the fruit of death to self and the

⁹Antony Puthenangady, *Everyone's Inner Child*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2006.

¹⁰Bhavya, *Indian Women in Religious Life*, p. 179.

¹¹Bhavya, *Indian Women in Religious Life*, p. 139.

reception of the gift of the Spirit. A communion of purposes should bring the religious together in the bond of charity and make the religious house a sweet oasis of peace. Incorporation into religious community involves a formation of the heart that affects the attitudes and preference by which a person sets priorities and makes decisions. One has to pass through a continuous *metanoia*, conversion.

16.1. Forgiveness

Forgiveness is essential to community life. To forgive is not to suppress hurt feelings, but to be conscious of them and still accept the offender.¹² Community is what we make of it. In the community, the religious do have their difficulties, their ups and downs, as in a family. Nevertheless, thanks to a forgiving heart, all is well again. We must show the world that in our communities the peace of Christ reigns. "Let there be charity, humility and patience in us all."¹³ There is none among us who does not fail occasionally. We must "therefore be compassionate as our Father in heaven is compassionate" (Lk 6:36).

16.2. Sensitivity

Everyone has a need to be accepted, esteemed and loved. This is why St. Paul exhorts: "Accept one another, then for the glory of God, as Christ has accepted you" (Rom 15:7). The essential problem of the human person is that of love. The human person is created to love and to be loved. Love is the language that every human heart understands; in fact it understands no other language.¹⁴ We should never be cold or indifferent with the needs of the other which would result in isolation, loneliness and emotional frustration.

16.3. Risking Trust

Young and old, everyone alike, has an inner need to be trusted and to be entrusted with responsibility. "Active and responsible obedience is the mark of mature religious. It is necessary to recognize the creativity, initiative, and dedication of each member and her aspiration to assume a communitarian responsibility. All members must feel free to offer their precious contribution for the common good."¹⁵ In a community,

¹²Kaitholil, *Communion in Community*, p. 131.

¹³A. M. Mundadan, *The Writings of Mother Mariam Thresia*, Trichur: Ebenezer Printers, 1994, p. 120.

¹⁴Kaitholil, *Communion in Community*, p. 54.

¹⁵Kaitholil, *Communion in Community*, p. 54.

especially in a multi-cultural setting, forgoing all the prejudices, the natural capacities, supernatural gifts, insights and commitment of all the candidates are to be recognized. This recognition will lead to shared responsibilities for the good of the community.

16.4. Diversity as a Gift

The Universal Church is a communion of various individual churches that are diverse in nature, texture and expressions. "Christ needs a diversity of persons to carry on his mission."¹⁶ Since all the members of a religious community have dedicated themselves to Christ through consecrated chastity, their union with Christ unites them also among themselves. The edifice of a church is made up of various components like walls, windows, floors, doors, beams, steeple and so on. They have different functions and cannot all be the same, yet, together they make up the one church. The various parts form a composite whole. So too, common life is lived in diverse ways. However, a union is found in the joining of our spirits in the Holy Spirit.¹⁷ Diversities are not divisions, and a difference should not be permitted to lead to indifference.

16.5. Appreciation

Open recognition of the talents and qualities of all members of the community and expression of sincere esteem for each other and honour given to others for a work done well or for the progress made in a particular field, are the expressions of fraternal charity and human generosity. "We are obliged to become loving persons and give love and appreciation to others."¹⁸ Since the candidates for a religious community come from various intellectual backgrounds, excellence is to be measured not on the basis of their output, but the sincere effort that each individual makes.

16.6. Fraternal Love

Fraternal love and friendly relations should flourish among consecrated persons. "Real love has two aspects: love of God and love

¹⁶A. van Kaam, *Personality Fulfilment in the Religious Life*, New Jersey: Dimension Books, 1969.

¹⁷Kaitholil, *Communion in Community*, p. 55.

¹⁸M. Mundadan, *The Writings of Fr. Joseph Vithayathil*, Thrissur: Holy Family Publications, 2007, p. 161.

of neighbour. God has called us to love others."¹⁹ The religious who closely follow Christ who in total freedom came to serve human beings, should copy in their life his love, freedom and spirit of service. "The friendship and contacts of the religious should be like salt in food, medicine in illness and fragrance in the air. Their social contacts and personal relationships should bring goodness where there is evil, virtue where there is sin, and divine knowledge where there is ignorance. Their friendship should bring them and their friends closer to God."²⁰ Since fraternal love is the foundation of any religious community, the candidates must be loved and based on the love that they receive, they will learn to love the community as "the children of a mother."²¹

16.7. Acceptance for One Another

In a community comprising of members from multi-cultural backgrounds, the members must accept one another as each one is. The candidates from various backgrounds are in the community, not because they are what we them to be or what we are or what we think we are. "Every individual is unique and unrepeatable. We must therefore, respect their differences of ideas, opinions, tastes, likes and dislikes. Many problems arise from one's inability to accept other members as they are. Unity is not the same as uniformity or even unanimity."²² Receiving a candidate in to the community entails receiving her into the hearts of the members as well.

16.8. Friendship and Sharing

The religious have come together, not on the basis of flesh and blood, nor under the influence of an emotional inclination to love. "The same vocation, the same obedience and the same spirit of service have brought them together. The spiritual dimension of community life is of capital importance. Love and closeness to the Lord and to his teachings is the measure of friendship and cordiality among the members. Since all the members of a religious community have dedicated themselves to Christ through consecrated chastity, their union with Christ unites them also among themselves. As all of them are marching towards the same goal, when they love and serve one

¹⁹Mundadan, *The Writings of Mother Mariam Thresia*, p. 161.

²⁰Kaitholil, *Communion in Community*, p. 85.

²¹Mundadan, *The Writings of Mother Mariam Thresia*, p. 124.

²²Kaitholil, *Communion in Community*, p. 139.

another, they share in the love of Christ himself.”²³ They grow and become capable of sharing that love with others as well.

16.9. Mutual Respect

Respect of personality in and by the community is another important need of all members. All expect to be taken seriously as unique and distinct persons. They feel and want to remain someone, and expect to be consulted and treated as valid counterparts in dialogue. “All want their individual freedom to be respected and their strictly personal matters to be left to their discretion. The most important issue is union and communion of life in which all members are equally sisters regardless of position, talents or past history.”²⁴ Mutual respect and concern should prevail in the members.

16.10. Community Meeting

Community meeting is meant to be a fraternal sharing of experiences, evaluations, ideas, and plans among the members. This helps the members to understand one another better, to participate in the life and activity of the community more meaningfully and deepens the fraternal communion in the community. When the young candidates are admitted to some of these meetings and given a taste of importance and a glimpse of at least a few aspects of the community life, they grow in the sense of belongingness.

16.11. Knowing One Another

The foundation of true fraternity lived in community is a communion in truth. This communion demands that each member of the community has a correct knowledge of oneself and others. “We should know our limitations as well as our value and merit. We are not able to really accept and welcome another if we do not know our own interior and exterior reality. To understand the person is something much deeper than to know what the person said or did.”²⁵ We can understand deeply only what we love. The one who loves, gathers the profound reality of the other and on its basis interprets her words and actions.

²³Kaitholil, *Communion in Community*, p. 84.

²⁴Kaitholil, *Communion in Community*, p. 55.

²⁵Kaitholil, *Communion in Community*, p. 140.

17. Recommendations for Innovative Formation

On the basis of the above analysis of the various aspects of formation of candidates in a multi-lingual community, the following recommendations are made:

Formation of a new person in the likeness of Christ: Take care to speak of Jesus by actions than by words. Do not contribute to the formation of persons to be powerful but to be humble, not to be successful but to be faithful. Spend quality time to intensify relations with Jesus Christ and with one another.

Formation should lead to identification: Help the candidates to learn their identity as a religious in a congregation and a local community. Bring them into contact with religious that are enthusiastic, joyful, committed and full of hope.

Formation programme includes psychological tests, counselling, spiritual direction, opportunity for interaction, faith sharing and exposure.

18. Conclusion

Consecrated life is a gift of God the Father to his Church through the Holy Spirit. The evangelical counsels were the hallmark of the life of Jesus the chaste, poor and obedient one. The principal purpose of formation at its various stages is to immerse religious in the experience of God and to help them perfect it gradually. Love is the heart of formation. Falling in love with the man of 33 of Galilee is important in religious life. When love is kindled, the religious will be ready to take up any asceticism, any risk, and any challenge for his sake. This life of total dedication and service of the religious, however, is not a bed of roses.

Some of the probable solutions to the problems arising in the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural communities are: not in changing the mode of life but in changing the motivations; not in choosing another way of life, but in living as *alter Christus* and not in having change in the form of life, but having change in the formation of candidates especially in the field of affective maturity.