

Editorial

Challenges of Religious and Priestly Formation

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” - (Luke 9: 23)

The Church today is under scrutiny. Critics and followers alike are looking for reasons to understand how the century-old establishment is struggling to face criticism regarding its ministry and service. One of the present and visible dangers include the process of recruiting for careers whose vocation is to go out into the public and identify with their hardship rather than remaining in their comfort zones. For sustainable efficiency in one’s profession, one needs to discover their identity and separate it from their functions, and look within them for the calling that brought them to their profession in the first place. “Hence it is the need of the hour that we as priests and religious are clear of our identity: Disciples of Christ. That is the only identity, rest are all functions” (Mathias, 2016). An integrated formation envisages not only academic training but also a holistic growth and efficient ministry of the candidate. The younger generation must be motivated by the eloquence of the life of religious and priests which radiate the joy and beauty of living the Gospel, and are the followers of Christ. “It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows but by attraction” (*Evangelii Gaudium*). Pope Francis in a Homily at Chrism Mass (2013) asked the lay faithful to “pray for those whom God is calling to be priests that they may respond to this call with humility and joy.”

“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever - the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know

him, for he lives with you and will be in you” (John 14: 16-17). In the formation of future priest, the pope identifies the need for openness to the Holy Spirit in order to discover the tendencies of the contemporary society, its deepest spiritual needs, and the most concrete task and method to adopt in order to adequately respond to human expectations.

Challenges demand self-sacrifice and hard work, regardless of the vocation to which one is called. Consecrated life is particularly a difficult one to live on because of political, social, cultural and spiritual changes of this time. There are both external and internal challenges that the consecrated persons face in the present scenario.

External challenges include multiculturalism and challenges of living in a multi-religious context, challenges brought by technology and media, problems that accompany globalization, issues with fundamentalism, secularism, and materialism and, a process of formation that does not create change. A multi-cultural society usually challenges its people by asking them the definition of ‘unity in diversity’ which often affects the genuine loyalty to the Church and the teachings of Jesus Christ. Though social media has been a great platform for priests to connect to its members and the youth, the negative side of the social media often looms bigger. The pointless hours of distraction watching funny videos and memes often distract people from their priorities. Globalization challenges the consecrated people to be a counter-culture in the face of exclusion and dispensability and to make a fundamental option for God alone. Fundamentalism distorts the openness of the consecrated and they remain closed without willing to have mutual acceptance. Secularism has crept into consecrated life that they slowly begin to live by the principle of secularism instead of living the Gospel principle. Consecrated people also fall prey to the idea of materialism, an interest in sensuous pleasures and bodily comfort and an excessive desire for material possessions, and live by this principle which challenges the initial consecration. Thus, when a formee who comes in for formal training to become a religious, they would have had to face so many obstacles that would have distracted them from the purpose of their calling. Purely academic training for formation would be yet another challenge for the formee.

The internal challenges include the particular lifestyle of the individual, cultural alienation, spiritual degradation, community life, breaking away from traditional ministries, being piety versus spirituality, mediocrity versus commitment. The urgency of a Christian formee

is to tune themselves keenly to listen to the voice of the Spirit. Pope Francis (2015) in his Homily talked about the priest's "tiredness" and spoke about how he turns his tiredness into opportunities to work more. St. Paul commented "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

Community life is what brings about a sense of belongingness where people converse about safety, comfort, relatedness, and willingness to provide hospitality and generosity to others (Block, 2018). The breaking of the community life with the emergence of individualism leads to challenges (Charlesworth, 1996) that create inevitable but invisible problems in the society. Some of the major challenges of the breaking down of community life are: neglect of prayer, partiality and favoritism, lack of solidarity and sense of belonging, mutual suspicion and lack of trust, domination of powerful individuals, growing comfort culture, unwillingness to forgive and reconcile and lack of involvement in the life of the poor. Formators need to be mindful of these realities and be prepared in helping the formee to engage in meaningful dialogue with the community on how to tackle these issues with proper accompaniment.

The position of high esteem that the community gives to the religious and priests for moral guidance has been tainted with recent news about sexual abuse and other scandals. The inconsistencies and eccentricities in the religious life dug up by the critics are many. The authentic life of a religious, as reflected by the verve of Mother Theresa and Pope John Paul II, needs to be brought up front. The priests and religious are truly to be "in this world, but not of this world"; they need to be deeply aware of their "nothingness"/"humanness" as well as their "greatness"/"dignity" (Pope Francis, 2015). They should be able to handle their human nature as well the divine responsibility entrusted in them. The formators can help the formee to understand that they are not giving up the pleasures of the flesh and materialistic world because they are bad but because "God is better" (Tirimanna, 2013).

It is true even in the context of the religious and priestly formation when Alvin Toffler said that "The illiterate of the 21st century are not those who cannot read and write but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn." The transformation of the self needs to happen on various fronts. Chandler (2014), in the book "Christian Spiritual Formation: An

Integrated Approach for Personal and Relational Wholeness,” spoke about the seven primary dimensions in Christian Spiritual Formation: the spirit, emotions, relationships, intellect, vocation, physical health and stewardship of the resources. These seven dimensions are interrelated and mature as they grow and become followers of Jesus. This distinction has implications on the formation of the religious and priests.

The future of all institutions is dependent on the commitment and presence of its members through all of its rise and fall. Formation is a process of creating a disciple of Jesus. Luke 9: 23 shows how Jesus was clear about authentic formative journey: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” The process is challenging but it should empower the formee to live up to the standard of the society and the religious context, and establish spiritual and emotional congruency. Each formee is like a grain of wheat that needs to die to self so that they may become fruitful in their vocation. The challenge for the formators is to provide a rich ground where these seeds can grow and be fruitful. “Inspiring human formation demands attuning both to an inner emotional reality and to that of those we seek to inspire” (Mathew, 2017).