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Paradigms in Formation: Approaches in Priestly and Religious Training in a Globalized World

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Abstract

This article explores the challenges of priestly and religious formation and the employment of a paradigm in formation. Globalization has had its impact on the society and the world. We can see a shift in the worldview of the image and mission of the Church today. Various scandals of sexual abuse are brought to light, and it has various implications for Formation. The article talks about the paradigm shift that calls for radical changes in approaches to the formation to the priesthood and consecrated life.

The Overview of the Church in India

“Fili tui India, administri tibi salutis” (Your sons, O India, shall be the ministers of your salvation). These prophetic words of Pope Leo XIII, of ‘*Rerum Novarum*’ fame, has indeed become a reality. In fact today India can boast of 170 Dioceses with over 200 Bishops and nearly 20,000 priests and over one lakh twenty-five thousand religious women and men rendering yeomen service to the people of India. What is also very consoling and encouraging is the fact that for the past two decades some Indian priests and religious are serving as missionaries in the continents of Africa, South and Central Americas, Oceania and

Europe. Our seminaries and formation houses still attract a fairly good number of young men and women and that too when demographically the families in India are increasingly becoming smaller and nuclear. Although numerically Christians are just 2.3% of the total population of India, the services rendered by the Church in India in the field of education, medical and social work is quite significant and laudable, a fact that is often publicly acknowledged and recognized by the Government of India.

Globalization - Secularization

India today is one of the fastest growing economies in the world and is making tremendous progress in manufacturing industries, information technology, biotechnology, nuclear energy, etc. The urbanization and globalization are presently sweeping through the Indian sub-continent with accelerated speed, which has indeed brought about rapid socio-cultural and economic changes in the Indian society. The Globalization and Secularization are two dominant forces that control the world today that have mesmerized the mind of modern man and woman particularly the youth of today. And these forces have succeeded to a large extent in creating a distinct modern culture guided by a hedonistic philosophy whose main goal is instant gratification. Globalization has succeeded considerably in secularizing the modern civilization. Secularization advocates “turning to the world” as the point of reference for the explanation of the mysteries of life and the search for its fulfillment. The forms of secularization that deliberately and at times maliciously reject any reference to the supernatural, the transcendent, and the divine. What is true is what can be empirically verifiable. And therefore the spiritual, the faith dimension which is beyond the scope of empirical verification is often rejected as an illusion or myth. With the rejection of the transcendent comes the rejection of any absolute claims and what we are witnessing as a result of secularization is in the words of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI – the ‘tyranny of relativism.’

Globalization and its Impact on the Society and the World

We live and work in an era of unprecedented demographic shifts. Millions of people are fleeing instability, violence, and conflicts; others are escaping from the menace of poverty and ecological degradation – all in search of more dignified living and better opportunities in safer climes, often at risk to their lives. Continuing flows of migrants and refugees have strained the global reserve of hospitality and the social ties that bind families and communities together.

More than any other time in the history of humanity we live in the age of expanding digital ecosystem characterized by the stupendous output of information (social media and the Internet) and unparalleled advances in science, technology, medicine, and healthcare. Digital technology is redefining the way we communicate, interact, work, and make decisions, particularly among younger generations. Information Communication Technology is facilitating the emergence of connections, relationships, and interactions that are virtual yet real, albeit sometimes fleeting and superficial. In the words of Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI, “As society becomes ever more globalized, it makes us neighbors but does not make us brothers” (*Caritas in Veritate*, No. 19).

Despite economic progress, we live in unequal societies characterized by unimaginable wealth and widespread poverty, staggering disparity, and gaps in wealth, equality, and opportunity (*Evangeliium Gaudium*, Nos. 103-104). The gap between the richest and the rest has widened dramatically with the world’s richest 1% owning more wealth than the rest of the world combined.

The world, our common home, is in the midst of an unprecedented ecological crisis that has rendered our planet fragile and vulnerable. As Pope Francis has reminded us, “Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years” (*Laudato Si’*, No. 53). The multiple signs of this crisis include the pollution of air, water, and soil; rising sea levels, melting snow caps, deforestation, desertification, and increased competition for resources (*Laudato Si’*, No. 14; No. 188; No. 206; No. 218).

An intensification of ethnoreligious and political conflict and violence is creating ever sharper polarization on the national, regional, and global scale. Almost daily we hear about acts of terror, intolerance, and violence perpetrated in the name of God by people whose sectarian ideologies tap into an expanding pool of disillusionment, desperation, fear, poverty, and ignorance. Open persecutions of believers are still reported in some parts of the world.

The Paradigm Shift in the IMAGE and MISSION of the Church Today

We are witnessing diverse and significant shifts in the world population and the global map of Christianity. Momentous demographic shifts on the global religious map point to diminishment and indifference in the West

and significant growth in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Pope Francis continues to reinvigorate the mission of the Church by his profound faith, exemplary lifestyle, inspirational leadership, and his tireless call for a poor Church, respect for the environment, and the practice of mercy.

Under the leadership of Pope Francis, a new understanding of the identity and mission of the Church is emerging. Through recent synods, he invites the Church to a Synodal and collegial way of proceeding that prioritizes collaboration, sharing, listening, and learning. It is a “Synodal Church” on the way, rather than a finished entity encased in a hierarchical mold. The Church is a community that walks together, practices inclusiveness, and welcomes all. The most important members are found at the base, not the top, of the pyramid.

During the extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, Pope Francis reminded us that mercy is the face of God and the “ultimate and supreme act by which the Father of mercy comes to meet us.”

In a world where hedonism and self-interest are rife, religious women and men continue to testify to the sacredness of the human person through their service of all, especially the poor and those on the margins, often in situations that call for great courage.

The witness and vocation of lay people in realizing the mission of the Church remain important graces for our times. As Pope Francis has affirmed categorically, “The [Second Vatican] Council did not see the laity as if they were members of a ‘second order,’ at the service of the hierarchy and simple executors of higher orders, but as disciples of Christ ... called to enliven every environment, every activity, every human relationship according to the spirit of the Gospel (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, No. 31).” However, clericalism in the Church undermines and inhibits the apostolic ministry of the laity.

Notwithstanding the “Francis effect,” there are signs of continued distrust of the structure and hierarchy of the Church and, more generally, institutional religion. While millions are attracted to a Church that proclaims its faith in the Risen Christ, others go elsewhere seeking deeper meaning. Sexual misconduct by clergy, the abuse of clerical power, and their continuing impact undermine the Church’s credibility as the proclaimer of good news.

The Scandal of Sexual Abuse and its Implications for Formation

In the wake of the scandal of sexual abuse of children and minors by clergy and religious men, in 2002, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops contracted the John Jay College of Criminal Justice to conduct a thorough study of sexual abuse from 1950 – 2010. In taking a dispassionate look at this emotionally charged issue, the recently released report makes a valuable contribution to our understanding not only of the sexual abuse scandal in the Church but also of the nature and extent of sexual abuse in the society at large.

The report evaluates the effectiveness of the Church's effort to prevent abuse, deal with perpetrators and assist victims. Its assessment of ecclesiastical authorities' mistakes and success in doing so should help everyone who is interested in confronting what is clearly a widespread problem in the universal church. The report indicates that the priests involved in sexually abusing minors were rarely pedophiles in the strict sense of the term. Rather they were immature, lonely men who, burdened by the demands of the priesthood and finding themselves in positions of powers over minors, lacked the personal integrity to resist abusing that power. They rationalized their deviant behavior in some ways, and they believed they would be able to escape detection and avoid punishment. The scandalous behavior of a small segment of the priesthood has tarnished the image of the entire group.

The clinical data of priests who were treated for sexual abuse of minors exhibited intimacy deficits, often emotional congruence with adolescents and other problems, e.g., stress, obesity, alcohol, gambling, etc. Priest abusers showed similar patterns of behavior to non-clergy offenders. Pathology drives a small number of offenders. The majority of offenders have serious difficulty in normal peer relationships. They suffer from isolation and loneliness, discomfort with close relationships, poor social skills.

It is also quite significant and revealing that the incidence of sexual abuse by clergy that reached its peak in the eighties has gradually declined to a minimum from nineties onwards in the U.S.A. The total number of accusations of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests has fallen from 975 for the period of 1985 through 1989 to 253 for the period of 1995 to 1999, and then 74 for the period of 2004 - 2008. The reason for this position change is a remarkable intensification of human formation and deeper understanding of the importance of its role in the past 20 years in the pedagogy adopted by the seminaries in U.S.A. The rigorous criteria

followed in the selection of candidates to the priesthood with particular attention to their childhood background and history of psychosexual identity; ongoing accompaniment in a professional manner helping the seminarian to integrate sexuality in the context of celibacy has remedied the causes of Pedophilia to a large extent.

The scandal of sexual abuse by priests and consecrated persons have no doubt unearthed a serious lacuna in the pedagogy of formation of candidates for the priesthood and consecrated life. The lacuna is related to the central human dimensions of the person of candidates which involves their affective maturity to live meaningfully and effectively the charism of celibacy or chastity. The neglect of this dimension in our formation pedagogy in the past has led to disastrous consequences characterized by the scandal of sexual abuse by clergy all over the world. On the other hand, thanks to the changed pedagogy that addresses the human dimensions of the candidates professionally have brought about significant positive changes in the candidates.

The Relevance of Priesthood and Consecrated Life

There is a perception, especially in the west that priesthood and consecrated Life is no longer a meaningful life option. Today's youth no longer see the priesthood and consecrated Life as relevant options through which they can channel their idealism and generosity. Domestication of the priesthood and consecrated Life as simply a 'labor force' emptied of its specific character as a charismatic gift and a prophetic voice in the Church. The Priesthood / Consecrated Life loses its relevance when it loses its specific identity and can no longer play its specific role in the Church and the world. The crisis of relevance of priesthood and consecrated life is simply an aspect of the more fundamental crisis of relevance of religions as such. Religion in its present socio-cultural forms in many ways seems to be more suited to an agrarian society and not to today's post-industrial and post-modern society. It somehow or other fails to respond to humanity's religiosity in a cyber-age. The formation to the priesthood and consecrated life, on the other hand, continues on the Tridentate model that is obsolete in many ways and fails to address the challenges and needs of modern India. Hence the need is urgent for new paradigms for the integral formation of candidates to the priesthood and consecrated life in India.

The need of the hour is to train the candidates to the priesthood and consecrated life to become mystics in keeping with the ancient and much

revered religious tradition of India on the one hand and on the other to be prophets in the midst of massive poverty. Socio-economic and cultural disparities, dehumanizing injustice and exploitation of all kinds, gender inequality, communal disharmony, etc. Given this context of India, there is a need for a paradigm shift in the pedagogy for the training of candidates to the priesthood and consecrated life in India today. The existing formation seems to be very much church centered with over emphasis on cultic and ritualistic piety, conformism to external rules and regulations, fulfilling the academic requirements of the syllabus. More stress on content and external structures and very little attention to the process of transformation.

Contemporary realities do not match the traditional rhetoric about priesthood or consecrated life, and the changing demographic factors play a role in this disconnect. The National Survey on Vocation and Formation of Priests and Religious in India conducted by Paul Parathazham in 1980 at the behest of the Commission for Clergy and Religious of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, point to the fact that 40% of brothers would not now want to encourage vocations of close relatives. One-fifth of the brothers stated, if they could choose again, they would not join. In fact, two out of every five are unhappy or unsure about their decision. So few do, in fact, leave the seminary on their own. More than half of them see priesthood or consecrated life as a channel of social mobility or insurance for better life. More than 1/5 see it as an escape from unpleasant realities of life. As many as 30% of the brothers admitted that they hid their real selves during formation. 36% of the respondents indicated their formation was not worth the money and time, and a vast majority of the respondents rated the people of their age in the world would differ significantly higher on all qualities. 3/4 of the respondents feel their peers are more hard working than priests. 60% of the respondents feel their peers are better in taking initiatives. 93% of the respondents feel that their peers are more self-reliant than priests and religious. 67% of the respondents feel that their peers are more realistic in their approach to life, laity score better on achievement and clergy score higher on self-abasement. Greater the duration of formation, greater is the sense of inadequacy.

The document of the Congregation for Catholic Education, "A Guide to Formation in Priestly Celibacy" (11 April 1974) states: "errors in discerning vocations are nor rare, and in all too many cases psychological

defects, sometimes of a pathological kind, reveal themselves only after ordination to the priesthood. Detecting defects earlier would help avoid many tragic experiences”. The solution to the problem of pedophilia as sometimes, naively and simplistically posed by some lies not in the abolition of celibacy as if it is the cause for the scandal. Rather it is necessary to look into the deepening and strengthening of motivational forces of the candidates so that they can live meaningfully and effectively the charism they have freely chosen to live as followers of Christ.

Paradigm Shifts That Call for Radical Changes in Approaches to Formation to Priesthood and Consecrated Life

There is a serious debate with great concern among bishops, major superiors, the staff of seminaries and formation houses of consecrated men and women in India regarding the relevance and effectiveness of formation today. It is under continuous scrutiny. We keep updating the programs of formation, training of formators, etc. However, we need to realize that we are dealing with the mystery of vocation and the person called to follow Christ. They are indeed inscrutable mysteries, and we should not be frustrated by our human efforts to unravel them.

There will always be individuals with profound psychological fragilities and mixed or confused religious motivations. Such awareness must not make us despondent or pessimistic but rather should enable us to confront our incarnated existence with profound humility and abundant trust in divine grace. St Paul who was affected by the burden of his human and spiritual limitations, pleaded with the Lord to remove the thorn from his flesh but to no avail. But the Lord assured him: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor.12:9). That experience of brokenness did not weaken him, but rather strengthened his resolve to depend on divine grace- “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil.4:13).

Formation is a sacred ministry. It places the formators in the personal life and spiritual journey and vocational discernment of other individuals who believe they have been called by God to follow Christ as priests or consecrated persons. Hence there is an urgent need for Paradigm shifts for radical changes in the approaches to the training of candidates to the priesthood and consecrated life:

1. Focus on Vocation Promotion as a Call to Follow Christ and His Mission rather than recruiting candidates for bureaucratic and administrative

functions of the Institutions of the dioceses and congregations. Attract and challenge the youth of today by presenting Jesus of the Gospels whose personality and teachings are ever fascinating and relevant for all times.

2. The Goal of the formation to the priesthood and consecrated life is to enable the formees to grow "...to mature manhood/womanhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph.4:13; *PDV* Nos. 43-59, VC No.65). "Formation then is a sharing in the work of the Father who, through the Spirit, fashions the inner attitudes of the Son in the hearts of young men and women" (*Vita Consecrata*, No.66).

3. The selection and promotion of candidates to the priesthood and consecrated life at all stages should follow a rigorous process of discernment assessing the suitability of the candidates from their motivation to commit themselves to become Disciples of Christ and not for a secure career in life. To ensure a more transparent and objective method and to avoid the danger of biases, let the selection and promotion of candidates be done through a collective process of discernment.

4. The location, the environment, the size and the lifestyle of the group of trainees are such that they reflect the reality of the lives of the people around us ('smell of the sheep') and the community that is akin to a 'field hospital.' There is a need for constant input from the socio-cultural and religious realities of the people in a manner that it challenges the candidates about their real motivation to become a priest or consecrated person. The present system of formation introduces the candidates to a culture and lifestyle that is in many ways alien to their roots.

5. The formative spirituality needs to be centered more on the Gospel Way of Life reflecting the mind and heart of Christ. Greater emphasis must be placed on silence, solitude, contemplation, interiorization in keeping with Indian spirituality.

6. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on the process of self-transformation than the content (syllabus) through a holistic integration of spiritual, human, pastoral and intellectual dimensions of priestly and religious formation as highlighted by St John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation - *Pastores Dabo Vobis*.

7. The ongoing accompaniment of the formees by competent guides is an absolute requirement to facilitate the process of self-transformation.

As we see very clearly in the life of Jesus, the twelve accompanied Jesus all through his public ministry exposed to his preaching, feeding the multitudes, healing people afflicted with all kinds of diseases and infirmity, casting out demons and often taking them to a lonely place to relish intimate moments with him and his heavenly Father. But Jesus followed them very closely all the time, accompanying them through their inward journey, enlightening them with his vision for establishing a community of the people of God (the Kingdom), often challenging their mindset, their attitudes and belief system when these were not in consonance with his Father's will. I am afraid the practice of accompaniment in our seminaries and formation houses is apparently a farce and is most of the time for name's sake, routinely undertaken by persons who lack the competence, to say the least. As a result, there is no significant change or transformation in the lives of most of our formees. How far the daily existential experiences that the formees undergo in their personal lives, in their prayer life, community, interpersonal relationships, study, games, emotional ups and downs, issues related to their sexuality, dreams, and fantasies, etc. are taken up for a serious scrutiny, reflection and discernment on a regular basis and in a professional manner? These are some of the questions that need to be addressed in a concerted manner if the formation has to become a process for self-transformation.

8. To facilitate a holistic or integral formation, it is of paramount importance that the formees can exercise freedom with responsibility and accountability at all stages of formation. This demands a conducive environment in our seminaries and houses of the formation where the formees feel secure and at home with a deep sense of belongingness. This could go a long way in inculcating self-motivation and self-discipline whereby the formee becomes the principle agent for his/her formation.

9. Character formation leading to moral and spiritual integration through the cultivation of virtues like love, compassion, sacrifice, service, simplicity, humility, forgiveness, generosity, etc. should be given greater importance than the development of talents and skills.

10. Human Formation to develop a secure and authentic self-identity supported by affective and sexual maturity is of paramount importance today given the stresses of modern life. Many of the candidates require therapeutic interventions through professional helps to heal their psychic wounds that adversely affect the persons resulting from unhealthy

personality and character disorders like narcissism, aggression, inferiority complex, victim complex, fear complex, authority complex, mood disorders, hostility, envy, rigidity, guilt, etc. A study by Lourdes, Patel, and Paranjpe (1991) comparing the traits of 300 clergies (priests, sisters, and seminarians) and 300 lay persons found that clergy, on the whole, were far less mature than lay persons. Of the 11 positive traits measured, lay persons scored more positively on 9 and of the eight negative traits, clergy fared worse on 7. “More clergy than lay persons were also characterized as having excessive nervousness, bad temper, exhibitionism, excessive conservatism and jealousy and being easily led away...” (Lourdes, Patel and Paranjpe, *Human Face of Clergy*, 1991, p.131).

Another study (Parathazham, 2006) which sought to elicit the views of formation personnel on issues and challenges in the formation of priests and consecrated persons in India concluded:

“Human formation, which is the foundation of priestly formation, is arguably the most neglected aspect of formation in India. We seem to be concentrating all our efforts on building a spiritual “superstructure” without the “base structure” thus rendering the entire enterprise tenuous and futile. Every other aspect of formation, be it intellectual, spiritual, or pastoral, is institutionalized in seminaries with a specific programme, designated personnel, and prescribed activities or exercises. But for human formation there is no such programme in place. It is largely taken for granted.”

The Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II on ‘*Pastores Dabo Vobis*’ highlighting the importance of human maturity in view of the ministry states: “ The priest should be able to know the depths of human heart, to perceive difficulties and problems, to make meeting and dialogue easy, to create trust and cooperation, to express serene and objective judgments” (*PDV*, no. 43).

11. Lived experience of inter-faith dialogue, networking with groups involved at the grass root level among the poor and the marginalized, frontier ministries, be part of the curriculum and not limit merely to the traditional church centered ministries. In many ways, it just caters to religious and ritualistic piety and does not address effectively the challenges and problems faced by people today.

12. The formative challenges affecting the youth of today require a new type of formators, men, and women who are persons of spiritual and

moral integrity, happy in their vocation, loyal to the Church, emotionally balanced, who is at the wave length of the present day candidates. It also involves formators who are trained with knowledge and skills to accompany professionally with skills and techniques in spiritual direction (discernment) and counseling. Already Vatican II document on 'Priestly Training' (*Optatam Totius*) states emphatically: "Formators should be chosen from among the best, and be painstakingly prepared by sound doctrine, appropriate pastoral experience and special spiritual and pedagogical training" (*OT*, 5).

In my view, the vast majority of the so-called formators in our seminaries or formation houses are academically trained to be teachers and do not have the required training to be formators. The assessment of the formators in the National survey cited earlier (Parathazham, 2006), clearly reveals that not many formators come across to the candidates as exemplary or inspiring role models. Indeed a very large number of candidates called into question the integrity, impartiality, and competence of their formators. More than half of the formators themselves (53%) felt that they lacked aptitude and competence.

13. The so-called intellectual formation is in fact in its present form is more of an academic exercise with a very comprehensive syllabus or curriculum that by and large caters to the rational intelligence. The other dimensions of intelligence: Emotional (EQ), Imaginative or symbolic, and the practical are given very little attention. The pedagogy that is followed in most of the seminaries and formation houses is termed as 'bank deposit' system, the traditional lecture system which is unsuited for adult learning. The formees are treated as passive recipients of information and knowledge that is dished out by the teachers. The formees who are endowed with more of emotional, imaginative or practical intelligence become bored because the system does not cater to their type of intelligence. And the method of evaluation or examination system that is being largely followed is to reproduce or vomit out the undigested material pushed down the throats of the formees by the teachers.

The present system needs a thorough revamping to make it suited to the adult learning. What is very much needed by way of intellectual formation is to develop in the formees a sense of critique in the light of reason (philosophy) and faith (theology), to take a prophetic stand against violation of human rights, injustice, exploitation and discrimination in the name of religion, creed, caste, gender, etc. The intellectual formation

to be effective for modern times should equip the formees with general knowledge on the current issues, challenges and problems affecting the world at large and the church in particular. They need to be equipped with tools and skills to reflect and articulate their views and opinions creatively and convincingly, tools with modern means of communication; tools with proficiency in English our common language as well as other local languages. It is important that the formees develop study habit and reading habit all through the years of formation.

14. Dialogue is the key to success of good community life and one of the outstanding qualities required and expected of modern leaders. This is all the more necessary in the Indian context where many of the formees especially among men candidates seem to suffer from fear and authority complex. There is need to create an open forum for dialogue through structures like student council where the opportunities are given for formees to raise their concerns, their grievances, to share their expectations, and thus they feel that have a say concerning their formation. My hunch is that many of the formators and staff members in our seminaries and formation houses have serious apprehensions about such open forums for dialogue sensing that they might turn into trade union like pressure groups. To avert such possible dangers the staff and formators need to build a good rapport with the formees and win over their confidence.

Conclusion

Are we as priests and consecrated persons attractive brands or icons to the modern world? “It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows but by attraction” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 14). Priesthood and Consecrated life will not flourish as a result of brilliant vocation and formation programs, but because the young people we meet, find us attractive because they see us men and women who ‘are happy.’ Similarly, the apostolic effectiveness of Paradigms in Formation for the priesthood and consecrated life does not depend on the efficiency of its methods. It depends on the eloquence of our lives, lives which radiate the joy and beauty of living the Gospel and following Christ radically.

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