

Formation for Freedom and Transformation: Psycho-Spiritual Determinants in Formation Processes

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Abstract

Human life has a purpose. Our vocation is nothing other than finding what we were born for and realizing it day by day. It is the situations and the surroundings in which we find ourselves that determine and shape our vocation. Therefore, sensitivity is a vital determinant in the Formation process. Formation is a process for freedom and transformation and not for training. Unfortunately much of our formation has led not to transformation but deformation where formees learn to adjust and survive. A healthy formation should involve the capacity to share more of one's authentic self in detail and depth. This presupposes not only a certain self-knowledge but also skills of self-disclosure and taking the risks to share with trusted others, whether they are formators, superiors, spiritual guides or companions.

Introduction

A few years ago, while attending a programme on "The Challenges Facing Religious Life Today," the resource person began his talk saying: "Religious life as it is lived today has no future." He sent us through a shock therapy giving us features that make religious life stagnant, stuck and irrelevant. That set me thinking in my work of formation and my reflections will highlight some of my answers to make religious life relevant today.

Why is psycho-spiritual integration such a desired topic among priests and religious today? To understand this, we need to go to the

challenges of our times in our postmodern globalized world and diagnose what ails us as priests and religious today. We also need to rediscover the Asian psyche and the gift of spirituality that we share as Asians to counteract the malaise that plagues us.

What Do We Mean by Vocation?

My vocation is something I discover. More than something to do, it is who I am or might be. It is something that unlocks my most creative energies. When we discover our vocation, something clicks. We have found what we were born for. Is there a deeper vocation that integrates all others? If so, it would be that way of life that fulfills me as a human being. Human beings are made to love, to help others. That is our deepest vocation. A life of service is not something people normally muscle into by sheer willpower. It is, literally, a calling that they "hear," a "still small voice" which, in privileged moments, comes through straight and clear.

Maryknoll sister, Ita Ford wrote to her young niece, Jennifer, just before she paid the price in El Salvador in 1980: "I hope you come to find that which gives life a deep meaning for you. Something worth living for – maybe even worth dying for – something that energizes you, enthuses you, enables you to keep moving ahead. I can't tell you what it might be. That's for you to find, to choose, to love." Ita invited Jennifer to discover her deepest calling (Brackley, 2004:56-58).

The wake-up call to service resonates with our own need for something worth living for, our need to find ourselves by losing ourselves. We discover our callings in response to the world we interact with – Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany, Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Montgomery bus boycott, and Mother Teresa in the streets of Kolkata. They grew in their vocation in response to their turbulent surroundings. Our surroundings shake us, sift us, and draw our vocation from us.

Formation for Freedom and Transformation

Human beings are called to freedom because they are called beyond themselves to share in God's life, the source of all freedom. For those of us in charge of the formation of religious and of seminarians, the question is not 'how are we to form others for freedom?', but 'how can we create conditions in which we, together with those in formation, can grow in freedom?'

Much of what passes for religious formation impoverishes the person by undermining his/her self-confidence and so destroying the very

source of his/her communication with God. If we are afraid of ourselves, we cannot know ourselves, cannot discern what is happening within us and therefore cannot come to know God's will for us. If the vows are to lead us to freedom, they must be chosen freely and loved for their own sake, not endured as a temporary deprivation in the hope of an eternal reward.

Formation is a process for freedom and transformation and not for training. For example, formees should be visualized not like the clay becoming a pot where one submits oneself passively to the formator but like the seed becoming a plant where the formee has the potential and is an active agent in his/her formation. Formation for freedom means the capacity of the formee to become what one is called to be. It is self-realization according to the truth of one's being. Unfortunately much of our formation has led not to transformation but de-formation where formees learn to adjust and survive. Much of formation rather than orienting to a self-formation has ended up in an induced formation.

An individualized effort must be made to strengthen the psychologically healthy religious to assist them, during the time of their formation, in psychological growth and development in needed areas. In *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Pope John Paul II is instructive:

Human maturity, and in particular affective maturity, requires a clear and strong "training in freedom," which expresses itself in convinced and heartfelt obedience to the "truth" of one's own being, to the "meaning" of one's own existence, that is to the "sincere gift of self" as the way and fundamental content of the authentic realization of self.

Formation is the education of the heart, the mind and the will. It aims at an adequate maturity so that the heart of the person is free to love or to perceive as "beautiful" what the mind discovers as "true" and the will experiences as "good and right".

The World We Live in

If we wish to understand the meaning and significance of priestly and religious life today, we have to do so in the light of the challenges of our time and situations.

1. Our world-view has changed from a static to a dynamic world-view. Nothing is fixed and finished, but is always changing. It

values diverse viewpoints and experiences. It seeks to build connections among peoples, nations, and with the cosmos.

2. Dualisms are being challenged: male vs female, hierarchy vs laity, conservatives vs liberals. There is a big push to LIVE as equals – as partners in relationship, in mutuality – women and men, laity and clergy.
3. A global consumer culture promoted by the media is threatening all cultures.
4. Scope to make quick and big money and side by side, the loss of personal meaning in life and hence alarmingly large number of tension-induced ailments affecting many.
5. Family structures are breaking down and individualism is ruining the lives of many.
6. Increasing stress on freedom and the rapidly shrinking space for individual and community decisions, due to imposition of uniformity (food, dress, values, etc.) influenced and powerfully aided by vested interests and business-backed media.
7. The material, the visible, the immediate so dominates that the long-term, the inner, the spiritual gets ignored. The individual is alienated from nature, from his/her own body and from society. Psychological tensions abound (Amaladoss, 2007: 231).

Religious life seems to be growing more and more secular and secure rather than spiritual. As Joan Chittister prophetically says,

It is precisely our security that is killing us, and our isolation that is insulating us from the gospel, and our obedience that is making us useless lackeys of oppressive and unjust systems. We have taken the very vows that were meant to free a person and turned them into institutional niceties that now enslave us to the economic standards and antiseptic social strata and patriarchal systems to which we say we are counter-culture.

Religious life as we see it today has strayed away from its basic thrust of countercultural protest. Forms of religious life, which arose as mystical-prophetic movements according to the needs of the situation, have become more and more institutionalized. Religious have compromised with the world and allowed themselves to be co-opted by it.

The Asian Psyche / Spirituality

A question that often intrigues me is, "Is there an Asian psyche, and an Asian mind?" Respect of the otherness of the other is the matrix of the Asian religious psyche. The spiritual source of this respect is a contemplative perception of reality; the expression of it is the all-embracing compassionate attitude to living beings (Painadath, 2007:1). This is a rich source that needs to be tapped in generating healthier formation programmes and processes. We need to work out models of formation that are more inculturated, integrated and holistic. Some aspects of this Asian psyche / spirituality are:

1. The Sense of the Sacred

As an Asian people we are steeped in a sense of the sacred, a sense of wonder and awe, openness and surrender before the mystery of the Divine which permeates the whole of creation. "A contemplative awakening to the all-pervading and all-transcending mystery of the Divine is a hallmark of Asian spirituality." (FABC-FEISA, I, 1994, Nos. 7.2.3). In this pilgrimage each one shares one's experience with others.

2. A Cosmic World View

We sense a cosmic world view in the holistic approach to life. The Asian outlook favours the sensory, the symbolic, the narrative and the intuitive approach to reality. We appreciate our rich cultural diversity expressed in the art, architecture, music, dance and the rich folk, classical and subaltern traditions. We recognize that the uncritical use of modern media and information technology can result in the homogenization and hegemonization of cultures and poses a threat to our cosmic world-view. Unfortunately our formation stresses western modes of rationalization, leaving little room for developing the creative arts and a critique of modern media.

3. Personal Spiritual Experience (*anubhava*)

Personal spiritual experience (*anubhava*) is normative in the growth of an individual and in the evolution of a community. Since reality is a mystery, access to it has to be a matter of personal search. Asians are basically seekers: spiritual pilgrims in a relentless quest for Truth (Painadath, 2007: 3). "Life is perceived in Asia as an ongoing journey. What gives ultimate meaning to life is the spiritual pilgrimage in pursuit of Truth, Harmony, the Divine." (FABC-FEISA, I, 1994, Nos. 7.1.1).

4. Intense Spiritual Discipline

Intense spiritual discipline is a prerequisite in spirituality. Asian traditions unfold the need of ascetical practices and contemplative silence in pursuit of Truth. A certain simplicity of lifestyle and a genuine closeness to nature characterize authentic spiritual seekers in Asia. A life that evolves out of contemplative pursuits is a life of openness to Truth and respect for the diversity of Truth-perceptions, a life of compassion towards all being and commitment to integral harmony (Painadath, 2007: 4).

5. Strong Community Ties

We encounter the strong familial ties of our people, the strong communitarian nature of our indigenous peoples, the emphasis on fidelity and respect for the community's elders as cherished values. Our encounter of Asian community bonding challenges us to strengthen team work and collective ownership of the apostolate without sacrificing personal initiative and creativity.

6. Hospitality

We experience the hospitality of our Asian brothers and sisters in their welcoming smiles and the generosity with which the poorest share all that they have. We acknowledge that partly because of our individualism, we have often not been models of hospitality.

7. The Celebration of Life and Diversity

We resonate with our Asian people in celebrating life in its abundance and diversity, expressed in the dance, song and myths at significant moments in the seasonal cycles, at the high points of life, in the memories of their ancestors, folk heroes and heroines.

8. Compassionate Attitude to All Beings

The holistic vision of reality gives rise to a compassionate attitude to all beings. As one experiences oneself in harmony with the entire cosmic reality in the divine process, one's heart is filled with a loving concern for the integral welfare of all beings. No one can be considered a stranger to oneself, and the suffering of the other becomes one's own suffering. All Asian religions uphold compassion (*karuna, daya, rachem*) as the hallmark of a

truly spiritual person. Genuine compassion consists in suffering with the other and participating in the struggles of the other for overcoming the suffering. Compassion is a transformative attitude to life. The Asian sense of compassion embraces not only human world but also the animal world as well as the wide range of the wounded earth. Hence ecological concerns are integral elements of spirituality in Asia (Painadath, 2007: 5-6).

Such is the Asian world into which the Lord sends us with all its complexity, with great global promises and countless tragic betrayals. It is into this world that we are sent on mission today. It is in this context that we have to reflect on psycho-spiritual formation of priests and religious today. To embody this holistic spirituality is the challenge before consecrated persons called to be mystical prophets for our times.

Psycho-Spiritual Determinants in Formation Processes

1. Self-awareness

A key set of skills for healthy psycho-spiritual formation is the growing capacity for deepening self-awareness. Young people today are well-versed with world-exploration at the cost of self-exploration. This implies that the formee is able to assess his/her strong and weak points, as well as the awareness the formee has of his or her own family of origin history and its impact on his/her life.

2. An Internal Locus of Control

Individuals with a high internal locus of control believe that outcomes result primarily from their own behaviour and actions. They become more accountable and responsible for their behaviour. Those with a high external locus of control by contrast believe that powerful others, fate, or chance primarily determine outcomes. Do our formees exhibit an external motivation or an internal motivation in religious life?

3. Capacity for Accepting Self and Others

Emotionally healthy persons accept the whole of themselves without rejecting any aspect: body, gender, sex, mind, limitations and weaknesses, strengths and talents, and their personal histories (Parappully, 2010:5). There is a tendency in some formees to minimize or deny their own weaknesses. Such formees do not speak to the formators about some of their serious

difficulties, as they fear they will not be understood or accepted. Sometimes it is growing up in an alcoholic family, or being the victim of abuse or neglect that leaves them feeling vulnerable.

Self-acceptance is based on genuine knowledge of self, grounded in realistic appraisal of resources and limitations. Self-acceptance is the calm readiness to look at our strengths and weaknesses without fear or boasting, to be grateful (to God and to those who have helped us grow up) for our positive traits, and openness to being corrected, so that we are not blind to our negative side. People who accept themselves have let go of the need to live up to other's expectations. This inner freedom allows for greater spontaneity and less self-consciousness. When we accept ourselves like this we are easy to live with, since we do not feel any compulsion to hide or defend our mistakes, or to make a show of our talents (Parappully, 2010:5). It is impossible to accept the love of others until you love your own self.

4. Growing Self-esteem

Nathaniel Branden defines self-esteem as the reputation one has with oneself. Self-esteem is the evaluative-affective component of oneself. So it will be important to see how formees really feel about themselves. Do they genuinely like the person they are becoming or do they feel inadequate, shameful, or unworthy? How we see ourselves has a great impact on what we bring to our relationships and religious communities. Formators can assist formees in their efforts to grow in self-esteem by providing creative opportunities to gain meaningful ministry and relationship experiences that allow them to expand their comfort zones. Formees who are more reserved may be challenged to take more initiative in the community; busy formees may be encouraged to slow down and develop their more contemplative side; and perfectionist formees may be challenged to accept their weaknesses and limitations as pathways to grace and compassion with self, others, and God (McClone, 2009: 8).

5. Establishing a Healthy Identity

When formees deeply value their identity and see it as a gift, they become freer to be authentic in life-giving ways. Identity is linked to autonomy. One of the basic psychological needs we all have is the need for autonomy. Autonomy refers to the freedom needed to make choices, to have a say on matters that

affect us, to give direction to our own life (Parappully & Mannath, 2009: 39). When we have the right balance between autonomy and dependence, we are able to collaborate with others, as well as accept help from others. We are not helplessly dependent on others.

6. Healthy Solitude

Stephanie Dowrick explores the primacy of solitude in developing healthy intimacy and points out that your connections with others can be as rewarding as the connection with the “someone” with whom you live every moment of your own life: your own self. Separateness and autonomy are keys to healthy adult intimacy and affective maturity. I can’t be together with you unless I have some sense of autonomy and separateness that I often discover in moments of solitude. Navigating solitude draws us deeper into our true self, unveiling the masks and shadow selves that only serve to block spontaneity, freedom, and authentic loving (McClone, 2009: 9). To what degree do our formees demonstrate a growing appreciation of solitude, contemplation and reflection?

7. Sharing One’s Authentic Self

Any healthy formation involves the capacity to share more of one’s authentic self in detail and depth. This presupposes not only a certain self-knowledge but also skills of self-disclosure and taking the risks to share with trusted others, whether they are formators, superiors, spiritual guides or companions. Communication skills can be further developed through learning how to listen well and growing in ability to empathize with others. Formees should be helped to be aware of and be able to express personal wants, needs, thoughts and desires. They also need to be able to assess realistically what their capabilities are and desire to learn more about what they can become (McClone, 2009: 9).

8. Developing Broad and Deep Interpersonal Relationships

When exploring key determinants for a healthy psycho-spiritual formation a core place to begin is looking at one’s capacity for healthy relationships. To be effective in a diverse church and society of today is to be relational. This implies the growing capacity to relate in more honest and conscious ways with oneself, with others and with God. When I become more in

touch with my true self, I grow to be more authentic in my relationships with others and my intimacy with God deepens.

Sexual desire represents the need for intimacy and not simply genital satisfaction. Rollo May says: "For human beings, the more powerful need is not for sex per se, but for relationships, for intimacy, acceptance and affirmation." (May, 1969:311)

Addressing the place of relationships in our lives is the first step toward constructing our psychosexual identity. Contemporary psychoanalytic literature explains how the meanings associated with these interactions constitute the core of our psychosexual identity:

[H]uman sexuality is indeed psychosexuality. The concept of psychosexuality excludes a sexuality of blind instincts culminating in propagation of the species, as in non-human organisms (though even for them this simple statement is no longer really acceptable); and it excludes a sexuality simply of erotic techniques and orgasmic adequacy. Psychosexuality means mental sexuality, that is, a sexuality of meanings and personal relationships that have developed and been organized around real and imagined experiences and situations in a social world. (Schafer, 1974:472)

Our more powerful need is not for sex but for loving interpersonal and communal relationships that do not come to an end but extend into eternity. As priests and religious, we hope love will always be with us. Our psychosexual well-being is ultimately tied to our faith and spirituality.

9. A Healthy Understanding of Spirituality:

Spirituality can be defined as a relationship with God, or whatever is held to be the Ultimate that fosters a sense of meaning, purpose, and mission in life. In turn, this relationship produces fruit (such as altruism, love, or forgiveness) that has a discernible effect on an individual's relationship to self, nature, others, and the Ultimate.

It seems to me that by and large there is a new search for spirituality today. There is a deep desire to address the hungers of the human heart. This need or hunger is experienced in a variety of ways.

1. Hunger for meaning in a world of absurdity.

2. Hunger for commitment in a world of ceaseless experimentation.
3. Hunger for depth in a world of superficiality.
4. Hunger for integration in a world of fragmentation.
5. Hunger for intimacy in a world of isolation/alienation.

Spirituality, then, is response to the Spirit: contemplative awareness of the transforming presence of the Divine Spirit in us and around us, and active participation in the creative work of the Spirit. Spirituality is about finding God in our lived experience and allowing him to transform that experience, through his Spirit, for ourselves and for the whole human family.

10. Ongoing Discernment:

Discernment is the capacity to pick up the voice of God amidst other competing voices coming from culture, media, context, and society. This is possible only in the context of a love relationship with God. Therefore it touches our deepest desire. The desires which distract the inner desire are called "inordinate attachments". Our deepest desires are at the mystical level of our consciousness where we really want to love God and please God alone. Therefore, discernment is the ability to recognize our deepest desires in the midst of many other desires that interfere with them. Discernment is listening to God in the depths of our hearts.

Discernment deals with our inner thoughts, feelings, inclinations, desires, memories and drives. Most of the time we are not aware of what is happening within us. Therefore the most important thing in discernment is to *become aware* and for this we need "*interior silence*". When we become aware of what is happening within us we are able to find out the origins, effects and the possible orientations of our experiences.

Discernment always happens at the true self. The true self is at the core of our being where we are truly ourselves and attuned to the Divine Spirit. It implies unmasking the false self and making the person interiorly free. The false self consists of our inordinate attachments, unbridled passions, sinful habits, destructive practices, unhealthy prejudices and preferences, our complexes and mixed motivations. In discerning vocation, formators help formees to peel

off the layers of the false self and arrive at the true self through the process of personal reflection, interior silence, depth prayers, centering processes and ongoing spiritual direction.

A Healthy Model of Formation for Freedom and Transformation

1. *Formation for mission* requires that it take place “in the varied apostolic contexts wherein the one mission of *faith that does justice* is actualized.” Formation for mission seeks the *integration* of life style, human development, spiritual growth, intellectual formation, and “participation in the struggles of the poor as they seek to build up a more just and humane society.”
2. Those in formation today should come to know and progressively *insert themselves in the culture of the people* they serve, whether urban or rural, especially the socio-economically marginalized groups. Such insertion emphasizes a sharing of the life and experience of these people, and attempts to understand from within their culture.
3. *Integral Paradigm of Learning* – effective approach to solid formation. This involves: situating oneself within a *context* – engaging in serious *reflection* – based on *experience* of the concerns of the people among whom one lives and guided by a faith-vision of reality – leading to effective *action* - and subsequent *evaluation*.
4. Those in formation are to participate appropriately in the *four-fold dialogue* with people of other faiths recommended by the Church: dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of religious experience, and dialogue of theological exchange.
5. *Team work* expresses and promotes a union of hearts and minds that transcends caste, cultural and other differences. It is the best antidote to unhealthy individualism. Group living fosters the human formation of the individual formee and is also the context in which personal guidance and discernment are practiced.
6. *Skills for inter-personal communication* and ability to relate with women/men respectfully and free of complexes. Guidance is needed in the area of affective maturity.
7. *Ecological sensitivity* and care in the use of the earth’s resources manifest the young religious’ “justice towards all communities in our present ‘global village’ and justice towards future generations who will inherit whatever we leave them. Therefore love of nature and interest in productive manual work.

8. Formation includes education for *collaboration* with priests, men and women religious, Christian laity and with men and women of other faiths and beliefs. To be 'men/women with others' is a trait religious must grow in.
9. *Primary responsibility for formation belongs to the young religious* for s/he "is the necessary and irreplaceable agent in her/his own formation: all formation..... is ultimately a self-formation." Responsibility for formation should be shared among: formators, field guides, apostolic communities, lay persons and her companions in formation. (JCSA, 1998: 2-7)

A metaphor that has enhanced my spiritual outlook as a formator is "The Tree." Like all great symbols, the tree is very rich in its symbolic possibilities. With its consistency, growth, proliferation, generative and regenerative processes, the tree symbolizes the developmental life of our formees right from the Godseed to a tree bearing much fruit. The tree invites them to a contemplative depth, to an experience of community, and to lived options of self-giving.

Anthony de Mello (de Mello, 1995) describes the tree as a model of love. The first quality the tree models is its *indiscriminate character*. The tree gives its shade to everyone, good and bad, young and old, high and low; to animals and humans and every living creature – even to the one who seeks to cut it down. The second quality of the tree is its *gratuitousness*. The tree asks for nothing in return. The third quality of the tree we need to imbibe is its *freedom*. The moment coercion, control or conflict enters, relationship dies. The tree leaves you completely free. I often remind formees that the bare branches of their lives are capable of budding new shoots with green leaves and abundant fruit.

Conclusion

To sum up, I have tried to show that forming men and women for religious life is to work in co-operation with them to discover freedom in Christ. The main purpose of the vows is to make us *radically free* for our mission. The three vows indicate three broad areas in which we need to free: freedom from love of wealth – from attachment to material goods and persons; freedom to love God and everyone else without reserve and egoism; freedom to do the will of God everywhere and always.

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