

ONGOING FORMATION: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Continued growth and development is natural to any human being in any walk of life. For priests and religious, ongoing formation is an integral renewal process, envisaging a continuous progression towards realizing their full potential. This entails a personal as well as a community commitment to a continuous renewal of fidelity to the founder. There is no specific age at which a person can consider that they have achieved full maturity in priestly or religious life. One should try to improve the quality of one's response to the commitments of ordained life.

Ongoing formation must be systematic, comprehensive and geared to the individual's spiritual, apostolic, doctrinal and practical needs. Continuing formation after ordination enables the priest to retain relevancy, both within developing times and new pastoral challenges. Vita Consecrata, the post-synodal apostolic exhortation, mentions five stages of ongoing formation: the critical stage, the risk of routine, the stage of maturity, advanced age and completion of formation at the moment of death.

Introduction

Ongoing formation offers us an opportunity to update our whole priestly and/or religious life in relation to God and his people. Human beings in any walk of life, naturally aspire to grow and

develop continuously. This is also a sociological fact, and affects all areas of our professional activity. In this context, ongoing formation can be understood as the updating of priestly and/or religious life, continually growing in friendship with Christ, love for the Church, pastoral zeal, and in generous self-giving to others. (Marcial, 1992:57). In other words, ongoing formation is the integral renewal process among priests and religious that envisages a continuous progression of each person to realize their full potential within their life and ministry. This is a personal as well as a community commitment to a continuous renewal of fidelity to the founder. In fact, it is an attitude of conversion and revitalization so as to discern the voice of the Spirit.

Meaning, Nature and Importance

Formation, in its ecclesiastical sense, reminds us of the initial grooming and shaping candidates have to undergo in order to start them on the path they have chosen. People are often tempted to believe that once the initial training and tutoring are over they have come to the end of their formation. However, since Vatican II, the initial as well as the ongoing formation of priests and religious are always frequently discussed in chapters/synaxis of religious congregations and of diocese.

The aim of this article is to contemplate the meaning, nature and importance of ongoing formation at various levels and stages of the religious as well as priestly life. Terms like 'ongoing' formation, 'continued' formation and 'permanent' formation are used in our discussion as synonyms. We shall take into consideration the new issues and challenges our country is facing at present, since these require extra attention to be given to constant updating and refreshing of our priestly or religious life. This in turn will help us to reach realistic conclusions that will enable us to propose helpful and practical solutions to the problems we are facing.

Different Orders and Congregations have their own unique strategies and formation procedures to train and form their future generations in accordance with their charism, time and situation. It is beyond dispute that changes in the world are affecting the church in general and religious life in particular. Initial formation consists of the training process a person undergoes until they are

released to full-time apostolic work. Ongoing formation continues this process and constitutes the remaining part of one's strive towards perfection until death. In former days formation was considered complete once the religious attained professional status.

Though the physic growth comes to a standstill once the person reaches corporal maturity, there remains an inherent capacity in every human being to continue developing in other areas. There is no specific age at which a person can consider that they have achieved full maturity in priestly or religious life. One should try to improve the quality of one's response to the commitments of life.

Ongoing formation must be systematic, comprehensive and geared to the individual's spiritual, apostolic, doctrinal and practical needs. Education should not be seen as the only means of personal enrichment. Formation based on personal life experiences are of greater value than classroom lectures. The knowledge acquired in the mission field should be acknowledged and treasured. Vatican II instructs that on account of the circumstances of modern society, priestly formation should be continued and perfected even after the seminary course of studies has been completed (*Optatam Totius* #2). Important documents of the church like *Christus Dominus*, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, *Optatam Totius*, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, *Vita Consecrata*, *Mutuae Relationes*, etc. draw attention to and endorse the importance of the ongoing formation.

The Code of Canon Law advocates that religious give priority to continuing their spiritual, doctrinal and practical formation throughout their lives, while their superiors should ensure that they have the assistance they need as well as the time to do this (CCL #661). Oriental Canon Law admonishes that after completing their initial formation, clerics are not to stop devoting attention to the sacred sciences. They are to take measures to acquire a more profound and relevant knowledge though formative courses approved by their own hierarchy (COCL #372.1).

During the closing ceremony of the Synod of Bishops' Special Assembly of Africa in 1993, Pope John Paul II specified the nature of ongoing formation, and very much stressed its importance for

priests. The Synod of African Bishops suggested formal courses and also private studies:

Continuing formation after ordination enables the priest to remain in tune with developing times and new pastoral challenges. This formation can be gained, not only by formal courses of further studies but also through private study and through seminars and workshops,... continuous spiritual renewal can be promoted by such exercises as day of recollection and annual retreats (*Synod of Bishops' 1993*).

Therefore, ongoing formation is an essential and irreplaceable component of formation for the apostolate, and must therefore, be systematic, efficient and coordinated with the seminary program of studies (*Directives, 1995, #60*). Mauro Jöhri, the General of the Capuchin Order, in his circular letter to the friars working in 106 countries, writes on importance of the ongoing formation as follows:

The primary purpose of ongoing formation must be exactly that to bring us back to the right way or have us take decisive step forward in our lifelong commitment... the Lord himself is saying to you, "Get up and walk" (Mt. 9:5) (Jöhri, 2010).

Why Ongoing Formation

It is an undeniable fact that both the sacred and the human sciences are constantly progressing. Therefore, it is an obligation on the part of priests and religious to develop concurrently in their knowledge of the advances made in these fields. Each person has to reflect on the manner in which they perform their pastoral ministry in the challenging situation of today. One cannot achieve maturity and personal growth without constant effort and conversion. Late Pope Bl. John Paul II, citing the first letter of St. Paul to Timothy, in his pastoral letter *Pastores Dabo Vobis* affirms, "Do not neglect the gift you have which was given to you by prophetic utterance when the elders laid their hands upon you. Practice these duties; devote yourself to them so that all may see your progress. Take heed to yourself and to your teaching; hold to that, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers"

(I Tim. 4:14-16) (#70). The call of God continues and therefore ongoing formation is necessary in order to discern and follow His call.

Both the Conference of the Catholic Bishops of India and the Syro-Malabar Church have published documents such as the Charter of Priestly Formation which acknowledges the need for ongoing formation. The Conference of the Catholic Bishops of India gives three major reasons for the need for ongoing formation of priests:

- 1) that they may reflect on the manner in which they perform their pastoral ministry,
- 2) that they may up-date their knowledge of the sacred and human sciences and
- 3) that they may deepen and strengthen their spiritual life (*Charter of Priestly Formation for India*, 2007, #37).

According to the Charter of Priestly Formation in the Syro-Malabar Church, the ongoing formation of priests demands an indispensable commitment on the part of clergy for their dedicated pastoral activity and spiritual lives. Therefore, the document concludes that the major problem priests face today is the lack of a comprehensive program of ongoing formation based on a clear vision and understanding of the role of priests. The document gives a lot of practical suggestions (*Charter of Priestly Formation in Syro-Malabar Church*, 2007: 116-119). Ongoing formation is particularly urgent today because of fast changes in the social, religious and cultural milieu of individuals and peoples among whom priestly and religious ministry is exercised. Therefore, priests should modernize their knowledge of sacred and human sciences. In other words, they should try to live a life of continuous renewal of their commitment and apostolic life that is best adapted to the present time, because our lives are a continuous path towards maturity - a maturity which cannot be attained except through constant transformation.

In our vocation, God has taken the initiative, and at every moment He calls us anew. We have to give an appropriate response to this call by upgrading our formation. The charism of the religious institute has to be transmitted to its members in order to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and incessantly developed. Every institute

requires continuous retrospection to assess its fidelity to the Lord, docility to the Spirit, careful attention to circumstances, and intelligent respect of the signs of the times.

While initial formation helps a person to attain sufficient autonomy for faithfully living a religious commitment, it is ongoing formation that assists a religious in integrating creativity within fidelity (*Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes*, 1990 #67). Openness to learning, and willingness to adapt, are critical skills needed for religious and priestly ministry in a world that is rapidly changing.

Stages of Ongoing Formation

As we know, initial formation has strict structures and a limited duration. It generally constitutes three stages: a) postulancy/pre-novitiate, b) novitiate and c) first commitment. Some countries in Africa and Asia have an additional 'aspirancy' since most of their candidates join while they are quite young. Perpetual profession brings to an end the period of initial formation. Ongoing formation, meanwhile, is gradual and longer. It is the most generative period in the life of the consecrated person, and it comes to an end only with death. Though there is some structure in ongoing formation, there is a high degree of flexibility, depending on the individual.

The first few years after perpetual profession or ordination are the most sensitive period and are to be dealt very carefully. Many of the problems we face today are due to the lack of a comprehensive program of ongoing formation based on a clear vision and understanding on the role of religious and priests at each stage of their lives. Therefore, the Church must take every possible measure to provide better ongoing formation for its specially chosen ministers. *Vita Consecrata*, the post-synodal apostolic exhortation, mentions five stages of ongoing formation: the critical stage, the risk of routine, the stage of maturity, advanced age and completion of formation at the moment of death. It is interesting to know the characteristics of each of these stages.

Critical Stage

The critical stage constitutes the first few years of full involvement in the apostolate after the perpetual profession or ordination. This

stage is marked by the passage from supervised life to a situation of full responsibility and freedom for one's apostolate. In other words, this stage is the passage from initial formation to the first experience of a more independent life, in which a religious must discover a new way of being faithful to God. The first experience of ministry, of about ten years, is a very critical time. This is the time that one is autonomous, and, in bringing in a change of life style, one requires a fresh inner coherence, which is a very demanding task. Life in this stage should not be over-structured like that during the initial formation. It is very important that those who are in this stage are supported, encouraged and accompanied by fellow religious who will help them to live the full freshness of their love and enthusiasm for Christ, within their Institute or diocese.

Risk of Routine

This is the second stage after the completion of about ten years of perpetual profession or ordination. The risk of life becomes "a habit" with the consequent loss of all enthusiasm. In this stage there is a need to search for what is essential and not to give in to the temptation of being disappointed with the meager results achieved in life and activity. Here, *Vita Consecrata* offers assistance to this middle-aged consecrated person to renew their original decision in the light of the Gospel and the charism of the Institute. They should also not confuse the perfection of their dedication with the degree of good results achieved. In this stage of deepening one's commitment, some Institutes offer their members the so-called tertianship, or the second novitiate. At this time a serious crisis can emerge because of external factors like drastic change of work, misunderstanding, etc. Internal factors like sickness, boredom and crisis of faith also contribute to this dilemma. During this stage fresh input should be given, and new motivations provided for decision-making. It is desirable that this time be spent within a community of the Institute.

Stage of Maturity

This stage brings personal growth. At the same time it can also bring the danger of an individualism accompanied either by fear of not being relevant, or by various forms of inflexibility, self centeredness or diminished enthusiasm. As a remedy, the ongoing

formation should help the person not only to bring back a higher level of spiritual and apostolic life, but also to discover the special characteristics of this stage of life. This stage can be lived like a gift, experiencing spiritual fatherhood and motherhood.

Advanced Age

This stage can be a time of severe crisis. It can occur at any age as a result of external factors like change of place of work, lack of appreciation from others, feelings of alienation, etc. Some personal factors can also contribute to this crisis, for example, physical or psychical illness, spiritual aridity, strong temptations, crisis of faith, and so on. This period poses new problems of suffering. But at the same time advanced age offers the elders the chance to be transformed by the paschal experience, and to be configured to the crucified Christ who fulfilled the Father's will in all things, abandoning Himself into the Father's hands. In such circumstances a religious or priest should be helped so that he or she successfully overcomes the crisis, in faith.

Completion of Formation

This last stage has to be awaited and prepared for as the supreme act of love and self-offering. The characteristics of this stage are very similar to that of the advanced age stage. Due to external factors a person can at any stage, encounter this critical situation. The person undergoing such a trial will then accept purification and hardship as essential in following the crucified Christ (*Vita Consecrata* #70). Superiors should appoint someone responsible to take care of such persons. Help of a spiritual guide or counselor is very important just as in the initial formation time.

Society in a Changing Milieu

Today with the help of social sciences we are able to analyze the structures of society both on national and international levels. All the major structures such as economic, social, political, and religious are changing fast. We cannot think of ongoing formation without examining the life situation of the world, the country and the Church. We religious and priests may find ourselves rather lost and disoriented in the midst of various crisis situations, and also the drastic changes in society. In the rural areas life may not have changed much, but in the cities and towns modernity has

affected all aspects of life. There have been new developments in the formation of governments (coalition), economy (variation in sensex), education (IIT, IIM. etc.), the medical field, and significant progress in different areas of life. These developments naturally influence and affect the Church in general and the religious and priests in particular, since their service is essential in the developing society.

A serious crisis in the value system is emerging. This is marked by the way people seek ruthlessly for wealth, fame, money and power. Corruption is a common phenomenon existing on local, national and international levels. In our country, support of organized crime by political parties and even government, including judiciary, is growing at an alarming rate. Not only corruption and bribery, but also riots and other forms of organized manslaughter, are on increase. There are also group murders in different parts of the country, committed on the basis of caste, creed, language, etc. Economic crimes are innumerable. Dowry killings and atrocities committed against women are on the increase (Puthumana, 1985:127).

India is a subcontinent with a large population. Sixteen percent of the world population inhabit this country. The population in our country is more than 1,2 billion, according to the latest census. India is the second most populous country in the world after China. Though India is a democratic country, the real power brokers are a handful of rich and influential people. Yet, an informal feudal system still exists in this country. Dalit Christians and tribal people are discriminated against, persecuted and exploited in various ways. Many political leaders are criminals. They are often corrupt, inept and inefficient, favouring their own families and parties rather than serving the common good or the development of the country.

Many other social problems like the steady rise of fundamentalism, the frequent occurrences of communal violence and atrocities, and also the persecution of minority religions are experienced daily. Underworld terrorism is on the increase. Lack of planning in urbanization is turning some cities into large slums where human dignity is not respected. Bonded labour and child labour are still blatant realities in our country. New forms of

culture are emerging from an over-exposure to the mass media, books, magazines, foreign music T.V. channels, films and other forms of entertainment. Images of violence, hedonism, unbridled individualism and materialism are striking at the very root of Indian culture. The religiosity of individuals, families and the whole of society is at the risk of extinction. The modern media threatens the traditional values of our society. This poses a serious challenge to the lives of both religious.

Globalization, modernization and westernization are the new phenomena of the nation. Of course, these have some positive effects on the people. India, being a third world country, has many underprivileged people who are not the beneficiaries of these positive effects. The people still suffer a lot, especially in the weaker sections of society. A great number of the physically challenged, blind, deaf and those affected by communicable diseases are left out of the process of progress (Vallipalam, 2007).

It is in this context that the ongoing formation of priests and religious must take place. The program of ongoing formation must be able to deal with these issues, and its apostolic character must be determined by the social reality of the society in which we live. On the whole, one of the chief purposes of the consecrated life is the growth of humanity. Its particular contribution to the world depends on the special charism of the Institute and on the needs of the times.

New Issues and Challenges

Challenge is a very familiar term and is part and parcel of our life. Life from its very inception involves facing numerous challenges, which are painstaking, self fulfilling and growth oriented. Every individual on their way towards their goal has to face many challenges, both internally and externally. In order to face these challenges courageously one needs an integrated and well balanced personality. Consecrated life is a constant search to know who one is and what one is called to be. Individual vocation has to be lived through constant discernment. Personal limitations have a great part to play in the move towards self-actualization. To discover and discern the potentials within oneself is a challenge which is to be faced in order to mature and to reach fulfillment in life.

Certain issues and challenges that the priests and the religious face today can be classified into two major groups:

- 1) those arising from the society, both at national and international levels, and
- 2) those arising from divisions within the church leading to anti-catholic movements and discord among members.

National level: There have been countless occurrences of attacks, threats, looting, and murders of Christian missionaries in the past few years. Hindu revivalism, religious fanaticism and communalism have been on the increase in social and political life. The Sangh Parivar and its organizations are using religion for their personal and political gains. They attempt to divide the people of India so that communal tension and conflict on the basis of religion could be utilized to capture political power. Their activism has a disastrous impact on the ministry of the priests and religious of India working in mission territories. The rise of militant Hinduism is posing a great threat to our nation's unity and integrity. The movements of Hindu and Islamic fundamentalist groups are a matter of concern for the ministers in the Church, in terms of religious harmony and peace in the country. This situation is alarming against the background of the minority character of Christianity.

The evils of poverty, illiteracy, exploitation of women and children, sexism, etc. with their wide ramifications is posing immense challenges to the life and ministry of priests and religious in India. They have repercussions on the life and activities of the Church personnel. Communalistic and inter-religious tensions often appear in the everyday life of the people. Violence, lack of respect for life, and exploitation of the weaker sections are becoming rampant in our society.

The resurgence of various grass-root movements like the movement of Dalit people, Women's and Gender movements, Human Right's movement, Laity movement, Environmental and Antinuclear movements, movements against caste discrimination, etc. express forcefully the need for shift in our position. It is high time to ask ourselves, where we as priests and religious are in

these issues and challenges? All these movements seem to be proclaiming the slogan: “shift of focus” (Monteiro, 2001).

International level: Globalization has become a hallmark of our present world. Certain aspects of globalization posit a challenge to the nature and mission of the church. Globalization promotes the twin cultures of dependency and consumerism, along with the twin cultures of individualism and achievement. In the 1970s and 1980s we were increasingly occupied with the notions of culture and inculturation. Missionaries of today are frequently exposed to multi-cultural situations. A number of religious Institutes have taken the option of living and working in intercultural and interracial communities.

New anti-catholic movements: India is characterized by a great variety of sects and religious movements of diverse origins. One of the key challenges has been the division of the Church into many denominations, making the proclamation of the Gospel considerably difficult and even ineffective. “Spirit in Jesus”, “Emperor Emmanuel Trust”, “Covenant People”, “Mother”, “Heavenly Banquet,” “New Age Movement,” “Atmabhisheka Saba,” “Witness to Yahweh,” etc. are some of the new sects which adversely affect the ministry of priests and religious in the Catholic church. Many of the groups mentioned above are anti-catholic. Some of them have no consistent and clear doctrine either. One may wonder whether the Catholic Church is losing its relevance, identity, and its human face in the midst of these movements?

In 2009, an opinion survey was conducted by St. Joseph Pontifical Seminary, Alwaye. This study involved 10,000 Catholic families and the result is startling.

62% of Catholics informed that these new sects had tried to influence them to join their group.

More than 1/2 of them agreed that they could not give proper answers to the questions asked by the members of these sects.

1/3 of them said that they were either subscribers, or regular readers of publications of these groups.

80% indicated their helplessness to react to these new sects and did not get any instruction from the church to confront them effectively.

The survey revealed that a number of traditional Catholic families have left the mother church and joined the new sects. The major reasons for leaving the church as reported in the survey are:

- economic gain (30%),
- ignorance (50%),
- church authorities' behavior (10%)
- selfishness (10%) (Mundadan, 2009).

Divisions in the Church: In 1995, on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India, a scientific evaluation of the Church in India was conducted. Some of its findings are interesting:

“Today the unity of the Church is in great danger due to conflict caused by the Rites issue”. (90%)

“The relationship among the three Episcopal Bodies is governed by a fear of survival, resulting in unhealthy conflict, and competition” (87%) (*CBCI Evaluation Report, 1995*).

The statement of the CRI in 1992 points to the seriousness of the problem: “Rivalries between Rites are a scandal to the people of God and cause us pain no matter what the historical origins that gave rise to them are.”

The national survey of 1992 indicated that around 40% of the vocation recruiters felt restrictions on recruitment in the name of Rites, dioceses, etc (Vallipalam, 1992). In this context, the mind of the Universal Church is pertinent:

The fostering of vocations should be done in generous spirit, not only for each one's diocese and nation, but also for other dioceses and other nations; the needs of the universal church should be remembered and the action of God who calls individuals to different tasks to the secular priesthood or missionary work or to the religious institutions (*The Basic Plan for Priestly Formation, 1970, #10*).

How can consecrated people best respond to these issues and challenges of the new phenomena and adapt themselves accordingly? Is it possible to live the consecrated life in this context of changing realities? Does religious life really require readjustment and reformation in accordance with the trends of the time? Does one need a total overhauling in order to be able to confront the new issues and challenges of the modern and the postmodern era? Do we stand up for our faith, recognize the new situation and give a creative answer?

The Indian Church is aware of the situation of the country and her role: "Hence the Church in India needs to become a defender of the voiceless poor and has the duty to challenge the sinful structures and practices and heal them and transform the society into a new society where justice, peace, freedom and equality will prevail" (*Catholic Bishops' Conference, 2011*).

The General public of India recognizes and admires the consecrated personnel of the church as efficient, well organized and skilled social workers rather than spiritual or prayerful persons. The other religious persons like the Buddhist Monks, the Jain Nuns, the Hindu Sanyasins, et al. are known as holy men and women of God. The identity of the Catholic consecrated people should not be tied to their ministry and their institutions, but to their life. I am not trivializing the importance of ministry and the wonderful services rendered by our priests and the religious in the social uplifting of the downtrodden. However we must be aware that this is only one aspect of evangelization.

Many of our Institutes and dioceses are undergoing a number of important and extremely demanding transitions. The challenges differ from place to place, and in each area the church has to play its role. Our vocation and mission demand from us the ability to demonstrate renewed adaptability and openness. Without an ongoing formation this cannot be achieved. Religious Institutes and seminaries in India have made some significant progress in renewing their initial formation programs at various levels, but regarding ongoing formation they have not done much.

Today the Indian Catholic Church is spread over 29 175 parishes and mission stations in 161 ecclesiastical territories (*Statistical Yearbook of the Church 2007, 39*). The boom of vocations in this

country has attracted the attention of the Catholic world. According to the latest available statistics there are 26 286 priests, of whom 13 290 are diocesan (*Yearbook 2007*, 97) and 12 996 religious (*Religious India*, 2010, 1). The total number of religious brothers is 3 812 and the religious sisters is 107 389 (*Religious India*, 2010, 1). There are another 520 members in various Secular institutes of both men and women (*Statistical Yearbook of the Church 2007*, 97). From the data available, or due to its absence, one is forced to assume that most of these consecrated people are not getting any systematic and proper ongoing formation.

Ongoing formation raises some serious questions regarding the quality and effectiveness of the ways religious institutes have responded, or failed to respond, to the challenges of renewal. Thanks to the impact of Vatican II religious structures have been modified, regulations relaxed, and councils and chapters have spent long hours deliberating on a variety of issues and challenges. However, we find tremendous resistance to implementing those changes. Lack of interest and enthusiasm for life and new ministry, inability to negotiate and compromise, withdrawal from the demands of new forms of ministry, the emphasis on independence rather than collaboration, and increased interdependence, were often the aftermath of such efforts (Coughlin, 1988).

Many consecrated persons do not even consider spiritual direction as an integral part of their ongoing formation. Even when direction is sought, the qualified persons are not always available. Coughlin writes, "Quality spiritual direction, where individuals are able to confront their experience and raise ongoing questions of faith, commitment and the vision of Church in the modern world ... must be an integral component of the ongoing formation of the community at some of its most significant levels. The quality and the nature of the spiritual direction surely affect the quality and nature of an individual's faith life" (Coughlin, 1988).

The evaluation of the life and activities of many Institutes in India at different situations, brought to light the following facts:

- There is tension between the older and younger generations
- Conflicts with superiors are quite common.

- Co-operation and co-responsibility are lacking.
- Lack of team spirit is quite evident.
- There is a lack of vision and planning.
- There is lack of proper communication among the members.
- Personal problems like frustration, anger, isolation, etc. are common occurrences.
- Integration of work and prayer is lacking.

Against the background of this information, something certainly has to be done within the purview of ongoing formation.

Conclusions

All professional people need to undergo professional updating. There is common agreement among the religious sociologists that priesthood is a profession. In a broader sense religious are also professionals. A profession is an occupation with some power and status. A high degree of technical skill, and specialization are need to make one a professional (Vallipalam, 2004).

Ongoing formation is a personal task of every religious and priest. It is up to every individual to persevere with professional integrity and competence in their quest for holiness and apostolic effectiveness. It is only through a process of personal and community renewal, and the updating of ourselves and our structures that we can live our vocation successfully according to the Gospel values and the charism of the founder. This renewal is intended to foster among the consecrated people a continuous process of personal maturation of faith, hope and charity; and growth in the likeness of Christ which enables them to be heralds of the Gospel and witnesses to the kingdom preached by Christ. "There can never be any question of the right kind of renewal being accomplished once and for all; it must be kept in train continually by the fervent support of the brethren and the constant care of Chapters and superiors" (*Ecclesiae Sanctae* II, 19). Consecrated people have to interact with the people and cannot isolate themselves in some ivory tower. The Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Paul VI is worth being quoted here:

Dear Religious, you must give your full attention to the needs of the people, their problems and their searching. You must give witness in their midst, through prayer and action, to the Good News of love, justice and peace. The aspirations of people to a more fraternal life among individuals and nations require above all change in ways of living, in mentality and in hearts. Such a mission which is common to all the people of God belong to you in a special way. This emphasizes the fact that authentic renewal of the religious life is of capital importance for the very renewal of the church and the world (*Apostolic Exhortation*, 1971, # 71).

The different aspects of continued formation like spirituality, participation in the life of the Church, doctrinal and professional updating, and fidelity to the charism, are inseparable and mutually influential. Many of the documents of the Church say that spirituality should have the primacy. This includes a deepening of faith and re-dedication of our religious profession. Participation in the life of the Church, especially at the local level, is very important. Doctrinal and professional updating will augment our biblical and theological understanding in connection with the local cultures.

The individual religious and priests are primarily responsible for their own ongoing formation. This must come from their personal conviction. The context of ordinary life will provide the means: meaningful liturgical celebration, personal prayer, sacrament of reconciliation, timely contact with the spiritual guide, systematic reading and study of subjects relevant to their apostolate. It is the responsibility of the superiors to create opportunities to train both the individual and the community. Retreats, recollections, refresher courses, seminars, conferences, special meetings, batch or group gatherings, etc. must be part of what is offered to the members for their spiritual, ministerial and professional development.

The members should feel the need for such helps, and come forward to take part in whatever is offered, precisely with the intention of renewing themselves. The canonical visits and the fraternal visits by the major superiors must be seen as occasions

for renewal. Every year, according to the need of the members, ongoing formation programs should be arranged; experts should be invited to animate the programs. An atmosphere of learning and reflection is to be provided in the communities. A good library, with sufficient number of reviews and periodicals, is required. Discussions on relevant topics and current issues are concrete means of attaining the goal of ongoing formation.

Specialized studies should include ecclesiastical or secular content to enhance the ministry of the members. The selection of the persons for higher studies should be based on the need of the province and aptitude of the individuals.

The strength of religious life lies in the gift received – not in something we can do on our own. We need to wake up and reexamine our identity and spirituality. In a situation where we become increasingly international and multi-cultural, we must be very clear about who we are. Sadly, the greater number of priests and religious do not avail themselves of such ongoing formation programs.

According to Paul Molinari, there are two levels of responsibility for religious: Firstly, one rests with their community as a whole. If the community does not live in an attitude of renewal as demanded by the church we can hardly expect that the individual members will do so. Secondly, the level of responsibilities concerns superiors, who face the task of leading the community and therefore, of animating, guiding and providing the appropriate means and opportunities needed for the members of the community to have what is really required for growth at their individual stages of development. (Molinari, 1981).

Ongoing formation needs to be updated and contextualized to meet the challenges of the changing times. In general the Catholic priests and religious are appreciated by the public for their services like social work, education, healthcare work, etc. However, we should not be satisfied with these identities. We must be viewed as spiritual men and women of God before any other attribute ascribed to us.

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