

Formation in Consecrated Life: Problems, Challenges and Prospects

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Formation in consecrated life must draw upon people in their innermost depths and totality. It is starting with these assumptions that we can understand the words of Pope Francis to the Union of Superior Generals in November 2013 when he observed that formation is ‘craft work and not police work’. As a consequence, the greatest challenge is to train men and women who are complete, mature, and capable of receiving their vocations as a gift and a service to the Church and to the people of God, people who become signs of hope in the world.

With a positive approach, an attempt will be made to present a brief survey of formation for consecrated life, with its problems and its challenges, which we can all list and whose impact on the lives of religious, and as a consequence in the life of the Church and our Order, we know about. In the view of Pope Francis, this picture also derives from the culture of our epoch because ‘We live immersed in the so-called *culture of fragmentation*, of the *provisional*’,² a culture that acts directly on our way of understanding the Church, consecrated life and the world, as well as on the way the world observes and understands us.

The document ‘The Gift of Fidelity, the Joy of Perseverance’ drawn up by the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (DICLSAL), at the beginning of its first part reflects upon abandonment of consecrated life and invites us to avoid a short-sighted and distracted view of the situation. In this sense we must identify what to do and which pathways to take in order to discern, prevent and accompany, with processes of support and complete care, those religious who go through periods of difficulty.³

In another of its documents, ‘New Wine in New Wineskins’, the DICLSAL offers an analysis that leads us to think: ‘this frustration can sometimes make abandonment seem like the only way to avoid giving in’.⁴ Leaving is seen as the only alternative in order to continue to be faithful, above all because of the difficulties that are encountered (with a healthy conscience) when living infidelity to the fundamental option and at the same time going on sleeping soundly.

¹ A Camillian of the Camillian Province of Brazil.

² Pope Francis in his address to the members of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 28 January 2017.

³ CONGREGAZIONE PER GLI ISTITUTI DI VITA CONSACRATA E LE SOCIETÀ DI VITA APOSTOLICA, *Il dono della fedeltà, la gioia della perseveranza: orientamenti* (CNBB, Brasília, 2020), n. 18.

⁴ CONGREGAZIONE PER GLI ISTITUTI DI VITA CONSACRATA E LE SOCIETÀ DI VITA APOSTOLICA. *Per vino nuovo otri nuovi. Vita Consacrata dal Concilio Vaticano II e le sfide ancora aperte. Orientamenti* (São Paulo, Paulinas, 2017), n. 12b.

The call of God does not absolve us from frailty and vulnerability. Aware of this, we seek at a specific moment of our lives to respond to troubles about our vocation by giving of our best, like, for example, when we engage in acts of giving up due to choices that give meaning to our lives and their form in order to overcome our frailties – however in doing this we respond to God as vulnerable people.

In the view of the Salesian Fr. Ronaldo Zacharias,⁵ every consecrated man should move from a perfectionistic narcissism to abandonment to God as the protagonist of our history who supports his vocational response, in the certainty that we are called by God, that we take part because of the grace of this love, that God is the source of our identity and that He gives us the capacity to love as He loves. In this sense, as people who have a vocation, we are continually provoked and we need to allow ourselves to ask questions in a systematic way about our way of thinking, wanting and acting.

Zacharias⁶ is of the view that it is important to know where to walk and for this reason we should look at the four elements that make up consecrated and/or priestly life in an overall way. Such elements need in-depth examination in our programmes of formation, both in initial formation and in ongoing formation:

1. *The primacy of God* – this involves handing over to him our hearts, our lives and our strengths, conforming our feelings to Jesus. This will humanise our personal lives, our relationships with other people and our apostolic mission, making us listen to the cry of the sick.
2. *Service to those most in need* – this involves operating in the Church and in society as shepherds, giving our lives as consecrated men a concrete tone, walking with those who suffer, helping them to receive the love of God in their lives.
3. *The fraternity of communion* – this involves the move from a life in common to communion in life, so that nobody lives where there is no love and one does not feel loved. When our relationships are formal and meaningless, we tend to take refuge in a private world and to look for a compensation for what we feel is lacking.⁷
4. *The joyous experience of the evangelical counsels* – this involves expressing the fact that the witness of following Christ is manifested in the joy of those who have given themselves without reservations and thus can freely embrace obedience, poverty and chastity and, in our case, care for the sick even when there is a danger to our lives.

⁵ ZACHARIAS, Ronaldo, 'Fragilidade vocacional e institucional: da crise de credibilidade à fidelidade na fragilidade', in TRANSFERETTI, J. A., MILLEN, M. I., and ZACHARIAS, R., *Formação desafios morais 2* (Paulus, São Paulo, 2020), pp. 75-76.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77-80.

⁷ Cf. *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis* (RFIS), n. 90c: 'the community forms the seedbed of a priestly vocation, since the seminarian emerges from it, in order to be sent back to serve it after ordination'.

Thus in the process of initial and ongoing formation these points must necessarily be considered, otherwise they become only an ideal and not a reality. We are, and we will continue to be, pots of clay.⁸ However, at times there is a lack of identification with the treasure (the charism) which causes frustration. In other cases, the frailty of the pot prevents a manifestation of the wealth of the treasure. Thus, throughout formation it is essential to understand the difference between *having a vocation and living with a vocation* because those who live as men with a vocation constantly feel called by God, experiencing Him in history and becoming contemplative in action.⁹

Arguing in the same way, the second part of the document *The Gift of Fidelity, the Joy of Perseverance* observes that ‘if fidelity is an essential virtue of every inter-personal relationship, perseverance is the specific virtue of time: both of them question the relationship with the other’.¹⁰ This tandem is present in the texts of the Magisterium because ‘perseverance is an essential attribute of fidelity’.¹¹ Thus in a community that is truly fraternal every member feels co-responsible for the fidelity of another member and is attentive to the moments of fatigue, isolation and lack of motivation of his brother, offering support to those who are afflicted. Therefore, it is the community that supports the perseverance of its members, being a support to faith and fidelity.¹²

Given these considerations, and without claiming to have exhausted the subject, we will now move on to a second part of this paper in which the greatest challenges and problems of consecrated life will be considered. On this subject, as well, I will offer some points that I believe are important for the analysis: these points will remain open and should be addressed after the end of this General Chapter as the Order of the Ministers of the Sick in our Provinces, Vice-Provinces, Delegations and communities.

Challenges, Problems and Prospects

A first and great challenge has been, and will be, *common life*,¹³ because without a good fraternal life in our religious communities every project of formation is born lame or a failure, because one cannot speak only about communities that provide formation. One should speak about Provinces

⁸ Cf. Jer 18:4; 2Cor 4:7.

⁹ ZACHARIAS, Ronaldo, ‘Fragilidade vocacional e institucional: da crise de credibilidade à fidelidade na fragilidade’ (2020), p. 83.

¹⁰ CONGREGAZIONE PER GLI ISTITUTI DI VITA CONSACRATA E LE SOCIETÀ DI VITA APOSTOLICA. *Per vino nuovo otri nuovi. Vita Consacrata dal Concilio Vaticano II e le sfide ancora aperte. Orientamenti* (São Paulo, Paulinas, 2017), n. 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, n. 29.

¹² Cf. THE CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, *Fraternal Life in Community: Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor*, Rome, 2 February 1994.

¹³ The Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 15.

and an Order that provide formation, seeing common life as a *schola amoris*, because in communities that provide formation it is useless to have moments of prayer, retreats and encounters if this is not experienced as a value and a lifestyle by all the religious.

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Christus vivit*, Pope Francis invites us to create a home, forming ‘bonds by simple, everyday acts that all of us can perform. A home, as we all know, demands that everyone work together. No one can be indifferent or stand apart, since each is a stone needed to build the home’.¹⁴ In this context, we consecrated men, above else, are called to form human communities as places of welcome – real homes.¹⁵

A second challenge of the process of formation is *transparency* and this is needed throughout the period of formation and beyond. Subjects such as the importance of empathy, education in truth, self-knowledge, responsible autonomy, respect for rules and the honour of others, individual and communitarian transparency, and confidentiality and privacy must be lived in a way so that those receiving formation feel the security and the authenticity of the process of formation.¹⁶

In this sense, our communities must provide ‘an environment that is healthy, trustworthy and organised which provides help, security and company, a place that allows those receiving formation to live their wounds, mention them and begin to heal them’.¹⁷ Thus, the person providing formation cannot be indifferent to the dramas of those receiving formation. Rather, he should offer a pedagogic pathway by which these dramas can be overcome, so that those receiving formation can take upon themselves their own humanity with its limits and capacities, allowing themselves to be led to truth with fidelity.¹⁸

This pathway involves openness, a capacity for dialogue and welcome.¹⁹ If the person receiving formation does not realise that his teacher or the process of formation are willing to welcome him, he will not be transparent and he will begin to use masks that could be revealed too late. Thus, we should move away from a mass formation and begin to consider individuality, because every student is unique.

¹⁴ FRANCISCO. *Exortação apostólica pós-sinodal: Christus vivit: para os jovens e para todo o povo de Deus* (Paulus, São Paulo, 2019), p. 86, n. 217.

¹⁵ The reader is referred to the article by Cardinal Ratzinger of February 1990 – ‘A Seminary is not a Hotel but a Home’.

¹⁶ COELHO, Mário Marcelo, ‘Confidencialidade e transparência: a responsabilidade e o compromisso com a verdade’, in TRANSFERETTI, J. A., MILLEN, M. I., and ZACHARIAS, R., *Formação desafios morais 2* (Paulus, São Paulo, 2018), p. 50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁸ TRANSFERETTI, José Antonio, ‘O papel dos formadores na formação: para além da mera formalidade e aparência’, in TRANSFERETTI, J. A., MILLEN, M. I., and ZACHARIAS, R., *Formação desafios morais 2* (Paulus, São Paulo, 2020), pp. 147-158.

¹⁹ This journey of dialogue can be illuminated by the passage on the disciples on the way to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35). Jesus listens, accompanies, speaks, warns, presents a journey, guides and, at the end, allows the disciples to make a choice in a free and aware way.

For this reason, the seminary must provide spaces for the expression of the subjectivity of every individual.

A third challenge is to overcome the idea that the responsibility for formation falls only on a teacher or a team, because everybody must take part in this ‘duty by means of our personal witness, prayer and evangelisation’.²⁰ Formation in an Order is the responsibility of everyone because there cannot be communities that provide formation, as has already been pointed out, without there being a wider structure that bears witness based upon the values of consecrated life. Perhaps this is the reason why there are difficulties in finding religious who will take on this mission. The challenge, therefore, is to think about the process in a broader way, considering the co-responsibility of everyone.

In this sense, we must bear in mind the anthropological model that we are trying to implement in our formation programmes. The answer will perhaps have consequences for the way in which we live as consecrated people and respond to the signs of the times. It is a fact that the characteristics of a person providing information ‘are not acquired spontaneously or unexpectedly but through careful formation’,²¹ formation that involves human-affective, spiritual, pastoral and charismatic maturity.

For this reason, it is a matter of urgency to have religious who have received formation and are receiving formation to exercise this function of service to the Church and to the Order, ‘without fear of leaving the great apostolic needs and urgent situations’ in which Provinces and Delegations may find themselves’,²² because this is one of the most sensitive ministries.

A fourth challenge is the *urgent need to form hearts* because the need for a new culture of formation for consecrated life must bear in mind the human dimension of the consecrated person as a central theme of both initial and ongoing formation. Thus, according to *Ratio Fundamentalis* human formation is an essential dimension, for evangelisation and mission as well.²³ It is therefore essential to think about the process of formation in a way that unites the different dimensions.

To this end it is necessary to draw near to all the subjects that bear upon man – an understanding of God, feelings, fears, ghosts, the realities that surround us, affectivity and sexuality, seeking to form the heart by a dynamic of communion whose model is Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd.²⁴ And we, as his missionary disciples, have the mission to live the actions of our Teacher and to translate them in the various environments that we live in.

Pope Francis is of the view that formation cannot be extraneous to human suffering and thus the formation of hearts must provide to candidates knowledge and experience of their own

²⁰ *Constitution*, n. 71.

²¹ *Regolamento di Formazione dell’ Ordine dei Ministri degli Infermi*, n. 41.

²² *Ibid.*, n. 37.

²³ Cf. *RFIS*, n. 97.

²⁴ Cf. Jn 10:1-18.

circumstances, needs, wishes, weaknesses and wounds, where they are like clay enveloped in the love of the Lord.²⁵ An urgent need is thus to think of a formation of the heart that is empathetic and looks in a complete way at both the candidate and the consecrated.

A fifth challenge is the *urgent need for pathways of formation in chastity*.²⁶ The Church has suffered a great deal in recent years from scandals relating to the abuse of minors and vulnerable people – this is a great wound in Church life. Therefore, from the process of formation onwards there is an urgent need to create a culture of protection and a pathway of formation that addresses the questions and issues connected with the affective-sexual dimension, that constitutes it and accompanies it from birth until death. In this way a person who is integrated in his affections and sexuality will certainly be freer in relating to other people, to institutions and also to things.

Here we have a challenge that is emerging in our programmes of formation and for this reason it is necessary to rely upon the help of people who are trained in the fields of psychology and sexuality. First of all, this is required in order to create pathways of formation but also in order to help us with how they are structured. In a community for formation it is the person who provides formation who determines the tone of the accompanying – hence the importance of providers of formation who are emotionally and sexually integrated and who foster meetings with professionals, readings and studies of the community on this subject.

A sixth challenge relates to *the way in which we address power and the use of material goods*. In this area Jesus invites us to reflect on not accumulating wealth on earth where moths and rust destroy²⁷ because when God ceases to be the centre of our consecration and our ministry other realities begin to take His place. Here emerge the problems of clericalism, careerism, exhibitionism and self-referencing that kill vocations and where the other is seen as an enemy rather than a brother on the same pathway as oneself.

Thus, in the context of formation, there is an urgent need to develop in young men their subjectivity in the deepest parts of their consciences because, depending on the level of narcissism, exhibition and self-referencing that is present, they could have great difficulties in loving in a selfless

²⁵ CARVALHO, Humberto Robson de, 'A urgência de formar o coração', in VEIGA, A. C. Da and ZACHARIAS, R., *Igreja e escândalos sexuais: por uma nova cultura formativa* (Paulus, São Paulo, 2019), p. 150

²⁶ FARIA, Michel Dutra de, 'A urgência de itinerários de formação para a castidade', in VEIGA, A. C. Da and ZACHARIAS, R., *Igreja e escândalos sexuais: por uma nova cultura formativa* (Paulus, São Paulo, 2019), pp. 275-292.

²⁷ Cf. Mt 6:19.

way and in respecting the freedom of other people without the constant temptation to seduce everyone around them.²⁸ There is an urgent need to understand a vocation as a service²⁹ to God and to the Church.

In addition to these challenges, we have innumerable others that are present both in the accompanying of vocations and in houses of formation or religious communities and these have to be addressed at the level of the Order. This is important because it will determine the tone of future consecrated people and, as a consequence, of Camillian mission and ministry in the Church and in the world.

In the accompanying of vocations we are faced with the challenge of adult vocations; clericalism; people with qualifications from one, two or even more seminaries: people who in human, psychological and spiritual terms are not structured; new models of the family; and young people linked to traditionalist or conservative movements or to movements of charismatic renewal.

In houses for formation and in religious houses there is the challenge of exposure to digital social networks; the presence of providers of formation by ‘cyber’ means; vocational and institutional frailty; practical atheism...In addition to these, there is also exhaustion and the loss of meaning (burn out) which generate collective illness and great *psychological suffering*, provoking a state of deep anxiety, powerlessness and abandonment and taking from people their affective strength and generating symptoms of depression that have an impact on their daily lives. In Brazil, in the year 2021 more than ten (religious and diocesan) priests committed suicide. Faced with this alarming fact, as a Church and as consecrated life, we cannot remain motionless and silent.

Conclusion

The whole of the reality described in this paper must be considered when one thinks of our projects for formation because they do not function separately or independently from the structure of the Church, of the Order and of the Provinces. Therefore, this subject is one that is important in the hall of a General Chapter and we must dwell on our form of presence as a charism in the Church and in the world.

The document *New Wine in New Wineskins* observes that young people are not without aspirations to genuine values, to which they are prepared to commit themselves in a serious way. One can recognise in them an opening to transcendence, a capacity to fall in love with the causes of

²⁸ ALMEIDA, André Luiz Boccato de., ‘Exibicionismo narcisista e autorreferencialidade: o risco pecaminoso da idolatria de si mesmo’, in TRANSFERETTI, J. A., MILLEN, M. I. de C., and ZACHARIAS, R., *Formação desafios morais 2* (Paulus, São Paulo, 2020), pp. 263-284.

²⁹ Cf. Jn 13:1-20 – the gesture of the washing of feet as the greatest expression of giving and of service: ‘I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you’ (Jn 13:1-15).

solidarity, of justice and of freedom. However, this document emphasises that ‘Through its standardised styles – that are too often out of cultural context – and its perhaps excessive apprehension over managing works, the religious life runs the risk of not intercepting the deepest desire of young people’.³⁰

In the light of this observation by the DICLSAL, I would like to add to the analysis of this paper a parable of Theodore Wedel on a lifeguards’ station which could provide a very good warning about the danger of irrelevance:

‘On a dangerous coast where shipwrecks often took place, there was once a small lifeguards’ station. The building was primitive and there was only one boat but the members of the lifeguards’ station were very active and constantly watched over the sea. When a ship sank, they went out altruistically day after day to save those on board. Because so many lives were saved by that station it became famous.

As a consequence of this, many people wanted to be connected to that station in order to give their time, talents and money to support its important work. New boats were bought, new crews were recruited, and a session of formal training was offered. As the members of the lifeguards’ station gradually grew in number, some of the members became discontented with the fact that the building was so primitive and the equipment was so obsolete. They wanted a better place to accommodate the survivors who had been rescued from the sea. Thus, they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the building which had been expanded and recently decorated.

The lifeguards’ station thus became a popular place to meet of its members. They met each other regularly and when they did this it was evident how much they loved each other. They greeted each other, they embraced each other and talked about the events that had taken place in their lives. But now a lesser number of members were interested in going out to sea on missions to save lives and so they employed lifeboat crews to take their place.

In this period a large ship was wrecked on the coast and the crews that had been employed brought to the lifeguards’ station batches of people who were cold, wet, dirty and half drowned. Some of them had black skins and some had yellow skins. Some could speak English well but some could speak it hardly at all. Some were passengers with first-class cabins on the ship and some were from the deck.

³⁰ CONGREGAZIONE PER GLI ISTITUTI DI VITA CONSACRATA E LE SOCIETÀ DI VITA APOSTOLICA. *Per vino nuovo otri nuovi. Vita Consacrata dal Concilio Vaticano II e le sfide ancora aperte. Orientamenti* (Paulinas, São Paulo, 2017), n. 12c.

The beautiful meeting place became a place of chaos. The soft carpets became dirty. Some of the fine furniture was scratched. Thus, the committee for the property immediately had a shower built outside the house where the victims of the shipwreck could be cleaned before they entered the house.

At the next meeting the members were split into two camps. Most of the members wanted to stop the lifesaving activity of the club because such activity was unpleasant and obstructed the normal activity of friendship of the members. Other members emphasised the fact that saving lives was their principal purpose and stressed that were called a lifeguards' station. But in the end these last were defeated and they were told that if they wanted to save the lives of all those kinds of people, they could begin their own lifeguards' station on the coast. And do you know something? That is exactly what they did.

With the passing of the years, the new station underwent the same changes that had occurred with the old station. It evolved into a regular meeting place for friends, for meetings of the committee and for special training sessions on their mission but few of the members attended to the people who were about to drown. The people who were drowning were no longer put in that new lifeguards' station. So another lifeguards' station was built on the coast. This story continued to be repeated. And if you visit that coast today you will find a series of adapted meeting places with large car parks and luxurious carpets. Shipwrecks take place frequently in those waters but most of the people drown'.³¹

³¹ N.T.- Thomas Wedel, *Ecumenical Review*, October 1953, paraphrased in *Heaven Bound Living* (Knofel Stanton, Standard, 1989), pp. 99-101.