

**MERCY IN THE DYNAMICS OF RELIGIOUS AND PRIESTLY FORMATION<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This article conveys the understanding of mercy and formation and how the two can relate in discerning the suitability of a candidate for admission into religious profession or/and priestly ordination. We emphasized that in the collaborative venture that formation is, the Church or religious community, the formator and the candidate must all cooperate with the grace of God in ensuring that no dimension of formation as outlined in Pastores Dabo Vobis is neglected. At the heart of the account of the dynamics of formation offered is the understanding of formation as conversion by way of internalization of Gospel values. Using Kelman's study of attitudinal change and the Christian idea of conversion, we explained how formation is meant to bring about a conformity to Christ in the candidate. With some citation from Dives in Misericordia and Misericordia Vultus, we then used Akinwale's explanation of the inseparability of justice and mercy to explain that formation is, at the same time, a work of mercy and a work of justice. It is about the good of the candidate and the good of the people of God whom the candidate will serve.*

*This article was originally presented as Paper during the Year of Mercy to the Formators Association of Nigeria; it is of relevance especially to those involved with formation.*

**INTRODUCTION**

I wish to begin this intervention by expressing my gratitude to the Formators Association of Nigeria, organizers of this workshop, for inviting me to share my reflections on this topic. While writing this paper, I became conscious of the fact that your invitation gave me an opportunity to reflect, once again, on the different stages of formation in which I have been involved for the past twenty years. It has become increasingly clear to me, over the past years, that religious or priestly formation is the Lord's work. He shows you what you need to see if you are attentive and observant, and if you are willing to cooperate with the grace necessary for the work of formation. In my present apostolate, I have come to learn and deepen my conviction that formation is more than a combination of programmes.

Upon further examination of the theme you have invited me to speak on, "Moulding the Hearts of Mercy in Formators/Formandi and Managing Tensions of Formation in the Light of the Year of Mercy", I have come to the conclusion that

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there are in fact four topics in the theme as formulated, namely: moulding hearts of mercy; managing tensions; formation, and Year of Mercy. Whereas it is impossible to do justice to these topics in just one short intervention – each of them would in fact demand a paper of its own – it is permissible, necessary and prudent to reformulate the topic. As a result, I suggest that we reflect on the theme, ‘Mercy in the Dynamics of Religious and Priestly Formation,’ and that is what I shall be doing here.

The theme, as reformulated, informs the division of this intervention into two sections. The first part attempts to present an understanding on the dynamics of formation of candidates, while the second part explores the place and role of mercy in formation.

The need for a proper understanding of mercy in the dynamics of formation is exemplified by a report in *The Cross News*, the Newspaper of the Catholic Archdiocese of Kaduna. According to the newspaper, Archbishop Manoso N’dagoso had responded that ‘Mercy does not destroy justice’ to pleas and suggestions that former seminarians who had been asked to discontinue their formation for the priesthood be asked to return in the spirit of the Year of Mercy.<sup>3</sup> The response of the Archbishop echoes St. John Paul II’s reflection that ‘Mercy differs from justice but is not in opposition to it ... true mercy is, so to speak, the most profound source of justice.’<sup>4</sup>

## **DYNAMICS OF FORMATION**

Pope St. John Paul II, in his post-synodal exhortation *Vita Consecrata* dedicates a lot of attention to initial and ongoing formation. According to the document, the primary objective of formation is the preparation of the candidate for total self-giving to God, in the footsteps of Christ at the service of mission while the path leading to this total consecration is the ‘progressive assimilation of the sentiments of Christ towards the Father’. The document further presents formation as a vital process ‘by means of which individuals are converted to the Word of God in the depths of their being and at the same time, learn how to discover the signs of God in earthly realities’.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, there is no formation without conversion, that is, without internalizing the values of Jesus Christ to the point where the person puts on Christ and imitates Christ. This transformation is a lifelong journey which leads the person to the point of saying with St. Paul, ‘it is no longer I that live but it is Christ who lives in me’ (Gal. 2: 20). Formation aims at the transformation of the person and precisely because it does, the work of formation never ends. It is a lifelong process that affects every attitude and action in the big and small events of life. Conversion is always a transforming experience and the concern of the formator is to elicit and order the desire for conversion in the candidate who professes a vocation to the priesthood or the religious life.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. *The Cross News*, 291, May 2016

<sup>4</sup> *Dives in Misericordia*, n. 14

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, pp. 65-71.

The concept of vocation is central to understanding the relationship between divine initiative and human response. In the story of God's call of Abraham, we see that there is first a call, a free election on the part of God, who chooses Abraham and raises him to the dignity of father of many nations. On the part of Abraham, there was a turning away from one style of life to a new life, a 'conversion' toward God in total obedience to do whatever God would command. There would be duties and obligations to love God alone and there was also an action that sealed the covenant (cf. Gen 17: 2-11). *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* states that the partnership between God and humankind finds expression in the theme of covenant: "'I will be your God and you will be my people'. Through Israel humankind is called into a deep, interpersonal relationship with a caring Creator."<sup>6</sup> In the case of a candidate for religious or priestly life, vocation entails a call within the call to holiness which is already addressed to every baptized Christian. While the time, attention, and encouragement which are needed for someone to reach the point of saying 'yes' to God's call must be offered by the Christian community, the invitation and response lie in the realm of grace and freedom. Willingness to joyfully assume the obligations that go with this call must be an important sign for one who feels called to the priesthood or the religious life. Nevertheless, vocation though an initiative by God, must be tested by the Church which is the sign and instrument of God in the world and in the individual person. In his fidelity, God who calls us ultimately takes care of our growth in the way of holiness. But he uses human leaders who, with the whole community, must set examples of love and loyalty. *Vita Consecrata* further reminds us that 'God is the educator *par excellence* of those who consecrate themselves to him'.<sup>7</sup> God uses human mediation to accomplish his purposes and so when a new candidate arrives, another person walks beside the one called, in the role of 'elder brother or sister'. Formation, then, is a sharing in the work of the Father who, through the spirit fashions the inner attitudes of the Son in the hearts of young men and women.

Formation presupposes that from among the options for living the Christian faith within the Church open to the candidate, he/she chooses to pursue and to explore further the already growing conviction that the Lord is calling him/her to the priestly or religious life. It is on this freely and consciously made choice that formation builds. The arena for that pursuit is the formation house or seminary as the case may be. Formation is a process involving identifiable stages of growth. Each of these stages has its own immediate goals and dynamics within the entire integrative process that leads to the ultimate goal. It is necessary to know the different stages of growth of each candidate so as not to accelerate or slow down the maturation process. Pope St. John Paul II wrote in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, following Vatican II's *Optatam totius*, of the spiritual, intellectual, pastoral and human dimensions of priestly formation. These also apply to religious formation.<sup>8</sup> Every candidate should be assisted by suitable direction in order to develop in harmony

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<sup>6</sup> *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, Ed. Michael Downey, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1993; p. 1009.

<sup>7</sup> *Vita Consecrata*, n. 66

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Vita Consecrata* n.65

these dimensions. Attainment of the goal is the sign that the candidate is ready to move on to the next phase of the formation process.

To identify the stage that an individual has attained in the growth process, determine the right environment for development during each stage and provide the right experience at the right time for integrative growth of the candidate, continual reflection on all the above mentioned dimensions is expedient. Such reflection facilitates the concrete designing of a programme of formation that would take into consideration the needs of each candidate and the provision of a programme that will be operational throughout the entire process of growth. Approaching formation planning in this way may require radical changes in existing programmes in our seminaries or formation houses as well as extensive re-education of the entire religious community or diocese.

Since formation is a 'process of integrative personal growth',<sup>9</sup> it is important to begin where the person is. Concretely, a diocese/community has to decide where an individual needs to be to begin initial formation within the diocese/community. In this respect, the first requirement is a good discernment process to verify the candidate's aptitude for formation, that is, whether the candidate already possesses adequate human and spiritual maturity, and whether the candidate gives sufficient indication of a possible authentic vocation before being admitted. The adequacy or otherwise of that initial discernment will determine the success or failure of formation.

Although the dynamics of mercy would be considered in the second part of this paper, it would suffice to say at this point that the requirement of discerning suitability for formation is hardly met when admission boards, in the name of mercy, accept candidates lacking in aptitude for formation. When this happens, the stage is set for formators to begin to lower standards in formation. A subtle, unintended process of accommodation begins to take place, in which the limitations of weaker candidates, rather than the ideals of the priesthood or religious life, determine standards of acceptable conduct and ability. When this type of shift starts to occur, any member of the formation team who raises questions about a candidate's suitability does so at considerable risk. And if the environment appears to lack consistency in the legitimacy of its challenges, a climate of uncertainty is created and the candidate begins to weigh which standards he/she must try to meet, and which standards can be safely ignored. Such an attitude does not rightly serve the process of formation.

The formator needs to be familiar with the path of seeking God, possess a profound knowledge of the Church, together with solid theological principles and adequate knowledge of psychology. These are essential as he/she is challenged to combine the 'illumination of spiritual wisdom with the light shed by human means, which can be a help both in discerning the call and in forming the new man or woman until they become genuinely free'.<sup>10</sup> This becomes even more necessary when one admits individuals with serious unresolved psychological issues into

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<sup>9</sup> Futrell J. C. 1981 *The Dynamics of Religious Formation in Human Development*, Vol. 2, No. 4, p.15

<sup>10</sup> *Vita Consecrata*, n. 66

formation programmes. We must bear in mind that the formation house is not an asylum nor is it a rehabilitation centre for those who lack the courage to make it out there. Formation can only engage an individual at the point he/she has reached developmentally. He/she may require some healing along with facilitation of personal growth. But we must also realize that there is a limit to the amount of healing a formation programme can provide. We must remember that obvious cases that need constant professional attention should not be admitted for vows or ordination. We must have the courage and tenderness, says Pope Francis, to accompany such individuals out of the formation house in order to begin a new life elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> To act this way is in fact to act mercifully towards the candidate, the religious institute, and the people of God.

If, as has been explained, the primary goal of both priestly and religious formation is to enable the candidate to internalize the values of Jesus Christ to the extent that the person puts on Christ and acts from this centre, then a practical question arises: what needs to take place during the years of formation in order to attain this goal? What type of formation would lead to internalization of Gospel values? Since internalization involves attitudinal change, it is important to address this question by referring to Herbert Kelman's seminal study of attitudinal change.<sup>12</sup>

Kelman describes three processes – compliance, identification and internalization – which help explain why people adopt attitudes and ways of acting. The first process, *compliance*, occurs when a person's ideas, attitudes and actions are influenced principally by the desire to gain a reward or to avoid punishment. In a house of formation this could be in the form of external conformity to rules with no deep personal conviction about what these rules stand for. Compliance does not mean commitment. Candidates who operate at this level may keep all the rules of the house in order to avoid being asked to withdraw and/or to achieve the reward of priestly ordination or profession. From real life experience, candidates who only comply seem to have some hidden agenda which exhibits itself after profession or ordination, for example, through attitudes of passivity or resentment. The second process, *identification*, occurs when attitudes and actions are adopted because of the desire to be part of a group and to maintain a relationship with an important, admired, or loved person. Even if the attitude is believed, perseverance in it is subject to the existence of the relationship itself – if relationship ends, one abandons what has been learnt. The process of identification is a necessary stage in the acquisition of values. Identification is a source of growth in the measure in which it makes us learn attitudes that increase values. 'But if the person remains at the level of identification, then the process has not reached its full term'.<sup>13</sup> The third process, *internalization*, occurs when attitudes, opinions and ways of acting are adopted and maintained because the person understands that this is the right thing to do. The

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<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis, Roma, April 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Kelman, H. C. Compliance, Identification and Internalization: Three Processes of Attitude Change, In *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 2, no. 1(1958), pp.51-60

<sup>13</sup> Costello T, Goal and Purpose of Priestly Formation, In Vincent S. and Constello T (ed.), *Formation and Transformation*, Asian Trading Corporation: Bangalore, 2010, p. 8

internalized behaviour becomes an integral part of the person, a manifestation of what one is at a given time and what one wants to become.

The processes of compliance, identification and internalization offer a framework for understanding the formative dynamics by which the essential goal of formation can be pursued, always in cooperation with the freely-given gift of grace which is poured into the candidate's heart through the power of the Holy Spirit. Motivation is what activates or directs one's being and acting. If one's motivation is by choice Christ – putting on Christ at the beginning and at the end of everything – then a fertile ground is available for formation to take place. Therefore, the question of internalization of priestly or religious values should be one of the very central concerns for any programme of formation. But it is important to differentiate between real internalization, compliance, or identification. For it is difficult to act always and exclusively out of the love for God or love of neighbour.

It is possible to observe the efforts made by a candidate to live out the values proclaimed by Christ. It is also possible to recognize the interference of personal interest, of identification and compliance. It is the responsibility of the formator to evaluate which of these processes is prevalent in the life of the candidate, to facilitate a gradual internalization of Gospel values, and to enable the candidate to recognize and understand his or her own motivations, goals and needs.

There are candidates who think they can consecrate themselves without the need for changing much in their lives. But the internalization of evangelical values, which formation is, demands death to the old self so that a new self-in-Christ may be born. This new person is neither a sample of human maturity nor a hero of perfection. According to Cencini, he/she is one 'who has felt won over by the look of Christ and conquered by his love'.<sup>14</sup> Such is the transformation that conversion is. It is, as St Paul reminds us, the work of the Holy Spirit who transforms the believer into the image of the Father (2 Cor. 3: 17-18).

The action of divine grace is gratuitous and comes about through God's initiative. The candidate, moved by grace, makes himself/herself available to God's work of transformation. This disposition on the part of the candidate is the fundamental attitude required for formation. The process of formation leading to transformation demands that first, the candidates must have relatively sufficient understanding of the ideals and values of priestly and religious life they wish to embrace. Secondly, he/she must sufficiently understand the demands these core values make of his/her life and way of being and acting. These demand personal involvement as well as making use of personal prayer, spiritual direction and accompaniment. Thirdly, he/she must personalize these ideals and values that they become so deeply part of his/her life.<sup>15</sup> According to Cencini, there is formation only where values and content are experienced and savoured by the candidate to the point of their constituting for him/her a new way of looking at things, a new way of life. It is a question of forming candidates in the perspective of Jesus' self-emptying whereby the community or the formation house becomes the place where he/she

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<sup>14</sup> Cencini A, *Spiritual and Emotional Maturity*, Nairobi, Pauline Publications, 2006, p.162

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Costello T, Goal and Purpose of Priestly Formation, In Vincent S. and Constello T (ed.), *Formation and Transformation*, Asian Trading Corporation: Bangalore, 2010, p. 14

experiences and expresses a love that becomes service and mercy.<sup>16</sup> In order to be capable of mercy, formators as well as candidates must be disposed to listen to the Word of God so as to contemplate God's mercy and adopt it in their lifestyle. This experience is then carried on to mission so that in our parishes and communities, 'wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy'.<sup>17</sup>

The process of formation that leads to the internalization of the values of Christ comes about through hard work not only of the candidate but of the formator and the formation process. For effective formation the formator must do his/her own serious work toward human and spiritual integration so as not to be a blind guide who increases the candidate's confusion rather than giving help. If the candidate is to internalize Gospel values, today's formator must be someone who has internalized the values of the Gospel and who has the skills to communicate these values to candidates, attentive to God's grace at work and courageous enough to point out obstacles where they are present and be well versed in showing the beauty of a life that follows intimately in the footsteps of Christ. He or she must have a good knowledge of the candidates as individuals, as members of a generation, and as members of a class.

#### **FACTORS THAT MIGHT INFLUENCE FORMATION AND DISCERNMENT**

First to be identified is the emotional baggage which the candidate brings into the formation process. Some of the contents of this baggage may reduce, sometimes severely, the candidate's capacity to be formed. These may include lack of clear personal identity, low self-esteem, histories of trauma/loss, fear of insecurity, a tendency towards conformity and harm avoidance, issues of mistrust etc. It is difficult for candidates with such baggage to be fully present to formation. Even if they complete initial formation, they may end up inadequately prepared to face the challenges of the life and ministry that await them.

A second factor is the family situation – division in the family, conflict among members, violence etc. The candidates with these backgrounds may find it difficult to adjust to the new life that the priesthood or religious life offers. Hence, before admitting an individual and initiating the work of formation, we need to evaluate his/her capacity to learn and to change. A bad family adaptation renders it difficult for the candidates during formation to accept correction, spiritual direction or accompaniment and co-existence with his/her companions.

A third factor is the influence of the realities of the world of our time. The world from which candidates come into religious life/priesthood today is a world in the firm grips of information and communication technology which can be put to good and bad uses. It is a society undergoing disintegration of family life, depreciating quality of education especially in public schools, substance abuse,

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Cencini A, *Spiritual and Emotional Maturity*, Nairobi, Pauline Publications, 2006, p. 28

<sup>17</sup> cf. *Misericordiae Vultus* n.12

violence, poverty, to mention but these. Prudence obliges that these be taken into consideration when one explores both the motivations and obstacles which are part of the choice for life in the priesthood or religious life today.

A fourth factor that could impede a thorough discernment process is pressure from the diocese/community, as well as the interior un-freedom of formators. It seems that the declining shortage of candidates in some Congregations or the great need for staffing our parishes and apostolates can create a situation in which vocation discernment is not engaged in with seriousness and detachment.

A fifth factor is the role of authorities of religious and or diocesan authorities, that is, major superiors and bishops, in the formation of candidates. This role may be positive or negative. It is positive if the authority of the formator is respected, negative if that authority is undermined by malignant interference. The same is true of the role of other members of the religious community.

### **MERCY IN THE DYNAMICS OF FORMATION**

Pope John Paul II, in *Dives in Misericordia*, laments the apparent lack of mercy in the technological countries of the 'first world'. According to the Pope, present-day mentality, unlike in the past, seems opposed to a God of mercy, and in fact tends to exclude from life and to remove from the human heart the very idea of mercy. Thirty-five years later, Pope Francis declared an extraordinary year of mercy. The two Popes challenge us to understand and appreciate what mercy is.

Scripture scholars agree that there is no adequate understanding of God's mercy that does not deal also with the Hebrew concept of God's covenant love expressed in Hebrew by the word *hesed*. In order to understand more fully the richness of God's mercy towards us, it would be helpful to reflect on the importance of covenant in Jewish history. A brief exploration of what we can learn of mercy from the Bible is useful. To ignore the Bible is to ignore the word of God, and to ignore the word of God is to ignore what God has to teach us about mercy. The *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* assists us in this brief exploration.

The *Dictionary* brings it to our attention that the Hebrew word *rahamin*, translated as 'compassion', is an 'instinctive attachment of one being for another'. It is a feeling which has 'its seat in the maternal bosom (*raham*)'. Usually used with the word *hesed*, which signifies 'fidelity', it is ordinarily translated into Greek as (*eleos*). According to the *Dictionary*, 'English translations of these Hebrew and Greek words oscillate between *mercy* and *love*, passing through a spectrum of meanings; tenderness, pity, compassion, clemency, goodness, and even grace (hb. *hen*) which, however, has a much broader sense. Despite this variety, it is not impossible to discern the biblical meaning of mercy. From beginning to end the manifestation of God's tenderness is occasioned by misery; and man, in his turn, ought therefore to show mercy to his neighbor in imitation of his Creator'.<sup>18</sup>

From what has been said, it is clear that mercy, in the Bible, is spoken of by using the language of human emotion. But this is precisely where one has to be

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<sup>18</sup> *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 351-354 [351]

Careful so as not to miss the real meaning of mercy. As Anthony Akinwale points out in his reflection entitled 'Mercy and Justice are Identical Twins'.

Whereas the Bible uses words that describe human emotions, we need to rise above the limitations of their mode of signification to grasp what they really signify... Unless we undertake this task of interpretation, we can neither transmit nor proclaim the rich message of divine mercy in and to our time. St. Thomas Aquinas explains that justice and mercy are in God, in the divine harmony of God's being. When justice and mercy are rightly understood, it becomes evident that any discussion of mercy is inseparable from discussion of justice in God,<sup>19</sup> that justice without mercy is not justice but vengeance, and that mercy without justice is permissiveness...<sup>20</sup>

Pope Francis says that *mercy* and *justice* are not two contradictory realities, but two dimensions of a single reality that unfolds progressively until it culminates in the fullness of love. Justice is a fundamental concept for civil society, which is meant to be governed by the rule of law. Justice is also understood as that which is rightly due to each individual.<sup>21</sup>

Akinwale further explains that in his work of creation, God bestowed goodness on us by giving to our human nature what is due to us, that is, what is necessary to sustain us. After creation came sin. The justice of divine goodness was diminished by sin. God's mercy is God's bestowal of goodness to us his creatures, that is, the goodness that is necessary to preserve his creatures, which was diminished by sin. What is thus common to justice and mercy is the bestowal of goodness on creatures by God. This understanding of justice takes us away from separating justice and mercy. God's love is mercy in so far as it is not preceded by our conversion. His forgiveness is without conditions. He does not wait to see if we are going to deserve his forgiveness. God loves us when we are not right to put us right, and that is justice and mercy. Therefore, 'mercy is not opposed to justice but rather expresses God's way of reaching out to the sinner offering him a new chance to look at himself, convert and believe'.<sup>22</sup>

This understanding of mercy points out two possible areas, in my opinion, that we could reflect on during this year of mercy. First is our capacity to experience the love of God so as to freely and truly immerse ourselves into the formation process. The second is our capacity to help candidates develop the heart of the Good Shepherd who reaches out in search of the lost sheep. Our capacity to help the candidates to be compassionate and not become judges, leading candidate to become agents, 'missionaries of mercy'.

From this explanation of justice and mercy, we would proceed to the place of mercy in formation. Formation is itself an act of justice and mercy because the whole process of formation is about bestowal of goodness on the candidate, on the people of God whom the candidate is to serve in the religious community and or diocese.

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 21 art 1.

<sup>20</sup> Anthony Akinwale, *Catholic Independent Newspaper*, Ibadan; 04/09/2016

<sup>21</sup> *Misericordiae Vultus*, n.20

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, n.21

Pope Francis reminds us that 'we need to recall that in Sacred Scripture, justice is conceived essentially as the faithful abandonment of oneself to God's will'.<sup>23</sup> Formation then implies the discernment of the will of God for this candidate. It is about ensuring that the candidate in question is formed and discerned to be suitable for religious life or priestly life. It would be unjust and merciless to the candidate and to the people of God to promote a candidate who has been judged as lacking requisite suitability.

Mercy is not about bringing back people who have been discerned to be unsuitable for the priesthood or religious life; not about lowering the standards nor is it about sending people who are suitable away. Mercy is not about admitting a candidate because he/she is the first from his/her tribe – this is an injustice to the individual and to the Church. Mercy is not about exempting a candidate for the priesthood or the religious life from evaluation using the certain criteria and objective standards proposed by the Church. Mercy is not about saving a candidate from the right of knowing the essentials about our way of life or about how he/she comes across in living out proposed values. In the name of mercy, we should not shy away from making a decision when we observe that a candidate is not suitable. St. John Paul II states that 'in no passage of the Gospel message does forgiveness, or mercy as its source, mean indulgence towards evil, towards scandals, towards injury or insult'.<sup>24</sup> Mercy is the discernment of the suitability of the candidate. We must recall that after freeing the man possessed by demons, Jesus entrusted him with this mission: 'Go to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you ... how he showed mercy on you' (Mk. 5:19). From the word go, formators should explain to candidates that formation is about discernment. If it becomes necessary to ask a candidate to withdraw, this should be done in mercy and assistance should be given. The appeal to faithful observance of the law of most of our institutions 'must not prevent attention from being given to matters that touch upon the dignity of the person'.<sup>25</sup> It is crucial that a judgment of readiness not be misunderstood as a judgment of personal worth.

It is essential to understand that the question being asked is not what kind of person this is but whether he/she has achieved a sufficient sense of personal worth, awareness and identity to be in a formation process in which he/she must adopt the different values presented. The question, therefore, is not: what will make this candidate feel good? The question is: what is good for this candidate? It is quite possible to make a candidate feel good without necessarily doing what is good to the candidate. In the same vein, it is quite possible to do good to the candidate while what has been done makes the candidate feel sorrowful. The good of the candidate at this point is the formation of the candidate and the discernment of his/her suitability or otherwise for religious and or priestly life. If a candidate judged unsuitable is admitted, such admission does not and cannot qualify to be called mercy. This could be called 'false mercy' which is not concerned with the truth and therefore cannot serve charity. For it is not in the interest of a candidate to be

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., n.20

<sup>24</sup> *Dives in Misericordia*, n. 14

<sup>25</sup> *Misericordiae Vultus*, n. 20

accepted to vows or ordination when it has been discerned that the candidate is not suitable. Mercy in this case is charitably discerning that the vocation of this candidate is to be found elsewhere, not where neither the candidate, nor the Church, nor the religious community will be served.

What does mercy demand of us in moments of doubts? When, in seeking answers to questions pertinent to discernment doubts arise, it is important to bear in mind that the decision to be made must be in favour of the Church. It is clear that not everybody is capable of living the religious/priestly life and this does not mean such people are not capable of any other commitment. There is a compassionate, sympathetic understanding way of working with people. If certain people cannot be accepted, a refusal has to be voiced within the movement of God's love. Formation programmes are essentially intended to strengthen the candidate's commitment to the Christian way of life; develop his/her understanding of this vocation; to support and enhance the candidates' growth as a human being and to encourage, support and challenge individuals to realistically assess the quality and depth of their experience so as to discern their vocation. Formators are to facilitate the way for someone who wants to follow Christ in an exclusive way by discerning the signs of this call. The formator is there to prepare the candidate, to help him/her to see more clearly into him/herself: what he/she likes, what he/she can achieve by his/her own means, discovering within him/herself what he/she could do with his/her life.

## **CONCLUSION**

God's coming into our lives creates the transforming tension between his grace and its demand for an ever greater selflessness which brings about a lasting communion with God and neighbour. Undeniably, formation, as has just been described, involves healthy tension. In Physics, magnetic tension comes from the fact that a metallic object is placed between two opposite poles of the magnetic field. In the same way, in human existence, tension comes when we have to navigate between two or more sets of competing and conflicting demands. At the core of our vocation and consecration there exists a tension between two poles. For there is what the society offers the candidate, and there is what the Gospel demands of him/her. The society has her standard, and the Church has her standard, which must be the standard of the Gospel. There will be need to differentiate between aspirations that are incompatible and those that are compatible with the Gospel way of life, and the candidate must choose between these two. To choose between these options raises a lot of tension. How does one evaluate these choices? The crises - which can occur not only during initial formation but also during ongoing formation, in fact throughout priestly or religious life - are valuable for both the content and their process. The issue of crisis points out the need to have qualified personnel involved in formation. They must be able to help individuals face the crises that will surface during initial formation and after. The ability to do so assumes that formators have learned to deal with their own crisis issues in an open and healthy way and thus can help others to acquire the same skills.

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Issues bringing tension could be summed up into three: there is tension that comes from having to change from the way of life before entering into formation and the way of life that formation entails; there could be tension in the relationship between the candidate and the formator or the other members of the community; and there could be tension between the candidate and other candidates in formation. In a nutshell, tension results from the conflict between expectation and experience on the part of the candidate, the formator/community, and other candidates. The general challenge has to do with forming for conversion - with the ability to step back and observe oneself, one's own choices. When what we expect is not what we experience, there will be tension. So the real tension is the tension between expectation and experience, between the ideal and the actual.

We must be careful not to present formation as a 'weeding out' period. Vocation discernment requires an openness and attention to the one's (candidate) interior movements, especially in prayer and an honest disclosure and discussion of these spirits in spiritual direction or accompaniment. These attitudes of openness and honesty cannot exist in the kind of fear and threat viewing formation as a 'weeding out' process inevitably produces. Such an approach focuses too much attention on external requirements that need to be met in order to 'survive'. Good discernment relies heavily on a person's ability to hear the voice of the Lord speaking deeply in the solitude of one's heart and in the concrete circumstances of one's life.

Let us quickly add that the time and process of discernment, a time when a candidate may be asked to continue or discontinue, is a season of tension. Accepting or not accepting a candidate for vows or ordination raises a lot of anxiety. But the ensuing tension can be managed by way of prevention, which is said to be better than cure. In concrete terms, we must make it known to candidates at the point of entry, and constantly during formation, without sounding threatening, that whereas they have no right to remain in the community or seminary, they have the right to choose to leave at any time. Moreover, the community or seminary or diocese is not under any obligation to keep them. They too have the right to ask the candidate to discontinue.

The period of formation is a period of trial, a period of courtship that precedes a marriage. The marriage may or may not take place. What is important is that the parties involved take a decision based on charity. If the candidate cannot find happiness in living the life, it would be wicked to encourage the candidate to continue, the same way it would be wicked to insist that a person bear a burden which, evidently, he or she cannot lift.

Tension is not always negative. Where persons live for the sake of something or where they dwell closely together, there one will always find fields of tension. Each one has to navigate these fields, and we, formators, must realistically take these into account. For the candidates, these fields of tension are, as it were a school of life, a battlefield in which they can become purified. Following this understanding,

it would seem that tensions that occur during formation can, in some instances, serve as normal, important and useful moments in the candidate's personal development as well as in his/her incorporation into the life of a religious community or diocese. In many ways, my experience in formation ministry confirms that formation is about tension – healthy tension – that is inherent in the process itself. The formator, aware of these, must be companion to the candidates across these fields – a fulfilling but often exhausting task.

There is never a failure in formation. The aim of discernment in initial formation is either the candidate integrates the life or is helped to search elsewhere. Suitability in one charism is not necessarily suitability for another. Like the prophet Eli in the call of Samuel, the formator must help the candidate to discern his/her vocation. If found suitable, ok. If not, ok still. In both cases, initial formation has achieved its aim. When formation has been transparent, accompaniment sincere, the non-integration of a candidate, although painful and regrettable, is more of liberation for the candidate and for the Institute or diocese. The candidate who either decides or is advised not to continue leaves with some feeling of gratitude. Some even come back later to express their gratitude, having settled in a new way of responding to God's call either in another institute or in married life.

But there is also unhealthy tension. This is tension that crushes or dehumanizes. Tension ought to re-humanize. Candidates should not be put into intolerable situations of conflict and they should not be subjected to a yoke that Christ himself did not want to force upon us. When what is expected of a candidate is unrealistic and unnecessary for formation, tension so created cannot be said to be healthy. When the candidate's expectations and conduct are incompatible with religious or priestly vocation, the tension that results is neither in the interest of the candidate nor in the interest of the Church. Adaptation to religious life and priestly life must be done with method and discipline. A choice has been made. From now on the candidate must enter into a pattern of life in which he/she will be the principal agent of his/her own formation. Hence the need for regular accompaniment of the candidate by the formator to reflect on the candidate's experience not only to support them in moments of crisis but also to help them develop skills necessary for effective living and ministry in the Church. Charity demands good management of tension in formation. Such good management demands prayers, skills and reflection so as to learn from experience on the part of the formator and the candidates. It is what they owe each other in justice and in mercy.

Being a formator is a gift and a privilege. Be a gift to those you are assisting in their formation, and let their encounter with you be a privilege for you and for them. As formators, our model, says Cencini, is by no means the Greek god, Atlas, who carries the whole world on his shoulders. Our model is John the Baptist, the one who points to and announces Another, not attracting others to himself.<sup>26</sup> Like John was

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Cencini A, *Spiritual and Emotional Maturity*, Nairobi, Pauline Publications, 2006 p. 36

the voice who prepared the people to hear and make sense of the Word, do your best to diminish yourself because it is the One who comes, Christ himself, that must grow in the heart of the candidates. Let not your voice be heard in place of the Word of God. Rather, as formators, let the Word of God be heard through your voice. Let us be careful not to project our convictions as formators onto our candidates. It is not we who are entering, we are already here. Let us allow the Holy Spirit to do his work. As for us, let us be content to collaborate with the Spirit.

### **QUESTIONS FOR GROUP WORK**

1. What factors affect the internalization of values in the formation house?
2. How do we show mercy to a candidate who is found unsuitable and who is asked to leave? How do we show mercy in communicating the message? How do we show mercy after giving the news?
3. How can Formators make our formation process a sanctuary of mercy? Give four concrete points.