

ABANDONMENT, DISMISSAL AND PROLONGATION: THE ACCOMPANIMENT OF A CANDIDATE IN FORMATION IN THE TIMES OF TRANSITION AND TRIALS IN THE RELIGIOUS INSTITUTE

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From my experience, I discover that the ministry of formation of candidates to the religious life is a sturdy apostolate. It is so because it calls for a strong person to occupy the position. It is a thankless labour. No matter what a formation director did, he/she is doomed to be a pointer and a talking point for years to come in the institute because the character of the formation director rubs off on the candidates at that point in time. Therefore, it is pertinent that the supreme moderator of an institute selects the person that is most suitable for the formation house at a given time.

I have worked in the formation house and my current work still borders on formation; hence, it feels I have been in formation work most of my years. Experiences and studies spur and allow me to share some thoughts on some aspects of formation.

WHAT IS FORMATION?

Strictly, formation is a pattern, a mould, a configuration that someone arrives at. It is presumed that there will be the object and another person the subject. The person who forms has something in mind to make out of the work at hand as in the case of the potter and the clay.

Religious formation is a process. By process, it is meant a procedure or a course in progression. It is a process of helping a candidate to go inwards and be connected with the resources that lie down deep within. It is therefore an inward journey aiming at conversion and configuration into the person of Christ. The Chief Director of formation is God, through the Holy Spirit. God then appoints a human director through the Major Superior to facilitate the process and works by/with the Holy Spirit through the human facilitator/ director.

In the process of formation, it is believed that God has infused His Holy Spirit into the candidate. The work of this human facilitator is to help the candidate get in touch, be connected, listen to God, and discern his or her vocation.

The work of formation is a life-long process and cannot be definitively finished here on earth. This is the reason spiritual direction, retreats, seminars/workshops and other forms of on-going formation are necessary to continue the facilitating process which took place in the initial formation or which began earlier from home.

WHAT ARE THESE PROCESSES?

A process is not something done one time off; it is done progressively. It is a combination of many things that work together for the common good. In the case of a formative process, theological and spiritual activities come to mind:

1. Accompaniment of the candidate which is a broad spectrum
2. The life example and active presence of the formation director
3. The rich and enlightened course contents taught in the formation house
4. The 'genius' of the formation director
5. The enabling environment/ prayerful atmosphere
6. A welcoming community
7. The 'glorious' system established in the institute
8. The good quality relationship that exists between the candidate and the director of formation
9. The manner of following the Charism of the institute.

All these and everything that facilitate the process of formation must be pursued with steadfastness. The formation director unfolds each course of action step by step.

ACCOMPANIMENT OF CANDIDATE IN FORMATION

The formation director must have good knowledge of Catholic faith and morals and must have:

- Experiential knowledge of God and prayer
- Wisdom that comes from listening to the word of God
- Love for the church and for human beings
- Enough time and good will to attend to the candidate individually without biases for any cultural/ethnic group.

It will seem that accompaniment is the main work for the director of formation. The director of formation journeys with the candidate on one-on-one. Although, there are many candidates in the formation house, each one is on formation individually; each one is on a personal journey with his/her God. The director has the responsibility to each candidate; helping each one to realize that formation is a personal journey and is helped to personalize the art of formation. There should be a balance between formation of the group and that of each person; a balance between the respect for the time envisioned for each phase of formation and its adaptation to the rhythm of everyone. Conscientious effort must be taken to initiate each candidate for religious life theoretically and practically into the concrete demand of the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

Experientially, not all the candidates enter into the formation process at the same level of human and Christian culture. Therefore, it is necessary to pay close attention to each individual, ensuring that each one advances at his/her own pace so that the content of formation and the way it is communicated are suitable to the one receiving it.

A formandi may not open certain issues with the formation director when he/she feels unsafe. In extreme cases the formation director could seek help, such as spiritual director or therapist. It is said that a stitch in time saves nine. When a candidate with a problem is given adequate consideration early enough and the problem is resolved amicably, everyone in the community will be at peace and the formation director would have done the will of God.

During the period of initial accompaniment, the candidate may not have integrated fully into formation process. The director needs lots of patience to journey with candidates and must not abandon the slow learners. Each person is unique; hence the candidate might need extra time or different approach. As a result, the director must be well trained to do this work.

The facilitator or director is a *midwife* in the work of accompaniment. The director acts like a midwife who helps to bring to birth new candidates and helps the candidates to bring to birth the best in each one of them and to bring out new things from the heart. Therefore, the director must give enough time to each candidate. If a candidate is slow or is not showing much progress as expected, it could be that the candidate is 'blocked' initially, but it is only patience and perseverance that can unravel the myth of such candidate.

A candidate might also feel more like an enigma in the formation house. The facilitator/director with prayerful mind can journey with such candidate. Anyone who is abandoned can portend jeopardy for the institute.

There are some cases when a candidate is seen as a 'sacred cow.' Even as difficult as that case might be, such a candidate must not be abandoned. I consider this as a time of trial for the institute and for the formation house. Such a facilitator/director must speak out because of the common good that is at stake. The institute cannot pretend too long that all is well in formation house when there is fire on the mountain.

THE EXCELLENCE OF AN ANIMATED COMMUNITY

Formation depends on a large extent on the quality of community living. A community is formative if it supports its members to grow in fidelity to the Lord. A lively community helps the candidates to adapt well and gives peace and sense of security to the candidates. A good community confirms the words that are spoken about the congregation to the candidates. This is where a candidate lives out what is taught. This is like a practical field where a candidate moves from theory to experiential arena. Therefore, the community should be marked with simplicity and charity.

However, having too many professed sisters in the novitiate community is counter-productive. Not everyone is appropriate to live in the formation house, hence, the Major Superior must not think of the formation house as a correctional house.

APOSTOLATE OF PRESENCE OF THE FORMATION DIRECTOR:

The apostolate of all religious consists first in their witness of a consecrated life. Paramount in the work of formation is the apostolate of presence. The person working in the formation house must be sufficiently free from any other duty. The director must be permanently accessible and see the formation house as a ministry ground where God is served through the acts of listening and dialoguing with the candidates and the formation director also serve as a role model for the candidates.

The apostolate of good example is vital in the formation house. In Greek culture, imitating a model was essential to the learning of virtue. The Greeks were convinced that virtues could not be taught by command but had to be learned from observation of its living expression in parents or teachers. The formation director is the living textbook of the virtuous life. The professed members who did not live the virtues are dangerous and have failed to live up to expectations.

EVALUATION OF INITIAL FORMATION

The evaluation of the candidate to the religious life at the initial formation is based on his/her ability to assimilate and deepen the religious identity. The focus of the director is to assess whether the candidate is prepared to be inserted into the world as faithful witness of the gospel. At the end of the assessment, the candidate might be advised to withdraw, the candidate might demonstrate the willingness to move on to the next level, or she or he might need to be on probation.

TIME OF TRIAL

Trial moment comes at any time. The death of parents or loss of a dear one might be the cause. It might also be moment of the dark night of the soul of the candidate. It might also be a resurgence of unfinished business and the candidate is bothered so much that everything about him/her is cloudy.

In the time of trial, the candidate must not be neglected. The reason being that when he/she 'falls out' from the institute, there is a probability that the candidate will aspire to join another institute. He/she will tell all the stories, true and untrue and may probably be admitted into another institute. We must not be in a hurry to dismiss a candidate and must not be in a rush to admit anyone.

However, an institute might be going through difficult times and at such times; the candidates in the formation house are worse hit. The problem might be because the formation director is weak or incompetent. It could also be because the institute is going through formative stage. Such an institute should seek the advice of the local ordinary or help from other institute that can offer credible assistance.

Moreover, there are new institutes who are still trying to establish their formation house. The founder or foundress has the duty to engage an experienced religious who is sufficiently free from other work to offer good services to the candidates in formation. In a situation where the formation director is working

outside the formation house, the consequence is great. This is not going to help the Institute in the near future and the church will be seriously affected.

At the beginning of the establishment, it is assumed that the institute will not have competent personnel for this office, and therefore, whoever is employed to do this duty must be trained and be free to work with the candidates. It is not enough to just get somebody. The person who works in the formation house must be prepared. Formation ministry is an exceptional work and calls for preparation and willingness from the person who will assume this post.

PROBATION: SHORT OR PROLONGED

Formation has different levels- initial and on-going. There are times when decisions will be made on each candidate. There will be times when the authority of the institute will not be sure of what to do with a candidate and so such a candidate is placed on 'awaiting trials;' on short or prolonged probation. In giving the assessment of a candidate in formation, those in charge must be reminded that formation is not achieved once and for all; it is a gradual process.

Probation in itself is purgative. The period can mar or truly purge a candidate of some inappropriate behaviour. Probation as a corrective measure must commensurate with the offence and must be specific in nature. It must also have duration and the candidate must be supervised. If the time is specified, this will push the candidate to work harder to achieve results on record time. If it is an endless and clueless probation, then this is counter-productive.

Probation may end well when the candidate is absorbed into the institute; it could also terminate with the dismissal of the candidate. When a candidate is to be dismissed, experts must be consulted, and Canon Law regulations must be dully followed. This will save the institute from embarrassment. Therefore, all the help must be given to a candidate before he/she is dismissed. When a candidate is dismissed without due process, it portends danger for any institute. He/she may become successful in the society. There are chances that we shall meet again somewhere. The institute might need something from this 'dismissed' candidate who is now powerful but bears a grudge against the institute.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Philosophical, apart from theological, studies must be taught in the male and female formation houses. This is to enable the candidates discover who they are and what they are called to become. It will also help them to have adequate knowledge of the good and evil.

2. Suitable method must be used to promote and motivate reading not only to pass examinations for academic pursuits but a kind that will promote the

reading of spiritual books that will help them to live better. There must be following up on what is read and how it is influencing their lives.

3. Adequate measures must be put in place to help the candidates purify their intentions and properly discern their vocation even while in the formation house.

4. It is important to train the directors of formation to enhance their effectiveness.

5. It is not helpful to have community house in the formation house. It could be counter-formative.

6. The formation director must create the time for seminar/ workshop and be updated on the issues of formation.

7. There are many institutes coming up every day. The Conference of Major Superiors must endeavour to enquire how to enforce policies that will regulate the proliferations of religious institutes and be interested in the way formation is done in the "new institutes" and discuss them because in the end some might survive the tests of time and the ones that did not get much formation will be representing the religious body in the society.

CONCLUSION

Various institutes must take the formation of candidate serious. It is not about the number of candidates in the formation house; we should focus more on giving sound formation and think more of the future of the institute. In the end, it is not about quantity but about persons of high-quality.

Life is sacred, and persons are entities of great worth, and therefore, we should not allow anyone to be sacrificed on the altar of cheap popularity.

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