

The Three Aspects of Novitiate Formation

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Valuing One's Initial Formation

It is now 25 years since I made first profession in the Blessed Sacrament Congregation. The Congregation itself has developed into a region and now into a province. Of the Australian missionaries only Rev. Bro. Eymard Campbell remains with us in Sri Lanka. We are now autonomous and indigenous. Good formation has enabled the Congregation blossom in Sri Lanka. For instance, the greatest satisfaction I derive is in the knowledge that I am in the right place at the right time in God's scheme of things. I am convinced that my ability to experience inner peace will largely be dependent on retaining this conviction of being at the right place at the right time, through the living out of the daily demands of my vowed life. This conviction is the direct outcome of my formation.

Appreciating the value of one's own initial formation is the first step to understanding the priorities of initial formation. Sensible adaptation depends of the ability to focus on clear objectives. One's own personal experience is indispensable in establishing priorities in the formative process. The drastic drop in the number of candidates entering the novitiate has added further reason to adapt novitiate formation. Yet, to be acceptable, these adaptations must retain essential goals of the novitiate. Today, the dearth of vocations to religious life, and the fact that candidates who enter are in their mid twenties, and even in their thirties, has compelled many to ask whether the maturity of the candidates should be reason enough to 'reduce' the period of novitiate to one year only. Advocates of the 'reductionist view' are impelled by the idea that emotional maturity is to be understood as the candidates ability to adapt to a new way of relating to others. It is my view that this assumption is based on illogic. Patterns of behaviour have to be unlearned in the process of acquiring new values, attitudes, and changing patterns of behaviour. I believe that the 'reductionist view' is short sighted. This becomes clear when goals of novitiate formation are rearticulated.

The Goals of Initial Formation

Initial formation, particularly in the novitiate, must involve the following: a). vocation discernment, b). religious socialization in learning new patterns of behaviour and imbibing associated value system, on – going individuation or personal growth.

a. Vocation Discernment

Vocation discernment is the first major aspect of novitiate formation. The objective of vocation discernment in the novitiate is to help novices attain the serene awareness and free acceptance of God's will for them in regard to their state of life. Candidates come seeking assistance in discerning whether God is indeed calling them to a lifelong

commitment to a service of Christ with this particular religious Congregation. How does the novice master provide this assistance?

a. Seeking Confirmation of the Call

The novitiate is a positive process. It is not to be compared with a military training school meant to weed out weaklings. Vocation discernment requires openness to one's interior movements, especially in prayer, and an honest disclosure and discussion of these movements in spiritual direction. These attitudes of openness and honesty cannot exist in an atmosphere riddled with fear and the threat of being 'weeded out.' Good discernment relies heavily on a person's ability to hear the voice of God speaking in the solitude of one's heart, and in the concrete circumstances of one's life. The novice master is to be like Eli who instructed young Samuel to answer the Lord's call (cf. 1 Sam. 3:1-9). It is expected that the candidate generously engages in the novitiate process under the guidance of the novice master. Refusal to do so, or half hearted engagement in the process is itself an indication that 'the shoe does not fit' the candidate.

b. 'Uprooting' Those Meant to be Planted Elsewhere

Discernment of vocation means determining whether the lord has called the candidate to a particular state in life. The discernment process remains open to the possibility that the candidate has come to the wrong place. That is an inherent dynamic of the search for God. Uprooting does not mean that the candidate has no vocation. Every Christian has received God's call and therefore, has received a vocation. However, the vocation may not necessarily be to the way of life in question. We recall Jesus' words, 'Many are called, few are chosen' (Mt. 22:13).

The objective of vocation discernment in the novitiate is to help the novice determine whether the depth and direction of their heart's deepest desires move them to make a self offering of themselves through vowed life. A few guidelines would help in validating the candidates' call:

- Is there an ever increasing congruence between what the candidate wants for his or her life, and the ideals of the Congregation?
- Is there increasing congruence between what the candidate professes to value and desire, and how the candidate actually makes decisions in life, and behaves?
- How does the community perceive the candidate, also bears out the existential fit between the individual novice and the particular charism of the Congregation?

Declining numbers in terms of vocation recruitment cannot justify laxity in vocation discernment or short circuiting the process of discernment.

b. Religious Socialization or Learning a ‘new’ Culture

Religious socialization is the second major aspect of novitiate formation and involves learning a new culture of the heart. Each Religious Congregation has a way of religious socialization whereby it has set in motion formal and informal mechanisms to sustain and transmit their faith. This is accomplished through participation in rites, rituals, traditions, organizational structures, and a belief system. Religious socialization is equivalent to the life long process of on – going formation. In this process of religious socialization, the novice master in particular must be deeply aware of what must be handed down and how? What values and beliefs are to be judged of perennial worth, such that they should remain permanently definitional of the group? What are the ‘habits of the heart’ that the Religious Congregation deems absolutely indispensable in order to retain its identity in the Church while maintaining its vitality? These ‘habits of the heart’ are particular expressions of the charism which have been kept alive in the Congregation.

The process of religious socialization where by a new religious culture is imbibed by the candidate includes a process of contact and separation. For instance what degree of contact should a novice have with family, friends, those in ministry and those in the particular Religious Congregation? While admitting that a definite period cannot be decided on arbitrarily, the process of contact and separation may be broadly classified as follows:

a). A dramatic separation that highlights the radicality of the transformation from lay life to religious life. Novices are physically and geographically separated from family, friends, those in ministry and those in the Congregation. Here vowed life is viewed as part of the process of self-emptying in the example of Jesus who gave himself on a cross. This is a time to launch forth on the quest for human and Christian maturity. This first stage is a time of structure. This is a time when a novice’s day is regulated according to a schedule, with definite periods set apart for personal and communal prayer, work and study. This is because like the acquisition of all habits, a religious culture is also acquired through repetition.

b). In this second stage, the seclusion is geared to foster strong investment in community building. It is within a context of vibrant community life that the novice begins to assimilate ‘habits of the heart’ or learn a new religious culture. It is in this stage that the novice begins to understand the significance of the charism of the congregation into which he or she had been immersed from the very beginning. The first and second stage, mark the gradual transition from total seclusion to relative seclusion over a period of 18 months. In this stage, vowed life is viewed as a liberative force which frees us from our selfishness and possessiveness so that we may ‘love as Christ loved.’ The time of relative seclusion is also marked by less structure in the learning process, in order to test out to what extent the novices have internalized and appropriated what they have sought to learn during times of structured learning. These non structured periods of the novitiate allow the novices to discover truthfully and behaviourally what changes in their lives and attitudes have taken place as a result of their training in the structured stage of formation.

Another important learning dynamic in this second stage involves the combination of experience and reflection. This mode of learning called *praxis*, calls for the novice's active engagement in learning experiences and a subsequent reflection upon those experiences in the areas of prayer, inter-personal relationships and ministerial effectiveness. The formators must ensure the quality of the learning experience because the belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. For experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other.

c). The third and last stage is re-integration into professed religious communities, particularly apostolic communities. It is basically meant to be a time of evaluated pastoral exposure.

c. Individuation

This third major aspect of novitiate formation calls for the on-going fostering of the personal growth of candidates. While the agenda of receiving community is stressed in the process of religious socialization, the process of individuation respects the agenda for persons in their individual growth process. One cannot give of oneself without knowing what one has to offer. Personal development is ultimately growth into harmony and wholeness as a person who has realized full potential. Growth in spiritual maturity depends heavily on integral human development. Grace does not substitute for nature, but brings it to fulfillment. For grace builds on nature.

In fostering personal growth, the novice master does well to remember that human growth takes places in stages, with each stage presupposing and building on preceding ones. These stages are invariantly sequential. The individual novice must be helped to proceed stage by stage.

Conclusion

A presupposition is that throughout the novitiate, the candidate deepens his or her Christian maturity through the practice of *Lectio Divina*, participation in the liturgy of the hours, spiritual reading, retreats, penitential liturgies, silence, solitude, learning the Catholic Catechism, deepening the understanding of the Eucharistic mystery which is the source and summit of Christian life, and undergoing the desert experience. Growth in Christian maturity is the catalyst that ensures growth in areas identified in the discussion of the three major aspects of novitiate formation. As the world continues to challenge me as a Blessed Sacrament Religious, I realize the importance of the three aspects of formation which must continue to be perpetuated in the life of every religious for the entirety of his or her life. I dedicate this article to my novice masters Erasto Fernandez sss and Kevin Gallagher sss, who led me to experience the charism of St. Peter Julian Eymard.