

FORMATION FOR CONSECRATED LIFE IN A PERIOD OF CHANGE

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It has often been said and many times repeated that the present and the future of our life and mission depend on the formation we receive and the formation we give. In fact, formation is the key that opens the door for a meaningful life and mission. Without a suitable formation to the demands of today, the risk of repeating ourselves, of standing up, and losing the sense of who we are and what we do is more than just a working hypothesis.

In the seminar we held recently on the Theology of Religious Life we did not speak directly of formation. The topics addressed within the overall theme of the seminar, entitled, *Theology of Consecrated Life: Identity and Significance of Apostolic Religious Life*, have been very rich and varied. All of them were suggested by some situations that consecrated apostolic life is going through, especially in the western world, such as issues of identity, aging, lack of vocations, difficulty in managing work, activism, and community fragmentation – just to name a few. Such situations can lead Religious Life to an identity crisis and the consequent loss of credibility, significance, and visibility.

Those of us who participated in this seminar can attest that it was a rich experience of fellowship born of careful listening and respectful acceptance of differences. These differences, moreover, were like epiphanies of a God who makes all things new and of a Spirit who is not in crisis, as was often repeated during the celebration of the Seminar. In this context of communion that knew how to embrace the differences and live with them, the Seminar cast a benevolent and hopeful eye toward the present and the future of Apostolic Religious Life.

Once concluded, the Seminar felt the need to make those reflections should crystallize into the daily lives of our Orders and Institutes. This requires the mediation of initial and ongoing formation. Bearing in mind, then, this workshop as well as the challenges launched by *Vita Consecrata* and those that come up against us today from the very situation of Religious Life, I will attempt (for this is what I have been asked mainly to do), to underscore some formative pointers that can help us to give a concrete answer to the challenges before us and, thus, strengthen our identity as Religious.

Some prior convictions

Before directly addressing the issue, I want to emphasize some convictions that I consider important to take these into account when we talk about formation:

1.- What I will say in what follows takes into account both initial and ongoing formation. And if I had to give preference to one of them, it would be to ongoing formation. For this, I rely on the document, *Walking from Christ*, the first text of the Church in which ongoing formation is dealt with before those of pastoral care of vocations and initial formation. In this way, we put aside that order we might call "chronological order", placing the emphasis on formation for all, which can be gauged from a careful reading of *Vita Consecrata*.¹

¹ Cf. Juan Pablo II, *Exhortación Post sinodal sobre Vita Consecrata* (=VC), (Post-Synodal Exhortation on Consecrated Life) Rome 1996, 15.

2.- This conviction leads me to another very important point, that is, *formation on a journey*, but a journey that lasts a lifetime. Formation does not refer only, as the document, *Walking from Christ*² expressly state, during the years in which we prepare for first profession or the final consecration. Rather, being formed is not that, but something that never ends, or better yet, something that starts with the first call of the Lord and ends with the visit of "sister bodily death." That is why it is necessary to speak of a "formation that never ends."

The Magisterium of the Church has for years convey this idea. The document entitled, *Essential Elements of the Doctrine of the Church on Religious Life in 1983* stated that "Life is in a constant process of development. It is not stable. The Religious is neither called nor consecrated once and for all. The call of God and consecration to him continue throughout life, able to deeply grow in ways that go beyond our understanding."³ "We are called to remain novices all throughout life; to mature "progressively in us the attitude of the disciple, always listening to the teacher, and of the pilgrim, always following in the right direction."⁴ For his part, John Paul II affirms, "Precisely because of its purpose of transforming the whole person, the requirements of formation never ends. Indeed, it is necessary that Consecrated Persons be provided the opportunity to grow in their commitment to the charism and mission of their Institute."⁵

3.- Another conviction that I underscore here is that formation is primarily allowing oneself to be transformed into and configured with the Master; allowing the Spirit *to conform us* with Him. A fundamental attitude that must constantly be maintained by both those in initial and ongoing formation is "open one's whole life to the Holy Spirit."⁶ Formation is "conversion to the Word of God"⁷; it is changing attitudes in order to better accept the Word of God, thus letting our lives be more conformed to Christ, and not just merely be a knowing more.

Our calling entails following, a total following that is binding and all embracing; a following that seeks to assimilate and make ones own the attitudes, values, and way of life of Jesus of Nazareth, the Master – as suggested by a text, very important to me, i.e., *Vita Consecrata*, which describes formation as a "progressive assimilation of the sentiments of Christ."⁸ Formation is simply "being converted",⁹ transforming the mind and heart according to the mind and heart of Christ. Formation is a dynamic process of growth in which each person opens his heart to the Gospel in daily life, committing oneself to the ongoing conversion to follow Christ with ever greater fidelity to his charism.

This leads one to take radical life as a normal requirement of following Christ. If religious life is to "reproduce" and "follow more closely" the Life of Jesus, then evangelical radicalism is not *optional*, but an option for life.¹⁰ The theology of formation¹¹ has surpassed the model of

² CIVCSVA, *Caminando desde Cristo (=CDC)*, (*Walking from Christ*) Rome 2002, 15.

³ CIVCSVA, *Elementos esenciales de la doctrina de la Iglesia sobre la vida religiosa* (Essential Elements of the Church on Religious Life), Rome, 1983, II.8. n. 44.

⁴ Amadeo Cencini, *La formación permanente* (Ongoing Formation), Madrid 2002, 53-54.

⁵ VC, 65.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ VC, 68.

⁸ VC, 65.

⁹ VC, 109.

¹⁰ In this context it is worth remembering that in the origins of consecrated life, the Gospel, the integrity of the Gospel, and firm will to live it and to configure one's own life to him, was the fundamental criterion of vocational discernment. This meant that Consecrated Persons lived a radical evangelical life. It's time to walk from the Gospel, if we want to revitalize our life and mission, and if we wish to move away from the mediocrity of life and mission. cf. Jose Rodriguez Carballo, OFM, *Consecrated Life in Europe: Commitment to An Evangelical Prophecy* in USG 2'10, 86-87; also in *Truth and Life*, year LXIX, n. 258, 18-20.

"imitation" and has deepened the model of "following", which is being forged by the model of "identification" with the sentiments of Christ. This involves both initial and continuing formation, a profoundly human formation that is, at the same time, evangelically demanding.

4.- A fourth conviction is this: formation is primarily accomplished in every day life; in situations experienced by the community itself, assuming the usual things, such as joy, fatigue, pain, success, and failure as prime moments offered by the Lord to transform our lives. In formation, one must not ignore the most ordinary mediations by which the Lord can be present. Being formed and to form is to embrace life as formation in itself so that "every attitude and behavior should manifest the full and joyful belonging to God, in the important moments, such as in the ordinary circumstances of everyday life."¹²

5.- This conviction leads me to affirm the need to ensure learning experiences throughout the entire process; experiences that are well prepared, accompanied, and evaluated; experiences that lead to a *before* and *after* – if don't want to fall into mere experiences.

6.- Both initial and ongoing formation must "be formation of the whole person,"¹³ i.e., integral formation; it takes into account the whole person, so that it his physical, mental, moral and intellectual qualities may develop in a harmonious way while being active in social and community life. The formation process is to feed the whole life, and not just one dimension, important as may be. Therefore, care must be taken of the human, Christian, and charismatic dimensions, and as such, must "cover" the four vital centers of the person, namely, the mind (important concepts), the heart (that is, to assimilate and customize concepts, but for this, feelings are essentials), the hands (formation must be practical), and the feet (formation begins with life and leads to life because it lives from a mission perspective).

7.- While remaining faithful to the Gospel and to one's own charism, the formative process should be aware of the uniqueness of the person and the mystery of God inherent in each one. That is why we have to follow a personalized process, suitable to each person. At the same time, it should inculturate itself in the environmental conditions and time in which it develops. This is very important for dialogue with contemporary culture and the Gospel. In this sense, studies must be considered one of the essential components of formation, according to the particular gifts of each one.

8.- Taking into account the demands of formation and the situation in which our candidates come to us or in which our fraternities/communities find themselves, I think it is essential that formation promote an authentic sense of discipline, directed toward honest self-understanding, self-control, fraternal life, and apostolic and missionary service.

¹¹ Cf. Amadeo Cencini, *Formazione permanente: ci crediamo davvero?* Roma 2011, pp. 21-26; "It must be said that real formation is when Christ becomes truly the form – in the deep and pervasive sense of the term – of the personality of the one called. He becomes the standard of life, or the footsteps in which he walks. This goes well beyond the levels of imitation or discipleship, though placing itself in continuity with it and integrating-assuming its undoubted positive value. It is as ever interesting and rich in meaning the fact that this invite should be an introduction to the hymn of the kenosis, almost explaining the content of these feelings that the one being called must learn to live, and which are, in fact, the feelings manifested in the Son who did not withhold anything for himself jealousy, in his loving self abasement to become man, a servant, humble, and obedient unto the Cross ... Would not the hymn of the kenosis be called, then, at this point the hymn of the feelings of the Son?" pp. 24-25.

¹² VC, 65.

¹³ VC, 65.

A determining factor and, therefore, key in vocational discernment, is being passionate, passionate for Christ and passionate for Humanity. Being passionate is the hallmark of people in love. The priest is called to a radical discipleship or, if desired, to a passionate discipleship. Being passionate, in fact, is what dynamizes vocational choice. Being passionate is what moves all the energies and places anyone who lives it in a constant attitude "of following more closely" in the footsteps of Christ, embracing the most radical demands of discipleship. Being passionate enables a definitive commitment for life, and places one in a constant search for creative fidelity. Being passionate is what leads to live for others, especially the poorest; it is to give of oneself gratuitously and living from the *logic of the gift*. Being passionate is what sustains the sense of belonging to Christ and to one's own Order or Congregation; lastly, being passionate allows us to cross over any type of cultural barrier or geographical distance in order to "restore" the gift of the Gospel [as center focus]. Such passion requires self-discipline. Without it will quickly be extinguished.

9.- Religious life is a gift in the Church and for the Church: "The profession of the evangelical counsels belongs indisputably to the life and holiness of the Church";¹⁴ it is an "expression of the holiness of the Church."¹⁵ That is why we cannot think or live if not in communion with the Church. Initial formation must foster in our *formandi* a great love for the Church, both universal and local; a love which ongoing formation should nourish carefully: "One cannot contemplate the face of Christ without seeing him shine in his Church. To love Christ is to love the Church in her people and institutions,"¹⁶ as our Founders did. It is this love which will allow Religious Life to fulfill its prophetic mission at all times by proclaiming and denouncing as circumstances require.

10.- All this should take shape in a *Project of Formation or Ratio Formationis*, which can be either provincial or general. The *Project of Formation or Ratio* must respond to the demands of formation, which in addition to what has already been said, it should be gradual and organic. To this end, in such a *Project*, general and specific objectives should be clearly included just as the means to achieve these goals in each of the formative stages should be as well. At the same time, it should provide the basic criteria for vocational discernment in order to move from one stage to the other. The *Project* must be evaluated periodically. Having a project, in fact, guards us against personalisms for the sake of the community, of improvisations with an air of clarity of principles, objectives, means, etc., and of measuring effectiveness merely based on numbers to scale the art of formation, thus prioritizing evangelical quality.

Finding the Essentials

Finding what is essential is the main and most urgent challenge today for the Church, the human person, and, of course, for religious life. Time, routine, the usual ... are filling us with accidental things that seem to be essential and indispensable. That is why we have to halt from time to time along the way to ask what is essential, necessary, indispensable ... and what is accidental, contingent, and even superfluous in our lives. We must be silent from time to time to identify what constitutes the essence of religious life in its very depths. Today more than ever we are being impelled – while transcending the peripheral aspects – to go back to the very heart of our Christian and religious option. This is the great task that today religious life has up ahead, namely, to identify the indispensable elements of this project of life. And it is precisely in the indispensable elements that formation has to focus and concentrate on, both in initial and ongoing formation.

¹⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, 44; cf. *VC* 29

¹⁵ *VC*, 32.

¹⁶ *CdC*, 32

Since Vatican II to the present day religious life has done a serious process of discernment as much at the level of each Order or Congregation as that of religious life itself. The theological reflection in this regard has been an important dynamic element to identify and – when it was necessary – to return to the essential and indispensable. As John Paul II recognized, it is about a "sensitive and hard period [...], a time rich in hopes, projects, and innovating proposals." All these efforts have been made with the aim of greater fidelity to those essential items. Unfortunately, they "have not always been crowned with positive results", thus leading many to discouragement. It's time, nonetheless, to continue that work with "new momentum".¹⁷

Consequently, the current theological reflection, as shown in the *seminar on Theology of Consecrated Life: Identity and Significance of Apostolic Religious Life*, held in Rome in 2011, and previously at the *First International Congress of Consecrated Life*, also in Rome in 2004, must continue to pursue these essential and indispensable elements of religious life, which are part of its identity, "i.e., those elements without which there can be no radical Christian life, no radical following of Christ."¹⁸ Without these elements, the identity will be a "liquid identity", for in the sense of belonging it loses cohesion and the limits of the "I" run the risk of being, every day, too flexible excessively.

Faced with an identity crisis that has certainly affected Religious Life in the post-Conciliar years, it is urgent to clarify such an identity and base it on a relationship model rather than a model of contraposition of strong identities, as happened not long ago. The task is as urgently needed as arduous, for it is not easy to stay faithful to our identity and, at the same time, be opened to integration with the other. A clear and open identity play a fundamental role both in initial and ongoing formation.

The aforesaid *International Congress of Consecrated Life* as well as the *Seminar on Theology of Religious Life* both have identified three elements that are characteristic of Religious Life at this historical moment we are living, namely, spirituality, fraternal life in community and mission. Benedict XVI insisted on these same elements at an audience granted to Superiors General on November 26, 2010.¹⁹ These are the key elements of the identity of Consecrated Life which each Order or Institute, in my view, must add, what characterizes his own charismatic choice. Formation, therefore, must insist mainly on one or the other at this time.

The Spiritual Dimension of Religious Life. You Are Everything:²⁰ Rooted and Built Up in Jesus Christ, Firm in the Faith (Col 2, 7)

Point of Departure

This is the first theological foundation of religious life. On it we must re-establish and re-found Consecrated Life. "Religious life consists in being completely seduced by the living God."²¹ The experience of the Religious is that of the prophet who said, "O LORD, you have deceived me,

¹⁷ Cf. VC, 13.

¹⁸ Felicísimo Martínez, *Situación actual y desafíos de la vida religiosa* (Current Situation and Challenges of Religious Life), in Frontera 44, 55, Vitoria 2004.

¹⁹ Cf. Discourse of the Holy Father Benedict XVI to the participants at the General Assembly of the Union of Superiors General (USG) and the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) at the Clementine Hall on Friday Nov. 26, 2010.

²⁰ San Francisco de Asís, *Alabanzas al Dios altísimo* (St. Francis of Assisi, *Praises to God Most High*), 3.

²¹ Mary Maher, *Llamados y enviados. Reflexiones sobre la Teología de la Vida Religiosa* (Called and Sent. Reflections on the Theology of Religious Life), CONFER, n. 190, 2011, 55.

and I was deceived; you art stronger than I, and you have prevailed" (Jer. 20: 7) or even that of the Apostle, who stated having been chosen from birth and have been called by his sole grace (cf. Gal 1: 15).

God is the only truly necessary; the truly central One in the life of a Religious.²² Religious life cannot be understood except from the experience of being called, seduced, and drawn by the living and true God, and from the radical following of Christ "in a community of disciples to serve and do ministry in His name."²³ Its mission is none other than affirming, with life itself, the absolute primacy of God.²⁴ His strength and apostolic fruitfulness lie in intimate union with Christ and in the configuration with Him, expressed and realized through the profession of the evangelicals counsels.²⁵ We read *Consecrated Life* that "the more one lives in Christ, the better one can serve him in others, going even to the furthest missionary outposts and facing the greatest dangers."²⁶ This configuration with Christ makes Religious Life "*a living memorial of Jesus' way of living and acting...a living tradition of the Savior's life and message.*"²⁷

In Formation special attention must given to the experience of God, so that one can develop the ability and sensitivity to capture the language of God, feel his presence, and his loving manner of acting in everyday life. It is the experience of God that leads us to say with Job: "Before I knew by reputation, now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42: 5-6).

Experience always marks a *before* and an *after*, even in a personal relationship with God. The experience of God is always *disruptive*, producing the effect of an interior earthquake, to the point that what was bitter before becomes afterwards "sweetness of soul and body".²⁸ Without the *after* "the experience is consumed, but not consumed."²⁹ One cannot confuse the experience of God by consuming prayers and pious exercises even though they are all necessary. The consummated experience generates attitudes, behaviors, and, ultimately, a new life, a life of those who feel and live as a disciple. The experience of God, more than any other, forges one's own existence because, transforming it into an "icon" of the Lord.

Formed in order to form in the primacy of God

In times of winter, strong winds, and storms like the one we are experiencing, it is urgent to establish or reestablish religious life on the rock that is Christ, the bedrock of radical faith, on the experience of God. If we do not want to build on quicksand, then we must foster in both ongoing and initial formation a true experience of God, an experience that leads us to open ourselves to Him, and accept Him unconditionally. It should be an experience that results in an *irreversible movement* directed toward conversion and in a *strong identity* that becomes a *mission*. It should be an

²² "Every Christian is called to the perfection of charity and to put Christ at the center of his existence, saying: 'You alone are the Lord' ... The baptized with a marriage vocation makes the radical choice for Christ by accepting first his/her spouse and afterwards his children ...; the 'you alone' they direct to Christ cannot be effective without a 'you alone' directed also to his/her spouse. Those called to religious life, however, make a radical choice for Christ without either a spouse or offspring; they say to Christ, 'You alone' without another 'you alone'. Sylvie Robert, *La teología de los consejos evangélicos en la Vida Consagrada Apostólica* [The Theology of Evangelical Counsels in the Apostolic Consecrated Life], in *CONFER*, vol 50, n. 190, 75-76.

²³ *Idem*.

²⁴ Cf. *Consecrated Life* (=CV), 85.

²⁵ Cf. VC 30.

²⁶ CV, 76.

²⁷ CV, 22.

²⁸ St. Francis of Assisi, *Testament*, 3.

²⁹ Lola Arieta, *Itinerarios en la formación. Pista para el camino del seguimiento de Jesús* [Itineraries in Formation. Pointers for Following Jesus], Vitoria 2007, in Frontera, 56, 48.

experience that involves a process such that one can say, "he was there! I did not see, hear, or touch him, but he was there." The path of faith begins from this confession.

The experience of God we are talking about is, first of all, to be formed and to form in a radical faith and in the experience of the Absolute who relativizes everything else. It is radical faith or theological experience that gives meaning and flavor to the project of life of a Religious. Radical faith is what leads the believer, the Religious to trustful surrender to the providence of God, even before it translates into religious or historical commitments. Radical faith is what leads us into the contemplative dimension and is nourished by it; and is what envelopes the whole person and becomes the source of true joy, unfailing hope, and our witness in the world.

It is clear, then, that radical faith is not confused with the mere knowledge or theological reflection, repetition of formulas, or ideological system of voluntarist conviction. It is neither to be confused with mere religious feelings nor expended in the world of emotions; nor does it have much to do with an emotional experience of moments of prayer. The radical faith that we are talking about is not reduced to the moments of prayer as such, even when it is nourished by them. Rather, radical faith is a finding, a gradual and living act of welcoming the reality of God and man in the light of Jesus Christ. Radical faith is, above all, an experience of trust in the Lord as shown by Peter when he stated, "relying on your word I will lower the nets" (Lk 5, 5). It is a trust that goes beyond all reason, all human guarantees, our strength, our reasons, and our lights. This trust is what sustains fidelity, even in the most trying moments. Radical faith, therefore, introduces us in the way of discipleship till we "have the same feelings of Christ" (Phil 2, 5).

To have this experience, it is not enough merely to return to regular observance or extend the time for prayer and meditation, or multiply liturgical and devotional practices of each religious family. To have this experience we must go beyond the merely ritual and mere observance. It is necessary to ask it insistently; receive it with meekness because it is a gift of the Spirit; and consistently exercise it through an intense personal prayer, of daily listening to the Word of God, and the celebration of the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation.

If there is a serious problem in religious life today, then it would be on the issue of spirituality and radical faith. Likewise, if ongoing and initial formation should pay special attention to something today, it would be on the experience God and educating in the radical faith. Without Him we can do nothing (cf. Jn 15: 5). Faith, freely accepted, is the only solid foundation on which to build a life of prayer, chastity, fraternity, poverty, and service.

Of course, when we speak of spirituality, we are talking about:

- A *unified spirituality* to make us children of heaven and earth, in which the world, far from being an obstacle to an encounter with God, becomes a normal way through which God manifest himself.
- A *spirituality in dynamic tension* that makes mystics and prophets of us and leads us to live passionately for God and humanity at the same time.
- A *spirituality of presence* to transform us into disciples and witnesses.³⁰

Among the Formative Mediations to experience God, I underscore the following:

³⁰ Alvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, *Profecía de la existencia y presencia amorosa de Dios en la vida consagrada* [Prophecy of Existence and Loving Presence in Consecrated Life], in *Theós. Identidad y profecía. Teología de la Vida Consagrada hoy* in Theos [Identity and Prophecy. Theology of Consecrated Life]. USG, Roma 2011, 79ss.

1. God can only be spoken of from experience and not from hearsay. And if this is true, and I personally am quite convinced of that, then we are entering into a critical area with regard to formation, that is, the need for spiritual masters and true spiritual guidance. In initial formation this requires the presence of *formators* who are on the path of this process, people who are credible for their life of faith and true masters of the spirit. For its part, ongoing formation stands in need of masters who, having quenched their thirst for God, like the Samaritan woman, become witnesses and teachers in search of the waters of life (cf. Jn 4, 1ff). I think this should be a real priority in both ongoing and initial formation because, in my view, there is a large gap right now in religious life and, perhaps, also in the Church.
2. On the other hand, particularly in the homes of initial formation, it is necessary to foster an atmosphere of silence,³¹ intense prayer, deep spiritual exchanges, places in which faith is assessed constantly without fear. Only then will young people in initial formation and adults in ongoing formation will be able to witness in their own search, that God lives, that Jesus is Lord, and the Spirit is the force that enlivens. Then the fraternities/communities will be shining places of faith, places of prayer and Gospel reference for the religious themselves as well as for men and women searching for meaning in their lives. This is an urgency felt in religious life and felt by those in formation; they feel the need for formation houses that are "schools of prayer".³² This is a response which many lay people expect of us, religious, namely, to form communities where life of prayer is lived out as an obvious priority. This, in fact, is a means of evangelization which cannot be forgotten – if we wish to respond appropriately to so many expectations that come to us from our society, so deeply secularized, but also in search of meaning.
3. Other formative mediations to enhance the experience of God are: formation to an authentic liturgical spirit; introduction to the study and prayerful reading of the Word of God,³³ authentic Marian devotion, retreats, and hermitages.

Also important is a suitable education/formation that enable the reading of one's life and history with the eyes of faith, the contemplation of Christ in the poor and the evangelical hierarchy of values and activities, as well as proper use time, taking into account the requirements of fraternal life in community, people's needs and mission, and the use of the means of communication with the necessary discretion.³⁴

Fraternal Life in Community. From life in common to communion of life

³¹ Es el camino de los místicos: "la noche sosegada, en par de los levantes de la aurora, la música callada, la soledad sonora, la cena que recrea y enamora" [This is the path of the mystics: the quiet night at par with the lift of the dawn, silent music, sound solitude, and supper that refreshes and deepens love] St. John of the Cross *Spiritual Canticles*.

³² Formation has great masters of mystical prayer, such as St. Peter of Alcantara, from the *Treatise on Prayer and Devotion*, "meditation reasons with work and fruit, but contemplation does so without work and fruit. The former searches while the latter finds; the former ruminates the food, while the latter tastes it; the former thinks and makes considerations, while the latter is content with a simple gaze of things because it already has its love and taste; the former is a means, while the latter is an end; lastly, the former one is a path and movement, while the latter is the end of this path and movement", (*Chapter XII, Some advice during this exercise, eighth advice*).

³³ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Exhortación apostólica Verbum Domini*, Roma, 2010, ns. 83. 86.

³⁴ "The media culture also carries counter values within it. And, therefore, requires a critical mind and wise discernment", Vera Ivanese Bonbonatto in a presentation given at a Seminar. *Theological Reflections on New Experiences of Apostolic Life*.

Starting point

Jesus inaugurates a type of family based on listening to the Word and in the bonds of faith (cf. Acts 2, 42ss). This family is called to transform the bonds of flesh and blood (cf. Mk 10, 22, Mt 19, 29).

Fraternal life in community is the second indispensable element of religious life. The ways of living it change according to the charism, the sociological models of religious community, the forms of organization, and community rhythms. The essentials, however, remain, such as fraternal life in community that shows the world what Christian love is; and a fraternal life in community that becomes a true "family united in Christ,"³⁵ where each one makes his own needs known to the other and where all members can reach human, Christian, and religious maturity fully.

What we said earlier regarding the experience of God, we can now say in rapport with fraternal life in community, namely, that religious life is called to be re-founded or re-established and, of course, revitalized, starting from a meaningful fraternal life in community – evangelically speaking. Fraternal life in community is, in fact, one of the strongest signs of the love of the Eternal One, but also the *place* where renewal of religious life becomes more credible. Fraternal life in community is also a strategic and decisive reality, from the spiritual and psychological standpoint as well as from the theological and sociological point of view, an aspect of religious life, which, perhaps, is more credible today.

In a culture that coined "egotism," the primacy of self, and, consequently, the most outrageous individualism; in a culture like ours that has weakened the primary groups, such as the couple, family, the village, and even friendship, fraternal life in community has now a great and valuable witness to our contemporaries. It shows the most essential aspect of Christian life, namely, brotherly love, and because of that, is, in itself, a proclamation of the Gospel. For many, it is the first form of evangelization.³⁶

Being formed in order to form in fraternal life in community that is meaningful

Fraternal life in community is not only an essential element in religious life, but also one of the most attractive for many young people who draw close to it. In fraternal life in community, they look for a space where faith and the Word of God are shared and celebrated in common; a space that places the person at the center, thus multiplying spaces of meeting rather than structures; a vital space where there is a community of goods and services as well as shared mission; a space where reconciliation and fraternal correction is lived out and where each brother accompanies the path of fidelity of the other brothers; and a space characterized by a simple way of life³⁷ and openness to share with the people, especially the poorest among them.

³⁵ *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, II, 25.

³⁶ As stated in the Seminar and underscored by Fr. Mauro Johri, "the credibility of evangelization is shown in the way fraternity is lived out", cf. M. Johri, *¿De la vida común a la comunión de vida!* [From Common Life to a Communion of Life], en Theos, *Identidad y Profecía. Teología de la vida religiosa hoy* [Identity and Prophecy. Theology of Consecrated Life], USG, 2011, 88ss.

³⁷ Vera Ivanese Bonbonatto, in the aforementioned lecture at the Seminar entitled, *Theological Reflection on New Experiences of Apostolic Life* stated in this regard that, "The constant search for austerity and radicalness of life is a hallmark of the new experiences of apostolic religious life. ... Radicalness and austerity of life are then expressed in terms of courageous renouncement of the comfort postmodern society offers; it indicates, furthermore, a break with the patterns of consumerism and individualism. Consequently, they are conceived as prophetic signs".

According to these searches and demands by many of the young people who come to us – which to me seem quite reasonable – *fraternal life* in community that is signified and nourished by the Eucharist, the sacrament of unity and charity, *entails* sharing in both the material and spiritual, in the search for God and Jesus, in prayer in common, and fraternal exchanges; it also entails a continued communal discernment that makes it possible to preserve its own charismatic identity, and guards its members from a routine and mediocre way of life.

Within this context, we can say that a fraternity or community that wishes to be defined as formative must believe themselves called to respond to the requirements listed above; they must also constantly strive to find appropriate means to recreate communion, intercommunication, warmth, and truth in the members' relationships with each other. A fraternity or community that wishes to be formative should be a prophetic community and a signal fraternity that knows how to read the signs of the times³⁸ and is able to incarnate the Gospel in a concrete and understandable way for today's culture.

A fraternity called to form, ought to know and believe itself in formation; seeking together what pleases the Lord; accepting each other, limiting its own personal freedom for the sake of others' freedom; and submitting to the demands of community life and the essential structures of the fraternity. A formative fraternity must be definitively the sacrament of transcendence and, at the same time, both deeply human and humanizing. For this purpose, values have to be cultivated, such as mutual friendship, courtesy, a cheerful spirit, in such a way that it may be a permanent stimulus of peace and joy, while always putting Christ at the center.

Formative Mediations for Fraternal Life in Community

In order to be formed and to form in fraternal life in community, it is important to pay attention to some mediations that are derived from what we have been indicating thus far. Here below are those that, in my view, may be considered the most important:

1.- One of the first mediations is ordinary life as a school of formation. It is the everyday, normal existence that holds the true secret of formation and makes it ongoing. To run away from this would be a childish pretense, thus becoming for the religious an ongoing frustration, perhaps in search of permanent alibi.³⁹

2.- Another important mediation is that of *conflict*. Apparently, it may seem a contradiction, but conflict faced with maturity, insight, and authenticity can be an important formative element. In the face of conflict, formation should help both the youth and adults not to react by flight, accommodation, or competition, but by collaboration instead. This last one is the one that does not shy away from conflict, but faces it, and, at the same time, thanks to its mainly supportive attitude, is respectful of opposing views to its own, able to dialogue and collaborate, honestly seeking a solution to the conflict, while calling into question its own reasons.⁴⁰

For such a reaction, one must have an attitude of dialogue as a lighted path: one illuminates the other, exchanging small sparks of truth. On the other hand, in order that dialogue may be possible two attitudes are necessary, i.e., *interior intelligence* and *relational capacity*. By *interior intelligence*, we understand it to mean awareness that every relationship is a challenge as much to

³⁸ Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 4; CV, 81, Paul VI, *Octogesima adveniens*, 1965, 3.

³⁹ Cf. Amadeo Cencini, “Guardate al futuro...” *Perché ha ancora senso consacrarsi a Dio* [Look to the Future...] Why it still matters to be consecrated to God, Ed. Paoline, Milan 2010, 96.

⁴⁰ Cf. Luis López Yarto, *Relaciones humanas en comunidad. Instrumento de ayuda*. Frontera 54, Vitoria 2006, 63ss.

one's own maturity as to one's immaturity. This intelligence is what leads us to discover what each one carries in his heart. By *relational capacity*, we mean the ability to learn to listen to others in humility, so as to be in tune with what the other is going thru.

3.- Very important is also *interpersonal communication*. This is the first step to advance in building an authentic fraternal life in community. In order for communication to be a tool for building fraternal life in community, it must take into account three levels: what we do, what we think, and what we feel. Communication is more than a simple exchange of ideas or news. A deep qualitative communication is one that has to do with a situation in which people meet. Communication is to enter directly in relation with the "other" whom I can definitely call "you." It is by encountering a "you" that makes "me" all the more.⁴¹

One aspect that I do not think to be secondary is that in order to believe in a mature communication, where there are heterogeneous communities, where communication does not end up being a trap to create members similar to each other or members who are self-selected. A formation house should reflect as far as possible a family environment where there are elders, adults, youth, and children. It is necessary to know how to live and grow with the "other" and the "different" from the beginning of consecrated life. In this sense international and multicultural communities are very important, where one is forced to deal daily with the international, intercultural and missionary.

In this context, I would like to point out, even if only in passing, the kindness of inter-congregational experiences since initial formation, provided they do not replace but integrate the formation offered by the Institute itself. These experiences will enable collaboration to go beyond its own Order or the Institute itself. The situation religious life is going thru is forcing us – it's pity that we do so out of obligation! – to share, increasingly, experiences, formative paths, projects, energies, and institutions.

Special care must be taken of communication in formation. I draw your attention here to a temptation to be avoided. Despite the many means of communication available to religious, I have the impression that interpersonal communication today has weakened much. Every time we meet, we are more interconnected, but less communicative; there is more community, but, at the same time, more alone. This can lead to tragic consequences with regards to vocation.

Within this context it seems important to point out the need to work in formation for fraternal life in community in the dimension of affective maturity, so as to be able to relate to others. A healthy affective maturity depends largely on the formative environment of a fraternity or community.

4.- When forming for fraternal life in community, it is also necessary to create *interdependence*,⁴² that is, the ability to collaborate on a common project and walk together towards the same goal; to walk together because I feel that my own realization and happiness depend on it. Thanks to interdependence and collaboration, the group disappears to become a family, consisting, as we have already said, of heterogeneous people and the wealth of roles. We become a family where common standards of conduct develop and a satisfactory form of leadership is established.

⁴¹ Cf. Martín Buber, *Yo y Tú* [You and I], Buenos Aires, 1974

⁴² Sobre la interdependencia [About Interdependence], cf. Th. M., Newcomb, *The acquaintance process*, New York, 1961.

5.- Finally, I want to say a word about a mediation that I consider very important both in ongoing and initial formation, that is, the project of fraternal life and mission.⁴³ In this project, there should be no concern of operational efficiency driving its development, but, rather, the need to integrate harmoniously the whole of our life and establish criteria in it to guide life and mission. Among the priorities of the charism and evangelizing mission, there must be during initial formation a dynamic feedback within which to register both personal and communal projects.

Mission Bearers of the Gift of the Gospel to the Men and Women of Today

Starting point

The Seminar on Religious Life as well as many other forums insist on mission as an essential element of Religious Life.⁴⁴ Benedict XVI reminded us in the aforementioned audience to the Superiors General of November 26, 2010, that "Mission is the way of being of the Church and, in it, of Consecrated Life; it is part of our identity." The Religious stands out for being *called and sent* (cf. Mk 3: 14-15).⁴⁵ As such, the Religious is a partaker of Christ's mission, *ho apostolos*, sent by the Father (cf. Heb 3, 1), so that "all other vocations and missions are as constellations placed around the person of Christ".⁴⁶

In this way, you cannot understand the mission of a Religious without an existential reference to Christ. If Jesus does nothing on his own (cf. Jn 8, 28) and if in his ministry there is no reference to his mission – for what is at the center is the Father who sent him, ("My food is do the will of him who sent me "[Jn 4, 34]) – then the same must be said of the Religious called to live in a deep filial anthropology.⁴⁷

With all that I want to reaffirm is that in the life of the Religious – as I mentioned above – all and, therefore, also mission, start from that "you alone", of that "You are everything." The mission of cannot be reduced to a religious volunteering, or simply explain it with the paradigms of contemporary thought. You cannot separate the "apostolicity" of the Religious from its Christological meaning with all that this entails.

However, this aspect is not enough. In the mission, the Religious is called to constantly confront the process of post-modernity and all that it brings with it. As a result, an important

⁴³ Project comes from the Latin verb, *proicio*, and its past participle, *proiectum*. Its first meaning is to launch forward. When we talk about a project of fraternal life and mission, we're talking about a life that, from its present, seeks to make room for creativity, while projecting forward in view of a successful life. The project of life is, in my opinion, the best antidote against any form of narcissistic withdrawal on oneself. The project of life is justified from a dynamic conception of the person, from a conception of man as a pilgrim, *homo vator*. Therefore, I consider these and other aspects of the project of fraternal life and mission to be important. cf. Nico Dal Molin, *Il mistero di una scelta. Giovani e vita consacrata* [The Mystery of a Choice. Youth and Consecrated Life], Ed. Paoline, 2006, 140ss.

⁴⁴ Cf. Josep M. Abella, CMF, *¿Nuevos horizontes para la misión de la vida consagrada?* [New Horizons for the Mission of Consecrated Life?], in *Theós. Identidad y profecía. Teología de la vida consagrada hoy*, USG, Roma 2011, 95ss.

⁴⁵ At the Seminar on Theology of Religious Life, Mary Maher, SSND, reminded us on repeated occasions in her speech, *Llamados y enviados: Reflexiones sobre la Teología de la Vida Religiosa Apostólica hoy* (Called and Sent. Reflections on the Theology of Religious Life).

⁴⁶ Paolo Martinelli, ofm-cap, *La persona consagrada de vida apostólica. Una reflexión teológica* [The Consecrated Person of Apostolic Life], in *CONFER*, Vol. 50, n. 190, 83.

⁴⁷ Cf. VC 18, 65-69, quoted by Paolo Martinelli, in his article to which we made reference earlier, pg. 85.

challenge that is posed in relation to the Religious mission is that of facing the complexity of the current moment.

For all who are consecrated, the world holds a profound theological significance. It is not something to be endured or something to be avoided, but a reality that has to be contemplated through the eyes of God and loved as it is loved by the God. It is a reality that becomes an opportunity to follow Christ more closely. In this sense we can say that in the reality of man and woman today, following Christ is not something merely optional – even less so for the Religious – but a characterizing ingredient of that discipleship.

Reflecting on Religious Life in recent decades has made Religious more aware of the need not to give their back to the world, especially in these times in which postmodern culture – or as some prefer to call it, pre-Christian culture with its wealth of opportunities, but also of uncertainties, disappointment, and skepticism – presents us with many challenges. Neither the Church nor Religious Life is foreign to the changes we are experiencing in these times both "delicate and tough."⁴⁸ Moreover, Religious Life has made a clear choice, at least at the level of reflection, to accompany our world, not because it has ready answers to the questions that people today pose themselves, but because, as men and women of our time, they perceive themselves as *seekers of meaning*.

To be formed in order to form in and for the mission

Let us discuss a principle that seems basic, elementary, and probably, therefore, critical. As a component of the mission of Religious Life, it is necessary that formation, both ongoing and initial, should help discover life as a mission, as Jesus lived it, an entire life given to proclaiming the Good News. This leads me to make my own Lola Arrieta's statement, who said, "Life in mission is discovered by walking after Jesus by familiarizing oneself with his pedagogy, and methods, even though it may take time to learn."⁴⁹ If we want to be "missionaries" and "apostles" we have to attend the school of Jesus and learn from that school how to look at our world.

The current situation is characterized, among other things, by its complexity. This means that those who want to be bearers of the gift of the Gospel here and now have to acquire the necessary wisdom and courage *to deal* with the *complexity*, without thereby giving up on the search for the founding or essential experience and the pursuit of the *Unum necesarium*.

John Paul II stated: "Formation is a vital process by which a person converts to the Word of God and learns the art of seeking for signs of God in the world's realities."⁵⁰ The world, history, economics, politics, the various arts, the lives of the people around us, and our life are all strewn with traces of the presence of God. Today we cannot think of formation in and for Religious Life that puts us or our *formandi* in the condition of inhabitants of a besieged city.

If mission is always to be *inter gentes*, then formation, whether initial or ongoing, must be carried out in an ongoing dialogue with reality, in an attitude of respectful listening to everything that comes from the complex situation that our world is going through without, however, suspending a critical judgment about it. A defensive formation, or what would be even worse, a formation full of negativity in relation to the world today would have tragic consequences in evangelizing mission to which we, Religious, are called, for that would prevent a fruitful dialogue

⁴⁸ VC, 13.

⁴⁹ Lola Arrieta, *Obra citada*, 96.

⁵⁰ VC, 68.

with the current culture. It would, consequently, prevent *restoring* the gift of the Gospel [as center focus] to the men and women of our time. A defensive formation and one that is full of negativity would make us foreign to our world, leading us to present a God foreign to the history of humanity, with the risk of contributing to build a world without God.

For Religious life, and more particularly for the Apostolic Religious Life, an inserted formation is required that is both well accompanied⁵¹ and close to the joys and sufferings of our brothers and sisters, the men and women of today. It should be a formation that allows us, as disciples and missionaries, to place ourselves in "a reality which changes many times at a frenetic pace";⁵² An appropriate formation to continue with the hand on the plow, despite the harshness of the land and the inclement weather; a personal formation for this time because the road ahead may be too long (1 Kings 19). A formation that responds not only to a time of changes – like many of those in history where novelty abounded – but also to a time of change, in a historical moment where changes are so complex and accelerated that it is easy to get the sense that we do not know where to step. It should be a formation full of *kindness* and *empathy* toward the world as God loves and criticizes it (cf. Jn 17.9). It should be an outlook that doesn't stop from projecting a positive and evangelical outlook regarding the contexts and cultures in which we find ourselves, while discovering the unprecedented opportunities of grace which the Lord offers us. Formation should help "set out to sea",⁵³ delve fearlessly into the *new Areopagus*,⁵⁴ and remain, in the words of Benedict XVI, as *outposts of faith*.

As I have said, we cannot turn our backs on the reality that surrounds us and which, in one way or another, becomes part of ourselves. At the same time, however, because it is a mission rooted in a God who is Father and who, from the depth of his intimate communion and love, sent His Son to proclaim and make present the Good News of his kingdom under the action of the Holy Spirit, the mission of the disciples cannot fail to keep in mind that the centrality of their lives is due to the Triune God as the integrating principle of their lives. Moreover, given that Religious Life is in itself a proclamation of the Gospel, the "missionary" and "apostle" can never neglect his own Consecrated Life, for he is called to be "a living exegesis of the Word of God" he must proclaim.⁵⁵

In a society like ours in which a man thinks he has reached "maturity" and, therefore, believes not to need God; in a world in which man comes to occupy the central position, which until recently God occupied, and in which God becomes a useless hypothesis and a competitor, not only to be avoided, but even eliminated, the "missionary" and "apostle" cannot fall into the same trap to proclaim, without God, his own message and which ends up being a pure ideology. This enables us in Religious Life to have to be formed and to form for a healthy harmony between being and doing, without subordinating elements of the way of life that each of us has embraced, and which are specific to each charism and to the work we have to do – even if these are apostolic in nature. Ongoing and initial formation should be responsible for the fundamental structure of the individual and the personalization of faith. Only on the basis of a Trinitarian faith and spirituality can we enter into the dynamics of the logic of the gift, which is the logic of the "missionary" and "apostle." It is faith in the Triune God that makes us less self-referential and to go out of ourselves, in order to go to the other and bring him/her the Good News of the Gospel.

⁵¹ Accompanying in formation is key if we want to avoid unpleasant surprises, but much more in inserted formation. This applies to the Friars in initial formation as well as those in ongoing formation, particularly, the brothers in the early years of their definitive profession.

⁵² *CdC*, 15.

⁵³ John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Rome 2000, 1.

⁵⁴ Cr. VC 96-99.

⁵⁵ Benedict XVI, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, 83.

Moreover, given the new situation we are living in and which is born of the socio-cultural changes that are occurring, even in traditionally Christian societies, what is required now is a new evangelization,⁵⁶ which is far from being a simple re-evangelization. This evangelization should be new because it is about making a second proclamation, though, in reality it is always the same one; an evangelization that is "new in its ardor, its methods, and its expressions."⁵⁷ Therefore, being formed and forming are required for an evangelizing mission which, without neglecting the ordinary activities of evangelization, gives priority to new initiatives in response to the challenges that come from the secular world we live in, but with particular attention to the new frontier areas.

In this sense the formation we give and receive must be very careful to read the *signs of the times and places* and life events that mark a particular period of history and through which, the Religious, should feel challenged by God and called to respond from the Gospel. These signs, moreover, should be flashes of light present in the dark night of our lives and the lives of our peoples; light posts of hope to be able to discern and interpret (cf. Lk 12, 56).⁵⁸

One of these challenges is that of language. Opting for a *new language* to be understood by men and women today is a requirement which cannot be ignored in mission. Today more than ever it is necessary to open the cage of language, so that communication of the Gospel may be more effective and fruitful. This requirement must be a concrete commitment in ongoing formation and should be present since initial formation – if we wish that evangelization be truly new.

Another requirement of formation for the mission is *passion for the truth*. It is certainly true that dialogue is the new name for mission, and this is a round trip which entails giving and receiving. It is, therefore, essential to be formed and to form for dialogue in its various meanings (ecumenical, interreligious, and with culture). However, it is also true that this does not mean we have to give up proposing the truth, which, for us, has a face, that is, Jesus Christ. Without passion for Truth, evangelization would fall into mere rhetoric and would become insignificant with the risk of falling into relativism. Passion for truth is essential if we don't want to be "children, tossed here and there and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles." (Eph 4, 14). When we have the experience of Paul that Christ lives within, we will feel how Christ himself urges him to give of himself to all (cf. 1 Cor 9, 19-22) in the logic of 2 Cor 5, 14, i.e., of the love of Christ which impels us.

The passion for truth that we are talking about is what will open mission to be mission *ad gentes* (cf. Mt 28, 19-20). A life touched by the dynamism of the Gospel becomes an overwhelming passion for the Kingdom. The "missionary" and "apostle", in turn, is transformed into a permanent crosser of borders of all kinds whether cultural, religious, or geographical.⁵⁹ If faith is strengthened by giving it away, then mission *ad gentes* is the full expression and to some extent the fulfillment of mission *inter gentes*. The explicit proclamation of the Gospel *ad gentes* is the culmination of our

⁵⁶ Cf. Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter in "motu proprio data", "Ubicumque et semper", by which the Pontifical Council for New Evangelization was established, on September 21, 2010, "This variety of situations demands careful discernment; to speak of a "new evangelization" does not in fact mean that a single formula should be developed that would hold the same for all circumstances. And yet it is not difficult to see that what all the Churches living in traditionally Christian territories need is a renewed missionary impulse, an expression of a new, generous openness to the gift of grace. Indeed we cannot forget that the first task will always be to make ourselves docile to the freely given action of the Spirit of the Risen One who accompanies all who are heralds of the Gospel and opens the hearts of those who listen. To proclaim fruitfully the Word of the Gospel one is first asked to have a profound experience of God."

⁵⁷ Juan Pablo II, *Discurso a la Asamblea del Celami* [Discourse to the Assembly of Celami], Port-au-Prince, 9 marzo 1983.

⁵⁸ Before becoming obsessed over adapting our structures to our possibilities, we should begin by carefully reading the signs of the times and places and let ourselves be challenged by them.

⁵⁹ Cf. John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, 25.

being in the world as both *disciples* and *missionaries*, after careful discernment to discover when "it pleases the Lord." ⁶⁰

One last note. Mission cannot be understood today unless it is a *shared mission with the laity*. In the varieties of ministries, all Christians are called to be bearers of the gift of the Gospel both *inter gentes* and *ad gentes*. The lay person is an evangelizer by its own right, not by a gracious concession or even less by way of substitution over shortages of clerical or religious personnel. Hence, there is a need for the Religious to enter into an *ecclesiological conversion* to give the laity the rightful place in evangelizing mission.

Formative Mediations for mission

Formative mediations can be deduced, as mentioned above. Without being too lengthy, I will indicate only a few.

1. Formation for mission is a fraternity/community that feels on a mission. It is not an artichoke fraternity/community that is closed in on itself, but open to others. A fraternity/community that wishes to form for mission should be increasingly concentrated and folded upon itself and always attentive to the spaces that could be opened with regards to witness and the proclamation of the Gospel as Good News of fraternity among all peoples, especially the least and excluded, because they are the first audiences of the Gospel (cf. Lk 4, 18ss).

2. Another critical formative mediation for mission are strong experiences of mission. If it is about mission *inter gentes*, then these experiences ought to be a normal part of any formative initial or ongoing project. I said it earlier about the fraternity/community that wants to be formative, it must also be said of the persons who live in it. Missionary experiences help when they are really accompanied well; they help the Religious to be less self-referential and to devote themselves to the proclamation and witness of the Gospel. If it is about mission *ad gentes*, then this element must be effectively promoted within the possibilities, while taking into account their own charism – as long as it is not about a simple religious tourism. In any case, it is important to place ourselves and our younger brothers in a position to experience and practice discipleship in the mission tasks entrusted to us and in the development of a work lived out as a mission. I think no risk should be saved in the mission. When taking risks, if we allow ourselves to be accompanied and evaluated, our will is strengthened and we learn to deal with conflicts and to remain faithful, thus purifying our vocational maturity.

3. Both in initial and ongoing formation, we have to guard always the nutrients of our *being sent out*, adhering to Him with all our hearts, souls, might, and mind, as the Word of God calls us to do (cf. Dt 6, 4), so as to be fully identified with him, thus being a "good fragrance of Christ" (2 Cor 2, 15).⁶¹ In all this, it is important not to lose sight of what Jesus did and lived. Only then can we discover mission as being sent out in what we do; only then can we clarify truly the reasons behind what we do.

4. Because mission is primarily about bearing witness to a life totally consecrated to the Kingdom, the vows play an important role in mission. A merely legal and ascetic view of the vows is outdated and the emphasis now is on the prophetic dimension, that is, on those elements of Religious Life that proclaim and denounce, while presenting an alternative way of life to that

⁶⁰ St. Francis of Assisi, *Regla no Bulada* [Later Rule] XVI, 7.

⁶¹ Cf. Xavier Quinzá Lleó, *Pasión y radicalidad. Pormodernidad y vida conagrada* [Passion and Radicalness. Post-modernity and Consecrated Life], Ed. San Pablo, Madrid 2004, 141ss.

offered by the world. Without really forgetting the ascetic and legal requirements entailed by the vows, in both ongoing and initial formation, we must instill a prophetic vision that leads to experience the vows from a firm will to be fully conformed to Christ and be "a living memorial of His way of existing and acting."⁶²

5. We have referred to dialogue as the new name for mission. We have also said that formation for dialogue is a priority today. Yet, dialogue, especially dialogue with culture, requires a good intellectual and cultural formation "according to the times and dialogue with the search for meaning by man today."⁶³ Without it, dialogue between faith and culture will not be possible. Formation for mission should motivate – as it does for the proclamation of the Good News – the study of theology and other sciences as a requirement of respect and responsibility for what dialogue entails today with culture and society. Today, perhaps more than ever, the "missionary" and "apostle" is called to support convincingly the knowledge of God.

Conclusion

Both initial and ongoing formation are, as I tried to show, a key that opens us to a passionate present and a hopeful future, and, therefore, to a meaningful Religious Life. Formation is "crucial"⁶⁴ for those wishing to "reproduce with courage the boldness, creativity, and holiness of their Founders",⁶⁵ and, at the same time, be "aware of the challenges of their own time," in order to give a suitable response from the Gospel.

Given the circumstances in which young people come to us, initial formation require "an extensive period of time";⁶⁶ they require also experiences to help change lives; an attentive personal accompaniment; and identifying well-defined itineraries, setting for each of them clear goals and precise mediations to achieve them. Among these mediations and crucial is to have properly formed Formators,⁶⁷ who are "experts in the ways that lead to God, so as to be able to accompany well others on this journey." They need people who show "the beauty of following Christ and the value of the charism in which it is being realized;"⁶⁸ people who are able, through a peaceful discernment, to help test all things and keep what is good (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5, 21); see what comes from God and what does not;⁶⁹ look for "what is good, pleasing, and perfect to God" (Rom 12: 2).⁷⁰ Moreover, it should be a discernment that is "free of temptations of number or efficiency, so as to assess in the light of faith and of possible contraindications, the veracity of the vocation and the rectitude of the intention."⁷¹

⁶² VC 22.

⁶³ CdC, 18.

⁶⁴ VC, 65.

⁶⁵ VC 37.

⁶⁶ VC 65. "In circumstances where speed and shallowness prevail, we need serenity and depth because in reality, the person, is fashioned very slowly" (CdC 18).

⁶⁷ "Dedicating on qualified personnel and his suitable preparation is a priority [...], although this brings with it significant sacrifices" (CdC 18).

⁶⁸ VC, 66.

⁶⁹ Cf. VC, 73.

⁷⁰ More exactly these terms mean select, interpret, criticize, decide, and recognize. Implicit in all these meanings is the sense of entering deep into the important issues in order to understand and resolve them properly. In this sense, discernment has at first two moments: the critical understanding of reality and then decision-making. The action of discernment has to do with the process of seeing (knowing), judging (assessing) and acting (committing oneself).

⁷¹ CdC, 18.

We must not forget that in Religious Life, we are all subjects of discernment, forced upon us due to the continuous change we experience around us and in us.⁷²

I conclude with some words from the document, *Walking Afresh from Christ*, that I think are very important, that is, "We must be very generous to dedicate time and the best energies on Formation."⁷³ Knowing what we are to do, all that is left for us is to be coherent with what we know and say.

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⁷² Whether it may be in initial or ongoing formation, what is required for a good discernment is to have a spirit of inquiry, animated by faith and the love of God; a spirit of freedom and detachment from self; and a spirit of living *sine proprio*.

⁷³ VC, 18.