

FORMATION IN THE BIBLE

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(Biblical Foundation of the Formation Ministry)

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Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ, 2010.

Christian Humanism Charter: “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things; and the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:8-9).

FORMATION IN THE BIBLE: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The title of this short course is:

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE FORMATION MINISTRY

The title suggests that it will be useful, profitable to look into the Bible and see if we can find some principles, indications, guidelines for the Formation Ministry. The intention is well founded, not arbitrary, if we take into account that the whole Bible is nothing else but the written witness of the history of salvation which is the account of God's initiative of love in choosing, calling and sanctifying his chosen people and eventually, through the mission of Jesus, all the peoples of the world, the whole of Humanity. The Formation Ministry, as referred to Formation to Religious Life and Mission or Priestly Life and Ministry, is a small, tiny section of this universal task of God, The Holy Spirit, that is continuously going on in the life of the Church and Humanity.

1.-Formation: a personal and community enterprise

The human being is a social animal. We are born human (we can say: fully human in the sense that at our birth we are not sub-human), but we become fully human i.e. we develop all our potentialities in the effort to reach full personhood.

The process by which we fulfill our fundamental vocation to full personhood is called Formation and takes place in the community.

Karl Rahner has a beautiful definition of Formation in which the communitarian aspect is underlined but especially the personal aspect. It runs like this:

“FORMATION and EDUCATION means the help which a man or a woman finds in the community in order that he/she might discover and develop his/her unique individuality so that he/she may be worthy of existing as a person in front of God for all eternity”.

2. Names

The idea implied in the very terms FORMATION and EDUCATION is that the formators do not make something new, but help something that is already there to take shape and develop. This is contained in the term FORMATION: to form, to shape, to mould, to fashion what is already there.

In the same way, the word EDUCATION (LATIN: EDUCERE) means to make something come out. Sometimes, the formators are called **Animators**: the concept is the same: to animate, to give life and dynamism to something which is already there.

The authority of the Superior or Formator, by the meaning of the term, falls on to the same concept: authority, from the Latin term: AUGERE which means: to make grow.

3. In the Bible, we find the term: TO FORM in very interesting contexts:

To form, to fashion, to mold

Genesis 2:7 “Then the Lord God **formed** man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being”.

Isaiah 64:8 “**Yes, o Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay and you are our potter; we are the work of your hand**”.

Jeremiah 18:1-6 “The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ‘Arise and go down to the potter’s house and there I will let you hear my words’. So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. Then the word of the Lord came to me: “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done?” says the Lord. **Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand**”.

Abba, Abba Father, you are the potter, we are the clay, the work of your hands. Mold us, mold us and fashion us into the image of Jesus, your Son, of Jesus your Son. Father, may we be one in you, may we be one in you as He is in you and you are in him. Glory, glory and praise to you; glory and praise to you, forever, Amen; forever, Amen. Abba, Abba Father, you are the potter and we are the clay, the work of your hands. Abba!

Isaiah 45:9-13 “Woe to him who strives with his Maker, an earthen vessel with the potter! **Does the clay says to him who fashions it, ‘What are you making?’** or ‘Your work has no handles?’ Woe to him who says to a father, ‘What are you begetting?’ or to a woman, ‘With what are you in travail?’ Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker: ‘Will you question me about my children, or command me concerning the work off my hands? I made the earth and created man upon it; it was my hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host. I have aroused him in righteousness, and I will make straight all his ways; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward,’ says the Lord”.

Isaiah 29:15-16 “Woe to those who hide deep from the Lord their counsel, whose deeds are in the dark, and who says, ‘Who sees us? Who knows us?’ You turn things upside down! **Should the potter be regarded as the clay**, that the thing made should say to its maker, ‘He did not make me’; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, ‘He has no understanding’?”.

Romans 9:20-24 “But who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to the molder, ‘Why have you made me thus?’ **Has the potter no right over the clay**, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?”.

4. Romans 12:2 “**Do not be conformed** to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect”

Romans 8:28-30 “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined **to be conformed** to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified”.

1 Peter 1:13-14 “Therefore gird up your minds, be sober, set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do **not be conformed** to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who has called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct, since it is written: You shall be holy for I am holy”.

5. Galatians 4:19-20 “My children I am going through the pains of giving birth to you all over again, **until Christ is formed in you** and how I wish I could be there with you in this moment and find the right way of talking to you. I am quite at loss with you”.

Very interesting Saint Augustine’s commentary on the above quotation from Galatians:

“He calls them “My little children” so that they would imitate him as they would a parent. “With whom I am again in travail” he adds, “until Christ be formed in you!” In saying this, **he seems to be speaking more in the person of the Church their mother**, for in another place he says, “I was a babe among you, like a nurse taking care of her children”.

Now Christ is formed in a believer through faith implanted in his immortal soul. Such a one, gentle and lowly of heart, is summoned to the freedom of grace, and he doesn’t boast of the merit of works which are of no value. But from the grace itself there is a beginning of merit, so that Christ who said, “As you did it to one of the least of my brethren you did it to me” can call him the least bit of himself. **Christ, then, is formed in him who accept his form**; and he receive the form of Christ who cleaves to Christ with spiritual love.

The result is that through this imitating he becomes, in the measure permitted to him, the same as Christ whom he imitates. “He who says he abides in him, - says John – ought to walk in the same way as he walked”. But since **human beings are conceived by their mothers in order to be formed and once they are formed are brought to birth through the pangs of labor, we can ask what is meant by the words, “with whom I am again in travail until Christ is formed in you!”**.

We can take “travail” to mean the anxious care with which he was in labor so that they might be born in Christ; and now again he is in travail because of the danger he sees them in being led astray. The anxiety of such concern about them, which leads him to say that he is in some way in travail can endure “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that they may no longer be carried about with every wind of doctrine”.

Hence, it is not in reference to the beginning of faith by which they were born, but concerning **the strengthening and perfecting of faith** that he says, “with whom I am again in travail until Christ is formed in you”. Elsewhere he commends this sort of travail in other words when he says, “There is the daily pressure on me of anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall and I am not indignant?”. (St. Augustine)

6. Mutuality in Formation. Formation is a relational process: it calls for Openness, communication and sincerity. Recently, the mutuality of the formation process has become more conscious and central. After God, it is the candidate who is most responsible for his or her formation.

‘A great temptation for people new to formation work is to be overly responsible for those in their care’. Good formation rests on the acknowledgement that we all are in formation, initial or ongoing, and that the Spirit of God is forming and reforming us and will continue to do so. There is no need for the director of formation to worry if the candidate is not all the time happy and satisfied.

At its heart, formation is a search for the Spirit: in this search, directors of formation and directees experience a fundamental equality before God. This conviction helps the director of formation to foster a relaxed atmosphere in the community; not to breathe down the neck of the candidates; to wait for their response in their own good time. And yet the response must come. ‘This mutuality is an essential sign of vocation’. The mutuality does not regard only the relationship with the directors of formation but it extends to the group or the community. A good group affirms its candidates. When the candidate feels accepted and valued, he will find in the group support for the moment

when he will start to look at the areas of his life that are embarrassing or sinful: past hurts, fears, doubts, failings.

This is often a moment of great turmoil and vulnerability and it can be a moment of grace, a sacred moment of transformation, of self-acceptance. This works both ways: the group has to accept the individual but he or she in turn has to accept the group. And this especially when the ethos or the outlook of the group is questioned. “Join us before you reform us”. The point is not that there is no room for criticism, but that levels of influence depend on levels of commitment.

PERSONHOOD IN GOD AND IN THE HUMAN BEINGS

Our basic vocation is inscribed in our human nature as seen in the light of Jesus Christ, the perfect human being. The greatest element in us is the fact that **we are persons**, principles of free acts and free choices. God has made us such in order that we pursue what is good.

We are persons since our beginning, but we become persons developing the potentialities that God has put in us. So, we can speak of a process by which we implement the fact of being persons, developing our potentialities in the light of God's plan for each one of us. This is the Formation Process.

We can understand the human person fully only in the light of Revelation:

- **Our beginning is from God:** we are persons because he created us according to his image, as capable of knowing and choosing, intelligent and free.
- **Our end is in God:** we have to become persons in order to speak with God, the personal God of Revelation. Jesus Christ is the perfect Man, the perfect human being, because he is the man who, more than any other, is linked with God. Life in its fullness is, in this perspective, a personal dialogue with a personal God, and its horizon is beyond death: eternal Life: "For this is eternal life, that they may know you, o God, and the one you have sent, Jesus Christ" (John 17:3).

This knowledge is the biblical knowledge, it is a spousal knowledge that embraces not only theoretical knowledge, but emotional involvement and total communication: **it is love**. In this perspective, Mary becomes the icon of vocation and personhood, and therefore of Formation, as we are going to see presently.

The Personhood in God

1. The contribution of the O.T. to our concept of God is immense. In this sense we belong to the Jewish religious tradition. The first idea is that **God is one: monotheism**. The second is that **God is good**. We see this through the goodness of his Creatures. We see this through God's law: **morality**. Then the **God of the Bible is a personal God** who wants to communicate with his creatures, with humanity and cares for us. God's personality and concern for us is witnessed throughout the whole Bible. He is a God who wants to have a covenant with his

chosen people, gives them his Law (the content of the covenant) and the heart of God's covenant is love.

- Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Outside Deuteronomy there is not explicit command to love God but its equivalent is found in 2 Kings 23:25 and Hosea 6:6. Though the command doesn't appear the Psalms and the Prophetic Books are full of the love of God. Jesus, quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5, lays it down as the greatest commandment of all (Matthew 22:37 (and parallel passages); with it goes fear the fear proper of an heir, not a slave : "There is no fear in love, but perfect love cast out fear" (1 John 4:18).

- Exodus 3:1-15

- Genesis 12:1-5

The goodness of the personal God is at the origin of the most popular book of the O.T., **the Psalter**. The Book of Psalms is the most amazing collection of 150 prayers, hymns and songs that can be found in any other religious tradition. In the psalms, the understanding of the personal God as a loving father as well as the personality of the human beings and their relationship with the personal God are abundantly exemplified. The Psalter is still the main source of the official prayer of the Church.

- Psalm 23

- Psalm 103.

All the same, **God is a great mystery**: we cannot see God's face, only his back: Exodus 33:18-33

2. **In the N.T., Jesus reveals the mystery of God**: God is "a family of love", the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

- John 1:18

- 1 John 4:12

GOD "*ad intra*": 1 John 4:16-17

GOD "*ad extra*": John 3:16

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the revelation and the sacrament of God's love for us:

John 1:1-18

John 14:1-11

John 15:1-11

- The Trinitarian **commission**: Matthew 28:18-20
- The Trinitarian **prayer**: The sign of the cross
- The Trinitarian **greeting**: 2 Corinthians 13:13

3. **Baptism attaches a person to Jesus, the Savior.** All his work of salvation proceeds from the Father's love and reaches its completion in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

- Romans 6:3-11
- Romans 8:12-17

The mystery of Formation. When everything is said and done, one even for the most well prepared and skilled director of formation, his work remains a mystery in the best and most profound sense of the word. Working with human beings, one touches daily what is imponderable and ineffable in the human personality in its efforts to respond to the challenges of life and to God's plan.

Mystery is at the heart of the Christian event not so much in the sense that we do not have a clear-cut understanding of God's self-revealing and self-giving activity in the world and in our individual histories, but in the sense that we approach a reality which transcends us, an Infinite Goodness that can be only embraced and experienced in the leap of faith and in the surrender of trust.

At the best, the director of formation understands that he can only be a facilitator in the work which he recognizes ever more as the work of the Spirit. Experience teaches him that often the results of his efforts escape his expectations: sometimes those who appeared to be the best formed candidates fail the test of life whereas others who seemed to struggle with the demands of their training and to be wanting in many things, turn out with balanced personalities and go through life and ministry with success.

In the work of formation, more than in many others, an attitude of peaceful humility, a relaxed sense of perspective, an open mind, almost an *esprit de finesse* are the constitutives of wisdom and make the more fascinating a job which holds in itself the joys and pains of spiritual parenthood which, as St. Paul writes, "takes its name ultimately only from God, the Father".

Personhood in the human beings

1. The concept of personhood for the human beings is among the most important biblical heritage of humanity. It starts immediately from the account of creation and it develops throughout the Bible, giving way to an articulated and rich existential description of the glory, beauty, drama, torment and ecstasy of being human.

Genesis 1:26-27 “Then God said: ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea...So God created man in his own image, in image of God he created him; male and female he created them...”.

Genesis 2:7 “Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being”.

Nephesh: is the life-giving breath (Psalm 104:27-35)

Adam: means “soil”

The description of chapter 2 appears more ancient and refers primarily to **the existential sense of fragility of humanity**, which is accentuated after the fall (cf. Genesis 3:19 “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; **you are dust and to dust you shall return**”). The quotation from first chapter shows a more developed theology and anthropology. The two elements must be taken into account at the same time: the dignity and the drama of being human.

Psalm 8 The majesty of God and the dignity of man

Psalm 90 The human condition

“You sweep men away, they are like a dream, like grass which is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers” (5-6)

Ps 103:15...129:6...Isaiah 40:6-8...1 Peter 1:22-25

2. **The wisdom books** deal with man as a man, human beings as human beings, and we have the classic passages that describe the **human condition** and situation: they have a universal value for humanity:

Job 3 “After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. And Job said: ‘Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night which said, A man-child is conceived...Why is light given to him that is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who longs for death, but it comes not, and dig for it more than for hidden treasures; who rejoice exceedingly and are glad when they find the grave?’”.

Jeremiah 20:14-18: “Cursed be the day in which I was born...Why did I come from the womb to see toil and sorrow and spend my days in shame?”

Universal human traits in the Psalms:

Psalm 1 *The two ways*

Psalm 51 *MISERERE : the sense of guilt*

Psalm 73 *Good and bad people compared*

Psalm 88 *Darkness*

Psalm 130 *DE PROFUNDIS: prayer in extreme need*

Qoheleth 12:1-8 “Remember your Creator on the days of your youth, before evil days come and the years approach when you say, ‘These give me no pleasure’, before sun and light and moon and stars grow dark...*There follows a wonderful description of the aging process and of death, full of poetic images, before the conclusion: Vanity of vanities, Qoheleth says. All is vanity*”.

3. **Man’s freedom** is an essential quality in order to enter in dialogue with the personal God and keep his covenant. The passage that enhances our freedom is:

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 “See, **I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil**. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. But if your hearts turn away.....therefore, **choose life** that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and cleaving to him...”.

4. In the N. T., we have this dramatic passage about the **struggle between the flesh and the spirit**, the law of freedom which is fulfilled in love:

Romans 7:13-25 “...I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but **the evil I do not want is what I do**. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. **Wretched man that I am!** Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh, I serve the Law of sin”.

Formation to human maturity. In this journey, in which the person in-formation is the protagonist, there is a necessary target which is, at the same time, an essential and indispensable requirement; something that must be there and has to grow: human maturity as the basis for spiritual maturity.

This is the central thrust of our discourse, this is something which can be considered now acquired, almost taken for granted. There is need for self-acceptance in order to assume a radically new identity. It is a losing of life, in order to gain, but we can’t lose

what we don't already possess. We can only be before God the way we truly are, with all that implies in the way of giftedness, sexuality, potential and weakness.

Consequently formation programs must reinforce among candidates the importance of continuing their commitment to the process of individuation (maturity, wholeness), even as they are simultaneously socialized into the group. 'Growth in spiritual maturity depends heavily on integral human development.

This truth has long been captured in the Scholastic adage that "grace builds on nature". We can say that the influence of development psychology in formation represents an enrichment of the tradition rather than a replacement of it. At the same time, developmental psychology does not, in itself, give an account of the goal of human development.

Contrary to many modern narcissistic attitudes, Christianity talks of the self as fulfilled in mutually self-giving relationships. And Christianity can legitimately insist in reading development psychology in the light of this goal, a reading which the best psychology literature would probably encourage. Moreover, the vocation of a priest and religious represents a specification of the Christian vocation. Celibacy and the charism of the institute further shape the ways in which we appropriate the developmental ideal.

FORMATION STAGES

An other important element in formation is **Finality**: an Ideal is needed as the target of the journey of Formation. We have the ideal in front of us, very concrete: Jesus Christ, the Perfect Man (Human Being).

The stages of Formation follow our fundamental vocation to become fully human, according to the image of Christ, the Perfect Man (Human Being). We can say that **these stages are parallel to the stages in the History of Salvation**:

1. The first Stage is **THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION**: i.e. to perceive the presence of God in all things: a COSMIC RELIGIOSITY that we find very much in our traditional religious heritage (Traditional Religions) and in the first part of the history of God's Revelation to Abraham and the Patriarchs.

The name of God is still a very common, general name: EL, ELOIM; it has not yet become a personal God, the personal name of God belongs to the Sinaitic revelation: YAHWEH.

Life is seen as a constant relationship with God. It is important not to lose this fundamental and basic dimension even when going up to the following stages. This religiosity can save us, and to appreciate it helps us to be near to the mentality of the people and even to understand the non-Christian religious.

Deuteronomy 6:4-13 “...*After the commandment to love God(Shema, Israel)...* Then take heed lest you forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve him and swear by his name”.

Deuteronomy 10:12-22 “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul... Behold, to the Lord your God belongs heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it; yet the Lord set his heart in love upon your Fathers and chose their descendants after them, you above all peoples, as at this day...”.

Psalms 104 *The canticle of creatures...* “These all look to you to give them their food in good season. When you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your Spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the earth”.

Psalms 128 *The blessing of the man who fears the Lord*

Isaiah 43:1-7 "...Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called by name, you are mine....Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you..."

2. DIMENSION OF THE LAW: at a certain moment, the content of God's Covenant and relationship with humanity is specified by means of the Law. God sets in front of us a series of rules: THE TEN COMMANDMENTS.

We are no longer free in front of the Law: it represents the demands of order and life. They are not arbitrary or without reason but they are demands flowing from a deeper understanding of God, as a personal God (YAHWEH) and of the dignity of the human person as created according to God's image (personhood).

We have here a link between RELIGION and MORALITY; or between MONOTHEISM and ETHICS. It means that God is not indifferent about the way we treat our fellow human beings and the best way for us of honoring God is to be honest and good to our fellow human beings.

This explains the link between the commandments concerning directly God (the first 3) and those concerning the other human beings (the other 7). If one does not struggle to live a holy life, according to the commandments, he fails to reach the full humanity that God has put as the target of every individual's vocation. In this sense the Law becomes: "a pedagogue to Christ", according to St. Paul's expression.

Exodus 20:1-21 *The Ten Commandments*

Deuteronomy 5:1-22 *The Ten Commandments* "...These words the Lord spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice; and he added no more. And he wrote them upon two tablets of stone, and he gave them to me".

Psalms 119 *An alphabetical psalm, the longest, a meditation on the Law.* "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to observe your righteous ordinances (105-106)..."

3. THE DIMENSION OF FAITH IN FREEDOM: THE DIMENSION OF LOVE: God's initiative of love and his self-giving to the human person reaches its climax or peak in Jesus Christ: in him God gives himself to Humanity in an extraordinary and unthinkable way and the human beings accept this proposal through a free and perfect OBEDIENCE: Christ's obedience first and then our obedience.

To reach the dimension of love, we must go beyond ourselves, towards the other: God and people, like Jesus did. He teaches us how to live and how to love. “I do not call you servants any longer, but I call you friends (John 15:15).

In a sense, the Law is no longer exterior to us, but through our obedience of faith, becomes interior to us: a life of love and imitation of Christ, the new Law and the Perfect Man.

This is not the result of a long process of training (although the training is there and the process or journey of Formation is there), but it is A NEW BIRTH: we are born anew through faith and Baptism to enter into the *Sequela Christi*: HE is our ideal of Maturity (Christian and Human): to be a perfect Human Being like Jesus Christ in order to make of our life a dialogue with God as Jesus did.

“The glory of God is a human being fully alive and the fullness of life for human beings is the vision of God” (St. Irenaeus).

Deuteronomy 8:1-6 “...And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart...that he might make you know that man doesn’t live on bread alone, but that man live by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord. Your clothing did not wear out upon you, and your foot did not swell, these forty years. Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you....”.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah...I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts...”.

Ezekiel 36:24-28 “...A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will take out of you the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh...”.

Hosea 2:14-23 “...I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord...”.

Ephesians 1:3-14 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even if he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ...”.

1 Corinthians 12:31-13:1-13 “Be ambitious for the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have no love...”.

Formation as a journey. The key concept that underlies all the observations, reflections, insights in our enquiry about Formation is the concept of movement, development. From a static idea of formation, from formation to conformity (where the stress was on the perfection of the details in imitating the model and the effort of the will as asceticism) to the idea of formation as a journey.

Religious identity, whether of the consecrated person or of the candidate to the ministry, rests less on the externals of separation and conformity and more on the successive attempts towards the required maturity and ideals, however messy and fumbling these attempts may be.

The tension between the loftiness of the ideals and the ‘humanness’ of our response is all too evident and this is all right ; it has to be accepted as normal; it is the fruit, the point of arrival of a successful formation. Well formed are the people who are able to maintain their idealism in a spirit of humble realism about the human condition.

Sometimes this is especially hard to recognize and to accept on the part of the very candidates of formation: because of their youth, they tend to seek more immediate satisfaction for their need for love and meaning. ‘The challenge for the directors of formation and for those under formation is to remain in the tension of always becoming something which is not yet here, but this requires a great deal of patience’.

This aspect of journey is reflected also, on a more exterior level, in the greater variety of the phases of formation; in their articulation which is more complex than in the past and in the greater exposure to mobility in the apostolic dimension of formation, in an effort to respond to the needs and conditions of greater insecurity and change, whereas in the past there was often a uniform and institutionalized apostolate.

JESUS CHRIST MODEL AND MASTER OF FORMATION

JESUS MODEL OF FORMATION

In the N. T., **Jesus is everything**. He is the Master and the disciples are called to his “*sequela*”. He is the model and more than the model.

1. He is “the way, the truth and the Life”. He is the “bread of life”. He is the “good shepherd”. He is “the vine and the disciples are the branches”. The disciples do **not simply follow him**, but must be united with him, they are invited to “make their home in him “. They are called to **identify with him** to the point of becoming an “**additional humanity**” offered to Jesus so that he can continue through their lives the mystery of his Incarnation. Jesus expects a childlike humility and availability. The climax of this identification is **to be with Jesus on the cross. It is love, given and received**. St. Paul’s witness is exemplary in this regard.

Luke 9:23-27 “And Jesus said to all: ‘If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For **whoever would save his life would lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it**. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of his Father and of the holy angels”.

Matthew 18:1-4 “At that time, the disciple came to Jesus saying, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ and calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them, and said, ‘Truly I say to you, **unless you change and become like little children**, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven”.

Galatians 2:20 “I have been crucified with Christ; **it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me**; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”.

2. **Jesus is the perfect Human Being** and to identify with him, not only by imitating his actions but by appropriating his sentiments and feeling (“*Sentire cum Jesu*”) is the work of a lifetime of formation, as saint Paul puts it in unforgettable passages: “**the knowledge of the Son of God**”, “**mature manhood**”, “**the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ**”, “**The surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord**”.

Philippians 3:7-16 “But whatever gain I had, I count as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the **surpassing worth of knowing Christ**

Jesus, my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him...; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death...”

Ephesians 4:1-16 “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all. But **grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift...** And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for **building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ;** so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, **we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,** from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and builds itself up in love”.

John 15:1-17 “...Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. **He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bear much fruit,** for apart from me, you can do nothing...”.

3. **Result of a good formation:** We can find in the N.T. the examples of a **formation well accomplished** in the personality of the Apostles, their single mindedness in facing the challenges of their mission, especially in their strong, unwavering conviction of God’s call. This is especially well documented in Saint Paul:

Romans 1:16-17 “For **I am not ashamed of the Gospel:** it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith...”.

1 Timothy 2:1-8a “First of all, then, I urge that supplication, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for all people...God, our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth...For this **I was appointed a preacher and apostle** (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth...”.

2 Timothy 1:1-14 "...I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for **God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control...**For this Gospel I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, and therefore I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed because **I know whom I have believed**, and I am sure he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me. Follow the pattern of the sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus; guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us".

Ephesians 3:14-21 "...he may grant you to be strengthened with might through the Spirit in the inner man, and that **Christ may dwell in your heart through faith**; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breath and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God..."

The Aim of Formation: Sharing Jesus' Mission

The excessive enthusiasm for psychology and the obsessive pursuit of human wholeness has been described as the 'therapeutic model'. **Human maturity can really become an obsession and produce the opposite effect.** People can become enmeshed in a relentless search for an elusive ideal of true self which is nothing more than an illusion and hides the incapacity of accepting themselves for what they are.

The danger of self-absorption is certainly very real and more than theoretical. I think that the present emergence of mission as the aim of formation is very healthy and psychologically correct. Human maturity is best served if achieved indirectly in the process of being caught up and enthused by real ideals which are outside the individual, like serving the poor or preaching the gospel. **This might be seen as similar to falling in love with a real person. This real person is Jesus whose Gospel we are commissioned to spread.**

The challenge is to see the attractive aspects of the present context of mission. In the past, thousands were ready to give their life for the ideal: 'to cross the seas, to save one soul and to die'. We have to inject the same dynamic charge into the modern aspects of mission such as dialogue, service of the poor, peace and justice and bringing the Gospel into people's cultures.

And if the frontline of mission cuts now across the secularized, consumerist western world, as some theologians of mission say, then it will be the ideal of **resistance, the counter-cultural challenge to the all-pervasive money culture of our society**, a resistance that we can have in common with the believers of other religions, especially the monotheistic religions. It is within a formation which confronts the young with the real problems and ideals of the present church and world that the pursuit of

human maturity will acquire its beneficial effects and cease to run the risk of becoming a therapy of navel-gazing or self-gratification.

JESUS MASTER OF FORMATION

Since the beginning of his public life, Jesus chose his disciples, especially the Twelve, and **started the process of their formation** both by instructing them and by making them share the vicissitudes of his apostolic life. The pattern of vocation in the Biblical tradition applies also to the vocation of Jesus' disciples.

1. **Vocation's patterns in the Bible:** The vocation manifests itself first with a strong, **deep experience of God**; then the vocation proper follows. Generally, the reaction of the one who is called is one of **fear and a sense of unworthiness**. Then come God's re-assurance and promise: "I will be with you!" that **confirm the vocation**.

Isaiah 6:1-8 /Jeremiah 1:1-10 /Luke 1:26-38

Luke 5:1-11 "... 'Depart from me , for **I am a sinful man**, Lord'... and Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be a fisher of men'. And when they had brought their boats to land,, they left everything and followed him".

Romans 8:28-30 "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. **And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.**

2. The first way that Jesus adopted in order to form his disciples was to **"stay with him" and live together**. He reserves the most attentive care to the instruction of his disciples and takes advantage of every little incident in order to instruct the disciples. Especially, **he wants them to understand his true identity**: "Whom do you think I am?". **He is patient with their slow pace** of following and understanding. He wants them **to grow in self-knowledge and in self-acceptance**. All the same he tells them the demands of their vocation and mission; many times the disciples witness the fact that **only after Jesus' resurrection**, with the help of the Holy Spirit, they came to understand the fullness of his teaching.

John 1:35-39 "...Teacher, where are you staying?' He said to them, '**Come and see.**' They came and saw where he was staying; and **they stayed with him** that day...".

Revelation 3:14-20 “...Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten: so be zealous and repent. Behold: I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, **I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me**”.

Matthew 16:13-20 “...Simon Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’...”.

Mark 10:35-45 “...But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. **For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve** and to give his life as a ransom for many”.

Matthew 16:5-12 “...But Jesus, aware of this, said, ‘O man of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves...Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember...’”.

3. Very remarkable are the passages in which we see **Jesus’ frustration** in front of the refusal of his teaching and rejection of his formation work and his person and mission. Jesus shows us that he accepted the **vulnerability of loving**, the risk of investing energies in a work that depends also to a great extent on the free correspondence of the person.

Luke 19:41-44 “And when he draw near and saw the city **he wept over it**, saying, ‘Would that even today you knew that things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes!...because you did not know the time of your visitation” (Cf. Matthew 23:37-39, Luke 13:34-35).

4. The **climax of their formation journey** was their sharing Jesus’ Paschal Mystery. The Paschal Mystery becomes clear and vital to them only after their **Paschal experience** or the experience of the Risen Lord. Before the passion, Jesus points at himself in a special way as their model:

John 12:23-33 “...The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. **If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also**; if anyone serves me, my Father will honor him....”.

John 13:1-17 “...Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do what I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, **a servant is**

not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you put them into practice”.

5. The paschal experience of the apostles is marked by a “**quality leap**” that the Risen Jesus provokes in them by his apparitions. The apparitions are unexpected, they come from Jesus’ initiative, they bring great joy to the apostles. They are meant to show that Jesus is truly risen and **to complete the Apostles’ experience of Jesus and his mystery**. As a consequence, they provoke in the disciples a “quality leap”. **The best example is in the episode of Thomas** (from human certainty to faith). But also Mary Magdalene (from simple human love to supernatural love), the disciples of Emmaus (the acceptance of the full Gospel), Peter (from self assurance to humility).

John 20:19-29/ 20:11-18/ 21:15-19/ Luke 24:13-32

THE METHOD OF JESUS, THE FORMATOR

I would like to stress **the categories of Jesus’ pedagogy** i.e. the centrality of the person, the pattern of the personal encounter one by one, the dialogue as way to the truth, the fundamental role of Jesus’ question to the person and of the person to Jesus (“Whom do you think I am ?, Mark 4:41; 8:29), by which **the identity of the person, that is the hub of any formation**, passes through the acknowledgement of the value of the individual and his freedom of decision.

Lastly, but it is something to take into account since the beginning, Jesus’ pedagogy is marked by love. **Some biblical scholars define it as “hospitality”: i.e. an absolute availability towards people** that can be considered as Jesus’ style and specific trait of his formation approach. It is the attitude of a master who wants and is ready to learn from the others because to “learn” is, as it were, at the heart of the Christian Mystery (*Fides ex auditu*: faith comes from hearing/listening).

The true Master operates in a way that the pupil, by encountering him, may learn - as from a living mirror- his own identity which, up to that moment, was shallow and obscure. **Jesus creates a space of freedom around his person**, sharing, by his mere presence, a beneficial proximity/closeness with all those who approach him. **This is a living space** in which to progressively grasp the depth, the breath and the height... and **which allows them to discover their truest identity and to own it**, starting from what is most profound in it that will suddenly become an act of “faith”: **credit given to the One who stands in front of us** and at the same time to the fullness of life.

We can see Jesus’ parables and his table fellowship as means for the above mentioned **constructive and liberating hospitality**. It is the way Jesus fulfills his holiness i.e. his love relationship which shows itself in as much as Jesus doesn’t impose

his identity as Master, absolute witness of the complete truth, but, as it is said in the Christological Hymn in the Letter to the Philippians, “he emptied himself”, foregoing, as it were, his figure as Master and learns instead from those he goes to meet, helping them to listen and to understand their own identity, thanks to Jesus’ words of truth.

Jesus helps them to accept, **through their free and motivated humanity**, salvation not as imposition or coercion in order to avoid punishment, but as Good News.

Formation, culture, communication.

The dynamics of formation nowadays are often compounded with the problem of acculturation and inculturation. Candidates are often called to enter into the process of assuming the values of a host culture while enriching the community with the riches of their culture of origin. This process is by no means confined to our religious or missionary communities. It is happening to an increasing extent in the wider world especially in the urban setting.

In this encounter which is by and large forced on the Church by the changing circumstances, something is gained and something is lost. The same balance is struck that happened when the opening to the world brought us to face the insights of the modern human sciences like sociology and psychology: a condition of naivety was lost forever but, at the same time, the wealth of human knowledge of the above mentioned disciplines passed on into the bloodstream of the Church institutions. The impact was painful and something was lost that needs now to be recovered.

In the same way, the relationship between formation and culture is now coming to the fore. A certain naïve sense of superiority is lost forever: the conviction that we knew all the answers, that we did things the right way, that ours was a perfect world. Instead, the different strands of the wider world are coming together: we are many, we are different, the difference can be threat but can also be enrichment.

The dynamics released by this encounter and the need for formation to deal with cultural issues bring in a new set of problems: fears, prejudices, complexes come to complicate the picture. **Only the ambience of a friendly community which knows how to give time and foster communication can look with confidence at the outcome of this process.**

Most of the time it is a question of communication. As in formation in general so in this particular aspect communication plays a crucial role. Language, symbols, attitudes, different outlooks must be patiently explored and given a chance to come out.

Channels of communication must be kept open or be continuously created anew to allow the process of acculturation and inculturation to take place. It is in this effort to communicate that all the other aspects we have listed above find their play: the role of mutuality, the pursuit of maturity, the effort to collaborate.

The encouragement of **emotional sincerity becomes then as important as intellectual honesty**. It is in this painful but fascinating exchange that the personal love for Jesus, the common strong commitment to mission, the passion for the gospel and the service of the poor, the common vision become midwife for the successful birth of a new humanity that reflects the traits of the world of the future.

And communication must be abundant: it is like pollination in the natural world. Fear, a stingy attitude, narrow-mindedness are unwarranted, they go against the grain, they do not reflect the policy of creativity and life. The results are hidden in the years to come, nobody understands clearly the shape of the future world that is in the making. Everything is taken on trust.

MARY AND FORMATION

Introduction

Every activity of the Christians, the followers of Jesus, falls under the influence of Mama Mary. First of all, because Mary is the ICON of the Church i.e. what happened to her, her destiny, is the destiny of every disciple, follower of Jesus.

But also because **we have been entrusted to Mary by Jesus**, as we read in the Gospel of John 19:25-27: “This is your son”. In the person of the beloved disciple, Jesus entrusts all of us to Mama Mary. The fact that Christ/God has entrusted (AFFIDAMENTO/COMMITMENT) the beloved disciple to Mary, corresponds on the side of the disciple to the acceptance of Mary in her function as spiritual mother: it means openness, acceptance, personal link or tie, active love; it corresponds to the opening of faith, it is in the line of faith, it is a fruit of faith as trust. We entrust ourselves to Mary (facciamo affidamento su Maria, nostra madre). We entrust ourselves to Mary especially in connection with our Formation Journey. She is our spiritual mother, the Mother of the Church.

MARY ICON OF FORMATION

We can contemplate the most outstanding example of Formation in Mama Mary: she is our ICON OF FORMATION. We can read anew the gospel references concerning Mary and interpret them as aspects of the journey of Formation. It is amazing to see how her life can become a real model for the most important traits of genuine Formation.

It is very rewarding for Formators and Formandees alike to know that Mama Mary embodied in herself the joy and torment of the Formation Process and in this way she can become **the star of Formation** as well as the icon.

It is very comforting to know that this difficult and demanding task is lived under the protection, intercession and smile of our spiritual mother, the MOTHER OF THE CHURCH.

I have reflected on five (5) aspects of Formation that are highlighted in the life of Mama Mary, but the first two are most important and fundamental: Formation is Affirmation; Formation is Joy. The other aspects are: Formation is Discernment, Formation is Obedience, Formation is Imitation.

FORMATION IS AFFIRMATION

This is the **core of the present reflection** and it flows from the exegesis of the passage of the gospel of Luke concerning the episode of the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38).

“In the sixth months (of Elizabeth’s pregnancy), the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth. He was sent to a young virgin who was betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the family of David, and the virgin’s name was Mary.

The angel came to her and said: “Rejoice, full of grace, the Lord is with you.” Mary was troubled at these words, wondering what this greeting could mean. But the angel said, “Do not fear, Mary, for God has looked kindly on you. You shall conceive and bear a son and shall call him Jesus. He will be great and shall rightly be called son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the kingdom of David, his ancestor; he will rule over the people of Jacob for ever and his reign shall have no end.”

Then Mary said to the angel, “How can this be if I am a virgin?” And she said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the holy child to be born shall be called Son of God. Even your relative Elizabeth is expecting a son in her old age, although she was unable to have a child, and she is now in her sixth month. With God nothing is impossible.”

Then Mary said, “I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me as you have said”. And the angel left her.”

The Annunciation represents **Mary’s Trinitarian Experience and at the same time her call to full personhood.**

The Bible includes God and Man and their Dialogue that ends in a Love-Pact: the Covenant (MISSION DEI: God’s proposal and Man’s response/ God’s Revelation and Man’s Reception).

In the New Testament, Monotheism blossoms into the TRINITARIAN MYSTERY and Salvation History overflows to include the whole of humanity (before it included only the Jews: the Chosen People; then all peoples are chosen) and the whole existence of Man. This is the novelty and exceeding nature of the Trinitarian Mystery (Eccedenza d’Amore).

Christ's history/event/vicissitude is understandable only in the light of his relationship with the Father and the Spirit. The same can be said of every follower of Christ, every individual Christian.

Christian Life (and its expression: Christian Spirituality) has been described or defined as:

The ongoing and unifying coincidence/correspondence/co-extension of the Human Spirit with the Spirit of God so that we may live in the Church as disciples of Jesus and children of the Father.

To be Christian means to enter into a mature and liberating relationship with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit/ with the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. In this way, we will be ALIVE IN THE SPIRIT who is the gift of the Father to the Son (and of the Risen Christ to the Church).

The fundamental Option of every Christian is the free acceptance of God's plan of Salvation, the plan of the Trinity, to enter into the Trinitarian Experience. "NOS CREDIDIMUS CHARITATI": this is how the first Christians defined themselves: We are the ones who have believed in the love of God.

Mary is the Model / Icon and the Mother of our Trinitarian Experience through her own Trinitarian Experience that is most evident in the Luke's account of the mystery of the Annunciation.

Mary is the first person in history who relates to the Triune God: mother of the Son, beloved daughter of the Father and disciple or spouse of the Spirit. She gives a joyous response to the Father, she believes in the Son as Messiah, and she welcomes the Spirit as life-giving power.

It is in the Trinitarian Experience, as revealed in the episode of the Annunciation, that God forms Mary's personality and makes her a person in the full sense of the word. God calls Mary to personhood. The experience is

Manifested in the give and take of a mature love relationship that develops in freedom and understanding.

The first movement is ACCEPTANCE: Mary is called to acknowledge the infinite love of God the Father for her that makes her his privileged daughter. At the angel's greeting, Mary is troubled, she is upset... The enormity of the assertion "GRATIA PLENA, DOMINUS TECUM" is almost unbelievable... Mary is embarrassed at the incredible greeting... She takes some time in order to come to terms with the fact that she is the recipient of the infinite, gratuitous love of God (GRACE).

In her the predestination of humanity to sharing God's life and entering into the intimacy of God's Trinitarian life is finding its destination.

Her VIRGINITY is the sense and the symbol of her total inadequacy to the infinite gift of God, radical existential poverty, but also complete availability/total freedom to accept, to surrender.

In the event of the Annunciation, the initiative is of the Father; the Son is present because it is for him that the divine deed is accomplished, and the Holy Spirit acts for the conception of the Son. In Mary we have the first revelation of the Trinity and the actions of the Three Person.

The person of Mary is formed and affirmed in very moment that she is called forth to acknowledge the infinite love of the Father for humanity and for her in particular and to give way to the Incarnation of the Son by surrendering herself to the action of the Holy Spirit. And this affirmation is substantially the acceptance of the free love of God. Doing this, Mary is repeating in her own destiny Christ's own AFFIRMATION as we read in 2 Cor 1:18-22.

“God knows that our dealing with you is not Yes and No, just as the Son of God, Jesus Christ whom we, Silvanus, Timothy and I, preach to you, was not Yes and No; with him it was simply Yes. In him all the promises of God have come to be a Yes, and we also say in his name: Amen! Giving thanks to God. God himself has anointed us and strengthens us with you to serve Christ; he has marked us with his own seal in a first outpouring of the Spirit in our heart”.

The best fruit of this acceptance of the love of God as affirmation of our personality is the Obedience of Faith. Personhood means responsibility: God's love calls us to become collaborators of God's plan of Salvation by sharing the burden of God's mission by means of our obedience.

FORMATION IS JOY

Mary's reaction to God's initiative reveals and forms her as a person, sensitive, sensible, active and responsible i.e. capable of a deep experience of faith. If, at the outset, she was hesitant and troubled, embarrassed and almost incapable to believe the enormity of what she was going through, later on Mary comes to terms with reality, the reality of God and her own reality and her person/personality is flooded with joy.

We have the witness of this in the episode of the visitation and especially the uttering of the MAGNIFICAT: Luke 1:39-56.

“Mary then set out for a town in the hills of Judah. She entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leapt in her womb. Elizabeth was filled with Holy Spirit and giving a loud cry, said, “You are most blessed among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb! How is it that the mother of my Lord comes to me? The moment your greeting sounded in my ears, the baby within me suddenly leapt for joy. Blessed are you who believed that the Lord’s word would come true!” And Mary said: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit exults in God my savior! He has looked upon his servant in her lowliness, and people forever will call me blessed. The Mighty One has done great things for me, Holy is his Name! From age to age his mercy extends to those who live in his presence. He has acted with power and done wonders, and scattered the proud with their plans. He has put down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up those who are downtrodden. He has filled the hungry with good things but he has sent the rich away empty. He held out his hand to Israel, his servant, for he remembered his mercy, even as he promised our fathers, Abraham and his descendants forever.” Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months and then returned home.

The **Magnificat** is the resonance in Mary’s heart of her Trinitarian experience. Mary is full of joy because she feels herself touched by the saving love of God. Already she has accepted without any problem Elizabeth’s greetings and blessing; now, in the canticle, she see the future and accepts the blessings of all generations. She is so rooted in her humility/virginity that she is totally free to accept and cherish the unbelievable, infinite love of God. Now it is Joy, existential, supernatural

Joy! The experience of joy in accepting God’s love and loving will in our lives is a fundamental step in our Formation. Mary is for us a model of this stage of Formation, she is “CAUSA NOSTRAE LAETITIAE”: the cause of our joy. I always cherished the sentence of an experienced missionary: “If your experience of God is not an experience of joy, you have no right to be a missionary”.

3. OTHER ASPECTS OF MARY AND FORMATION

FORMATION IS DISCERNMENT

Twice in the gospel of Luke we find references to Mama Mary’s thoughtfulness:

Luke 2:19:

“As for Mary, she treasured all these messages and continually pondered over them”.

Luke 2:51:

“As for his mother, she kept all these things in her heart”.

Mary is shown going through the happenings of Jesus’ infancy and consequently Jesus’ life with a contemplative attitude and a discerning mind and heart. Discernment is usually considered as an attitude of the mind and the heart in order to reach a right operative choice, as a method of deliberation.

But there is a larger concept of discernment; it is discernment as a way of life. It is the attitude by which we understand the happenings of our past life as history of salvation and we see God inside our present reality. In the light of discernment as a way of life, we want to acquire the mind and the heart of Jesus (SENTIRE CUM JESU), his value system and outlook.

Certainly Mary had acquired the mind of Jesus. She is the model of Formation as discernment. A well-formed personality is a thoughtful personality and a discerning one. We are especially called to overcome narrow-mindedness and keep our life in the perspective of God’s plan of salvation which is enfolding in the world. Consecrated people who lack formation to discernment, can fall under a narrow minded outlook that usually manifest itself in:

- *Antagonism*: this happens when we waste our psychic energies in fighting among ourselves, with the members of our community, because of different points of view or simply because of different temperaments. It takes the form of jealousy or envy, competitiveness, gossip and sometimes even calumny.

- *Discouragement/Despondency*: in the face of difficulties or failures in our apostolate; or because of weak health or difficulties in relationships. It turns easily into self-pity.

- *Self-pity*: it is the excessive sense of our limitations, the morbid fixation with the shortcoming of our personality that paralyze the person and brings the person to bend on himself/herself, losing sight of the wider perspective of his/her personality and of the wider view of God’s operation in reality.

FORMATION IS OBEDIENCE

John 2:1-11:

“Three days later there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus was also invited to the wedding with his disciples. When all the

wine provided for the celebration had been served and they had run out of wine, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine". Jesus replied, "Woman, your thoughts are not mine! My hour has not yet come." However his mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Nearby were six stone water jars meant for the ritual washing as practiced by the Jews; each jar could hold twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them to the brim. Then Jesus said, "Now draw some out and take it to the steward." So they did. The steward tasted the water that had become wine, without knowing from where it had come; for only the servants who had drawn the water knew.

So, he called the bridegroom to tell him: "Everyone serves the best wine first and when people have drunk enough, he serves that which is ordinary. Instead you have kept the best wine until the end." This miraculous sign was the first, and Jesus performed it at Cana in Galilee. In this way he let his Glory appear and his disciples believed in him".

The work of Salvation is a mysterious encounter between God's Grace and our Freedom. We are saved radically and totally by his grace, but his grace cannot be received by us without our cooperation, our free assent, the YES of our freedom. By creating us free and by respecting our freedom, God empowers us to work for our salvation and the salvation of others.

The perfect example of this divine/human SYNERGY (POWER+ENERGY; SYN+MUTUAL; INTERACTION) is Mama Mary. Already at the Annunciation, her experience of faith becomes Obedience of Faith. The word: Obedience come from Latin: ob-audire (to listen). Mary's obedience is the culmination of the SHEMA' ISRAEL (Listen, O Israel!). Obedience is to listen: to come out of oneself and to enter into the vision of God's plan.

Elizabeth praises Mary's faith (obedience of faith), because it is total, unconditional and heroic: Mary offers her life to God and her heart to be pierced by the knife. That is obedience as FUNDAMENTAL OPTION.

What Mary was to God the Father at the Annunciation, she is to Jesus in the episode of Cana in Galilee. She enters into Jesus' hour and gives us the uncompromising guideline of mature obedience: DO WHATEVER HE TELLS YOU.

Mary is model of Formation in as much she has entered, through her listening attitude and discerning heart, into the concrete circumstances of God's plan and teaches us to give our wholehearted and free cooperation. **FORMATION is Obedience if it makes us people who are able to listen, to understand, to share the vision and to make ourselves available to God's plan with our loyal cooperation.**

FORMATION IS IMITATION

Mary is present in the most crucial moment of Christ's paschal mystery (at the foot of the cross) and of the mystery of the Church (the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost):

John 19: “*Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother ...*”

Acts 1:12-14: *“Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olives, which is a fifteen minutes walk away. On entering the city they went to the room upstairs where they were staying. Present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James, son of Alpheus; Simon the Zealot and Judas son of James. All of these together gave themselves to constant prayer. With them were some women and also Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.”*

At the foot of the cross or in the upper room, Mary does not utter any statement, as if to teach that successful formation is not measured in words but through presence and silent sintonia, what the Christian tradition has identified as IMITATION.

“Mary’s witness of deep faith-life was a constant challenge, non only a once-and-for-all response during the Annunciation. Imagine the challenge to her faith when Mary was misunderstood as a pregnant, unmarried woman, when there was no place in Bethlehem for her to give birth, when the holy family had to flee as refugees into Egypt, when Jesus was lost in the temple, when she stood under the cross of her son at Cavalry.

Mary was not spared the uncertainties, struggles and sufferings of human life; **she lived deeply into the mystery of God's design of salvation.**" (J. Kroeger).

[illegible]