**Formation:**

**The Essentials**

**in a Nutshell[[1]](#footnote-1)**

by Joe Mannath, SDB

I am what I am today mostly because of my seminary formation,” wrote Paul Mark, an ex-seminarian studying for IAS. “I came to the seminary raw and uncouth, with no great knowledge or culture. The seminary provided so many, many opportunities for our growth. The Fathers who oversaw us were caring, strict and very loving. We could approach them any time, talk with them, ask them questions, or tease them. Even now, as an ex-seminarian, if I want to consult someone privately on an important personal matter, I first think of the superiors and companions I had in the seminary, more than even my close relatives.”

Are all experiences of formation equally positive? No. I have also heard statements like the following: “I think I was a better person under my mother’s guidance than I was after joining religious life.” Sister Esther (a major superior now) told me. Father George, a middle-aged priest looked back on his seminary with frustration and anger: “Those formators made us waste our youth,” he said. “We were young and open. We could have learnt so many useful things. Instead, they kept us busy with silly things. The teaching was generally poor – badly done, largely irrelevant, with little room for questions.” As these quotes show, our religious and priestly formation period can be a time of fantastic personal growth under the guidance of wise and loving formators, or a huge waste of time and money, or a badly managed training in a poorly conceived setting.

How was it for you – and of others you know well? Did your formation help you to become a more mature, more loving, happier and more God-centered person – or increase your unhealthy tendencies (fear, selfishness or love of comfort)?

India, right now, has the largest number of seminarians and young religious in the world. In fact, for several international religious orders, India is one of the few places where the order is growing. We have many religious in formation, as well as large seminaries. If this process is done well, we can make a fantastic difference to the people of God and to the world.

Here are the essentials of formation work in a nutshell. It is based on my twenty years of formation work, some eight years of work in a centre for on-going formation, and what I have learnt from other religious and priests – as well as from what some lay people say about our formation.

**1. Stakeholders in Formation**

The main agent of religious and priestly formation is the Holy Spirit. It is God who can mould me into the person I am meant to be. How fully this happens will depend on how sincerely I respond to God. God normally acts through people. Just as God did not cook for me or bathe me when I was small, He continues to reach out to me through others. In formation settings, there are, in addition to God, three human agents or stakeholders – the formee, the formators and the religious order or diocese. What are their roles?

**The Formee**: The church teaches that the main agent of formation is the formee: “All formation is ultimately a self-formation. No one can replace us in the responsible freedom that we have as individual persons.” (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n.69). What responsibility does the formee have? I would summarize it with three words: ***What, Why, How****.*

***What***: It is the formee who must decide what s/he wants to become. Do I want to become a Salesian priest, or a Trappist or a married man? Others should not decide for me, nor pressurize me into choosing one path over another.

***Why:*** Why do I want to become a religious, and belong to this order? I need to clarify this. Others can help me, e.g. by asking me questions that clarify my motivation. Many young people have mixed and inadequate motives at the start and need time and guidance to clarify why they are choosing a path.

**How:** How am I using the opportunities I have? Thus, a young religious who says she wants to be a sister, or imitate the saints, but does not spend time in prayer nor studies hard, and seems keener on good food and TV, shows little seriousness about her call.

**The Formators**: Our duties and roles as formators can be summarized in three words: ***Inspire, Interact, Instruct***.

***Inspire***: The formator is not merely a lecturer. His or her role is to model the behavior expected of the formee. The seminarian or young religious needs to live under the guidance of adults who are inspiring older brothers/sisters to them. Young people look for models. They need adults about whom they feel: When I grow up, I want to be a person like you!

***Interact****:* Formation, like parenting, is a twenty-four-hour task. You can be a part- time professor; you cannot be a part-time formator. The formators are with the fomees in the chapel, in the class-room, on the playground, doing manual work, during picnics or in their sickness and sad moments. Loving (not suspicious) familiarity breeds confidence that opens hearts and minds. Both learn. Both grow.

***Instruct:*** Teaching is a part of formation ministry, but formation is not limited to the class room. If we are interested in the integral growth of our formees, there is no limit to what we can teach them – Bible reading, healthy tips, good manners, human relationships, leadership skills, communication, methods of meditation and prayer, good study habits…

**The Religious Order or Diocese**: has the following three responsibilities: ***Mission, Members, Methodology***.

***Mission****:* If your religious order has a gripping and challenging mission, it will attract idealistic young people. If you are not clear or enthusiastic about your mission, youngsters will see no point in joining your group.

***Members****:* Inspiring members are the best advertisement for a religious order or diocese.

***Methodology****:* A religious order needs a plan of formation, with each stage clearly defined, with its goals, the subjects to be taught at that stage, etc. Thus, a novice mistress does not invent the syllabus of the novitiate. She follows the formation plan of her order. She also knows what the candidate will have covered before reaching the novitiate, and what she will do after her novitiate. There is a well-thought-out organic plan of formation, from the recruitment stage to final vows or ordination.

**2. Stages of Formation**

Our formation did not begin with the minor seminary or the novitiate. It began in our families. Hence, we speak of three stages or formation: Family, Initial Formation and On-going Formation.

***The Family***: “My best spiritual director, both before joining and afterwards, has been my father. There is nothing I cannot discuss with him.” I heard these words from a much- esteemed major superior.

In seminars on formation, I write on the board, “My first formation house.” Then I draw a picture – not of a building or of chapel, but of a pregnant woman. I say: “That’s me in my mother’s womb. This is my first formation house.”

Our parents and siblings have influenced us more than our mistress or seminary rector. Our deepest values, our most touching experiences of tenderness, our most painful hurts, our understanding of love and of God, the way we smile and laugh, the manner in which we face illness or hardship… all these core traits were developed in our families.

So, too, some of us have been deeply hurt or neglected in childhood. Many of our greatest joys and a few of our most painful wounds – both go back to our early years. Each of us is more a product of our families than of our religious orders.

Formators need to remember this. The formee is not a blank slate which we fill with new ideas. No, each of them comes to us with fifteen or twenty years or more years of experience – years filled with joys and pains, God-experiences and questions, hardships and freedom. Some of our most memorable experiences are from our early years. A wise formator would well to listen to a formee, understand these early experiences and see how they have moulded the person. We need to help the young person to integrate the best experiences, get healed of their wounds – many do carry wounds that need healing! – and question some of the unexamined assumptions of the cultures they come from (e.g. caste bias).

If the original experiences are not dealt with, challenged and integrated in a healthy way, a religious can learn all the theory of religious life, but be a caste fanatic or biased against people from other places or ethnic groups, repeat oppressive patterns they have internalized during childhood.

Sr. Teresina, a candidate mistress, realized during group therapy that her mother had a nagging style of child-rearing – and that she herself was repeating the same way with her candidates, always nagging them, and never saying a word of encouragement.

It is important for formators to get to know the formee’s family. There are formators who do this systematically, even travelling long distances to do it.

***Initial Religious Formation:*** This is what is usually meant when people speak of “formation” – the training from recruitment up to final vows or ordination. It can last anything from eight to fifteen years.

The chief *goal* of religious formation is to help a young person to become Christ like. After all, we do not join religious life to become geography teachers or nurses or school principals. For doing any of these “jobs,” a person does not need to join an order or a seminary and spend years in spiritual practice – daily Eucharist and other prayers, sermons, retreats, spiritual direction, times of silence. If the goal is forgotten, or is pushed to the periphery, we will end up with smart and ambitious men and women who pursue worldly goals. Or we may keep busy with a series of meaningless activities that fill the day but have no deep formative value. This was the experience of Christina.

She left a good job and joined the convent, “to get closer to God.” “I found everything except that,” she wrote. “In fact, already as a young sister, I was made part of the formation team. I was shocked to see how we waste the time of our candidates on really silly things – so much attention being given to preparing flower vases, decorating the house for the superior’s visit or preparing the notice board. I wondered: Is it for this that we are inviting young women to join us?” How do we help the formee to move towards maturity and holiness? There are no short cuts. We learn the best lessons of life by experience and example, not through exhortations. A formation house must be a setting where younger people live with persons they can look up to and learn from. “My seminary was truly a home of love,” Anand, a young priest, told me. “I would love to meet with my former superiors any time, even now. I wish they could visit us now and then in our place of ministry, see how we are doing, and give us guidance.” For creating a good atmosphere in the formation house, the formators have the main responsibility. Father Peter Brocardo, SDB, a much-esteemed formator based in Rome and spiritual guide to many, would say: “The young have a right to make mistakes. It is we, older people, who should be exemplary.” More about initial formation are given in the later sections.

***On-going Formation:*** The Church insists much more on on-going formation than it did earlier. Why?

The main reasons are three. (1) People live much longer today. A hundred years ago, the average life span around the world was fifty- three years. Now it is over seventy. (2) We know much more about adult development than earlier. Thus, for instance, we know more about the physical and psychological effects of menopause or about the needs of seniors. (3) The world around us changes more rapidly. Just think of how the social media affect us. What we learnt in the novitiate or seminary twenty or thirty years ago proves inadequate for handling life today.

Everyone should be given chances to attend on-going formation courses and update oneself professionally. Or else we stagnate, lose our enthusiasm, or get stuck in the past. India has many centres offering on-going formation courses.

One difference between initial and on-going formation programmes is this: While the initial formation programme is largely planned by experts and offered to the formee, it is the individual religious who needs to take charge of one’s on-going formation. The religious order can offer some short programmes, but it cannot tailor these programmes to each one’s level of maturity and need.

Albert, a religious brother, found in his forties that he was losing enthusiasm for prayer and for religious life in general. He still believed in religious life, but the old fire was gone. So, too, he was confused about a deep friendship he had with a woman religious. How healthy was it? Was it a sign that he should leave and array? He sought spiritual direction to talk these issues over with someone he trusted. He said later that these spiritual direction meetings helped him profoundly to sort out issues, to grow humanly and spiritually, and find enthusiasm again.

This is what I mean by that, while I was not in charge of my novitiate programme, I am in charge of my on-going formation. It is mostly up to me to find what I need.

**3. Qualities of a Good Formator**

I was once asked to prepare a format for evaluating young formators before they were sent for higher studies. We discussed this with other formators and agreed on the most important qualities a formator should have. Here they are, from the most important to the less important ones:

***(1) Inspiring Personal Life:*** Is he/she a person whom the students can look up to? The necessary qualities include: honesty, integrity, personal values, prayer life, simple life style, dedication to duty,

***(2) Team Work:*** Does s/he work well in team? A good relationship to others (staff and students) includes: listening, sharing one’s views, supporting as well as challenging others respectfully, accepting criticism, sharing the common work.

***(3) Sound Judgement:*** As someone called to assess and train candidates, does this person show sound judgement regarding persons and situations? Judgement is a combination of common sense and experience.

***(4) Fidelity to the Church:*** Do this person’s view and praxis reflect a sound understanding of Church teaching and fidelity to it?

***(5) Enthusiastic Familiarity with the Charism:*** E.g. Does s/he have a right understanding of the Salesian (Franciscan, Jesuit, …) spirit and style? Does s/he look happy to belong to this congregation? Enthusiasm matters more than theoretical knowledge.

***(6) Effective Communication:*** Can this person teach and preach well? A formator need not be a scholar or writer but needs to communicate the essentials to a group of young people clearly.

***(7) Intelligence and Academic Preparation:*** This should be adequate for understanding and explaining the subjects to be taught clearly, correctly and with some ascendancy. A person of average intelligence and academic achievement who relates well, shows good judgement and is inspiring is more suited to be a formator than a brilliant academic who lacks these qualities.

***(8) Pastoral Experience:*** We are preparing people for ministry, not for scholarship. To do this, the trainers themselves need to have had some pastoral experience, such as parish ministry, hearing confessions, counselling youth, ministry among the poor, teaching, caring for the sick and the elderly, etc. A degree alone is not enough.

***(9) Some preparation for this ministry:*** Some knowledge of theology and scripture, some training in spiritual direction and counselling, study of the congregation’s charism & spirituality, some ways of praying. If someone is assigned for formation work, the person should be given chances for attending at least some short courses. Thus, for instance, a formator with a degree in theology would do well to get some training in counselling and spiritual direction.

**4. A Healthy Atmosphere:**

As we saw earlier, the formator’s main responsibility is to create a good atmosphere. This is the most important factor in the education of the heart, which is the heart of all education. Unless the heart is formed, as Pope Francis reminded major superiors two years ago, “we will be training little monsters who will then be in charge of our people!”

How do we prevent that? How do we make sure that the young person entering a religious order or seminary comes out more Christ like and more deeply human – and able to inspire and lead others?

The atmosphere matters very much. It is palpable. Here is how a healthy atmosphere can be described:

***(1) Integral:*** We need to care for the formee’s all-around growth. We are interested in their bodily health, mental development, emotional growth, relation- ships, professional preparation and spiritual journey. Formation should not have a one- track focus.

***(2) Joyful:*** Do the formators and the students look happy? People grow best in happy settings. Gloomy settings will also create emotional problems. Whether a candidate stays or leaves, they should have happy memories of their formation years. I have found ex-Salesians, for instance, speaking of the wonderful time they had in the formation house, and how they love meeting their former companions and superiors even now, after decades of separation.

***(3) Loving:*** Are the relationships based on mutual affection and trust, or on fear? Does the setting feel “warm” or “cold”? Is there a feeling of unity or division, trust or suspicion? All of us look for love and grow best when we are loved. Young people in particular have a special antenna to sense who loves them and who doesn’t. There are seminaries called “homes of love” by their alumni priests. A married layman who was a professor in a major seminary, living with the community for months, told one of his close friends, “This seminary not only conducts seminars on love; it is truly a home of love.” Sadly, there are also formation houses marked by fear, mutual indifference and power games.

***(4) Inspiring:*** Are the formators persons whom a young woman or man look up to? What are the formees most likely to learn from the way the formators live and relate? A seminarian in Chennai said this about one of the priests on the staff. “After meeting him, I believe more in Jesus. So many things I had heard about Jesus, I see in him.”

***(5) Faith-filled:*** Is there a palpable sense of being a Christ-centred family, or does it feel worldly? Do the decisions of the staff and their spontaneous comments reveal a faith- vision or worldly values, such as, power or ambition or rivalry? Is a young man/woman entering this community likely to come out a better/holier person, or worse than when they entered? I remember a seminary rector noted for his integrity, who reacted to unfair criticism and calumny this way, “When someone speaks ill of me, I pray extra for that person; so, I have never lost my peace of mind.” This is faith.

**5. Lessons from Experience:**

Here are some lessons I learnt from my experience as a formee and as a formator, and from feedback from formees and formators.

(1) The formator’s *life style* has a greater impact than his/her theory and talks. Only those who lead a simple life will be credible. Leaders are watched, not listened to!

(2) Fear-filled settings are destructive, and foster hypocrisy and anger.

(3) We need a *critical appreciation* of our culture. Its good points and its bad (unchristian) aspects, e.g. India’s religious sense, as also its caste discrimination and male chauvinism.

(4) Candidates learn a lot from the way we treat *those who leave*. If I stop caring for you when you leave, it means I never loved you.

(5) *Celibacy* is best safeguarded when the setting is one of love and trust, with sufficient chances for heterosexual contacts and normal relationship with one’s family. We are not, by and large, providing an adequate and realistic *formation for celibacy*.

(6) In our culture, many will take a *long time before they develop enough trust and courage* to come out with their deeper, more painful problems, e.g. sexual abuse.

(7) In some setting (e.g. rural India), it often takes more *courage and faith* to leave and face life than to stay in.

(8) If the formation setting (or the general atmosphere of the religious congregation) is not healthy, the candidate becomes *worse or less mature.*

(9) In the training of priests, the academic side is planned well. *Emotional and spiritual formation are often weak*. In the training of women religious and non-clerical orders of men, *both these aspects, as well as the intellectual aspect, are often neglected*.

(10) One big danger is that we may recruit and train people to *maintain institutions*, rather than to get closer to God and bring God’s love to people. If so, people will pick up worldly values, and end up uninspiring, unhappy or power-hungry.

**6. Tips for Formators:**

If you are a formator, please check whether you would make the same suggestions. If you are a formee, see how far you agree with these suggestions to formators.

**(1) Be genuine:** What you are is what you give. Young people can spot genuineness or humbug easily. speak what you believe in. If you don’t know something, admit it.

**(2) Be open to corrections and challenge:** The young will be open to corrections, if they see that we are open to be challenged too.

**(3) Give opportunities, demand they perform well, and encourage.** To tolerate shoddy work or waste of talent is not kindness; it destroys. Appreciate work well done.

**(4) Confront calmly and in a caring way, not out of anger.** Correct privately and with respect, rather than wait for official reports and meetings.

**(5) Pray for each one every day,** especially for those whom you are finding it hard to reach. Pray more for the person who hurts you, who seems troublesome, who looks unhappy.

**(6) Get counselling and spiritual direction.** The best way to become good in counselling or spiritual direction is receive it yourself.

**(7) Provide variety,** e.g. in methods of learning, ways of praying, etc. Young people get bored with sameness. Just to insist that they be present for community prayer is easy but is not enough.

**(8) Learn how to give feedback effectively.** Good feedback highlights a person’s good qualities more than their mistakes.

**(9) Get involved in the neighbourhood**, esp. the needs of the poor. Expose formees to the realities of life outside. Over- protection and narrow setting make people unaware of people’s problems, fussy about small difficulties, and waste their energy on gossip and silly concerns.

**(10) Make sure that what they tell you in confidence remains confidential.** Never betray confidentiality! A number of young religious do not trust superiors because what they shared in confidence was revealed to others.

**7. “Showing their true colours”?**

Some comments heard here and there:

“Now s/he shows his/her true colours.”

“She was polite and obedient as a novice. Now she does what she likes.”

“He was such a nice seminarian. See how he has changed after diaconate!”

Have you heard such comments? If so, here is my answer: If one out of ten behaves differently after formation, probably that person was not sincere. S/he did what was asked out of fear, or to get ahead. Now that there is no danger of being sent away, this person shows her wrong motivation – quest for comfort, money, power, etc.

But if five or six out of ten behave this way, there is something wrong with the formation programme and the selection of formators! If most live in fear and cannot be themselves, the formators are doing a bad job. Change them, before they damage more young people!

**Conclusion:**

*Formation ministry – like parenting – is demanding, beautiful and influential. We help young people to grow up in all areas of life, by providing inspiring example, by creating a loving, joyful and challenging atmosphere, and by interacting with them in simple and caring ways. We become their friends and confidants for life.*

When a religious or a priest faces a serious personal problem or wants to talk about a deep and meaningful experience, the persons they feel most comfortable with for sharing are usually their formators. The link of love and trust (with many lovely memories of praying and working and learning together and much fun and teasing) remain for life.

Links forged in joyful sacrifice and tender care do not die easily.

And we, formators, have the joy of seeing those who were once young people in our care go on to doing great and beautiful things for so many, with edifying dedication and zest. That really is our reward. It is, as I said, a lot like parenting – a full time commitment to give ourselves in love to those whom God entrusts to our care.

Our dream and wish are that they pass the love on, do even better than we did, and do their bit to increase the love and goodness in the world. What else is the purpose of life?

And in the process, we, formators, learn much – and grow much, too.

**NOTES AND REFLECTIONS:**

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