

E-BULLETIN #45

"Let the holiness of God shine forth" (cf. Mt 5,16)

item

is everything alright with our Formation?



A much debated topic in religious circles is formation. Programs of formation and its contents, dynamics, environment, the formators, etc., are all under continuous scrutiny. We keep updating these programs, and the formators. Yet, somehow, there always remains a sense of dissatisfaction. Maybe, in this case, we are dealing with the mystery of religious vocation and the person himself. They are indeed inscrutable mysteries and we should not be frustrated by our human efforts to unravel them.

Our reactions to the scandal of sexual abuse of minors by the clergy also makes us reflect on our very understanding of human nature, our religious vocation and its care through the formative process. While this crime should be unequivocally condemned, whether it is perpetuated by clergy or anybody else, we also need to remind ourselves that such manifestations of the impact of original sin were present in the past, are happening today, and will also occur in the future. Certainly we must do everything possible to reduce or annihilate any such tendency in the future, but it is unlikely that we will achieve a 100% success however hard we try. There will be always individuals with profound psychological fragilities and mixed or confused religious motivations. Such an awareness must not make us despondent and pessimistic but rather should enable us to confront our incarnated existence with profound humility and abundant trust in divine grace. St Paul, who was afflicted by the burden of his own human and spiritual limitations, pleaded with the Lord to remove the thorn from his flesh but to no avail. That experience of brokenness did not weaken him, but rather strengthened his resolve to depend on divine grace.

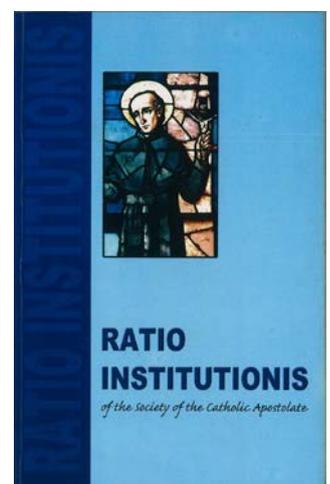
Some of the negative trends of modern culture such as growing individualism, shallow relationships, over-dependence on science and technology at the cost of the overall well-being of the human person, etc., are radically changing the very fabric of many of our social structures such as family and marriage. Television programs have begun to substitute the precious moments of traditional family prayers and recreation. Such negative social and cultural trends will have lasting repercussions on the overall psychological, social, moral and spiritual dimensions of the human person. Destruction of the family structure will inevitably lead to the obvious annihilation of human self and end up in the moral and religious decadence of an entire civilization. In today's world we are hardly surprised any more if individuals show alarming and absurd behaviours, like entering a cinema and shooting innocent people!

In this short article, I wish to touch only on the negative psychological impacts on the human self when family structure is affected by the separation/absence of parents, violence, insecurity, lack of love and

pathological relationships. Early family relationships, as we know, constitute the core of the human self. Love, respect and security experienced in the family become the very psychological foundation for one's self-identity and self-worth. The absence of these positive experiences, on the other hand, can leave a person permanently psychologically fragile and wounded. Depending on the intensity of negative experiences people can be affected to various degrees. Besides these psycho-social factors, there could be also organic and genetic factors contributing to the psychopathology in different persons. I wish to examine here briefly the issue of human formation of candidates entering religious life with such inner psychological fragility.

We need to be aware that many of our candidates entering religious life carry with them scars of such psychological fragility. Of course, proper selection and psychological screening can avoid many difficulties. Even then some will get through regardless of such screening processes. In other instances individuals can develop unhealthy patterns of behaviour at a later stage in life, or under stress. So there is no fool-proof method of screening and avoiding such cases. This is also because the human person remains a mystery all through his life.

A percentage of our candidates certainly come from very difficult family situations. Some of them may have had to endure alcoholic parents; some others might have been sexually, physically or psychologically abused. Some others may have come from broken families and had to carry heavy burdens like taking care of many younger siblings. Many enter religious life with unresolved sexual conflicts, bundled with much subconscious guilt and shame. Many carry with them a variety of unhealed hurts and traumas from childhood. Negative self-image, developed by such traumas, creates many psychological blocks later in life. When our self-identity and self-worth are damaged to a significant level, there arise many problems which will certainly affect relationships with others, vocational commitment and apostolic effectiveness. The negative psychological impacts on the human person in such situations will be enormous. Regardless of all their sincere effort, such persons will not be able to live their vocational values with inner freedom, peace and joy.



If we really want to help such troubled and difficult persons, the areas of their human formation need to be substantially improved, of course always assisted by divine grace. Human formation, if it is to be really effective, must deal with not only the conscious behaviours and attitudes but should effect a transformation at the motivational level, including the subconscious areas of one's life. Most of the formative or therapeutic support offered in our formation houses hardly goes beyond occasional advice or group dynamics capable of effecting some peripheral, external behavioural changes. Religious formation, by and large, is limited to the intellectual level, especially in the case of priestly formation. Certainly this one-sided approach to formation does a lot of harm. Someone with a doctorate in Theology or Philosophy does not automatically become a good formator. Formation should always be integral, taking into consideration every aspect of an individual's life if it is to be effective and lasting. Current scandals in the Church concerning sexual abuse of children are certainly an invitation to all of us to examine the very concept of our religious and priestly formation. Growth in sexual and affective maturity is, without doubt, an important part of human formation. It is an opportune moment to give serious consideration to this aspect in our formation system.

Often we expect and demand very mature and perfect performance from the newly ordained priests and professed religious. They may be competent in their professions but many of them could be fragile in the psychic level. Sometimes people wonder why a particular priest or religious is so dysfunctional, and some may be even shocked by the scandals caused by such supposedly ideal persons. As undigested food can upset our stomach, our unresolved psychic problems can emerge in different ways. One's interior struggle is often evident in a harshness of character, lavish life-style, sexual exploits, temper, violence or irresponsibility. These character traits will undoubtedly affect the outcomes of our evangelical works. Our

personal witness attracts or distances people from the Church. Though one may proclaim many ideals and values, people will not be convinced of sincerity, genuine love, care, compassion, sensibility, patience, friendship and humility unless they find their authentic expressions in actual life.

To enable such fragile individuals to overcome their difficulties and to indeed grow, trained and experienced persons should commit to regular and professional accompaniment. Personal accompaniment of the candidate by such persons is absolutely necessary for growth in human and spiritual maturity. Such formators need to be truly human themselves, and trained in human and spiritual sciences. They must have the necessary personal maturity, and an ability to empathize with those entrusted to their care. They should have also sufficient life-experiences in order to understand human struggle. Finally, they should also be persons of faith, men or women of God.

The ministry of the healing of brokenness is a fundamental and most rewarding one. The very meaning of the salvific work of Jesus was one of healing, thereby giving us the fullness of life promised by God. The Gospels are full of narratives of Jesus' healing – physically, psychologically and spiritually. True healing must be a holistic process, touching every dimension of human existence. Physical, psychological and spiritual dimensions are all inter-related. Though the healing process does not take away the past, it can help individuals to live in peace. The past does not go away, but it loses its power to make a misery of our lives. Once a person has resolved his/her inner struggles, psychic energy can be channelled in creative and constructive ways in our evangelical work.

There are many psychological and spiritual techniques to improve a damaged and fragile self, with a distorted self-image and diffused [confused?] self-identity. But they are no substitute for genuine love and acceptance of others and God. The experience of the steadfast love of God for us is the most healing and effective therapy. But experience of divine love is not easy unless one gets rid of all distortions and impediments at the human level. God's grace enhances, works through and transforms our human nature.

As a concrete suggestion I would recommend that we invest more on the preparation of formators who are really able to accompany persons entrusted to their care with absolute dependence on divine grace, and with a profound knowledge of the human and spiritual dynamics of the human person. The work of New Evangelization ultimately depends on personal conversion, a change of heart, *metanoia*. Such an apostolate will certainly be a participation in the healing ministry of Jesus, enabling the human person to enjoy the fullness of life promised by God.

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LAITY and CHURCH

Attached to this edition of our Bulletin is a paper titled:

**LAITY and CHURCH
in the documents of the
Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences**

This has been photocopied from COMPASS – published in Australia by the Australian Province of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. The author is **Dr Peter N V Hai**, an honorary fellow at the Australian Catholic University.



Dr Peter N.V. Hai is an honorary fellow of the Australian Catholic University. He is currently researching the theology of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference as proposed in their pastoral statements (1967-2010).

At the end of 5 pages he provides his own summary:

“This paper has provided a comparative analysis of the FABC’s theologies of the Church and of the laity under four categories of vocation, mission, development, and methodology. It demonstrates that there is a convergence of thought between these two theologies, highlighting their interaction and suggesting that the Church and the laity share in the same mission. Indeed, when Pius XII first lent the Church’s authority to the exalted dignity of the laity by declaring in 1946 that lay people are the Church, he formally brought an end to a theological and pastoral tendency to treat them as merely passive members of the Church .

*Over the next 50 years, inspired by Vatican II’s constitutions *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, and in particular the decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, the theology of the laity took on a new course. In the hand of the Catholic bishops of Asia it is intimately linked to their contextual ecclesiology and unifies their teaching on the Church’s evangelising mission with such deep insights as the triple dialogues of life and basic ecclesial communities. In fact, the Asian bishops have scarcely issued an official statement where the theme of evangelisation did not dominate. It is the basis of their entire theology, which places particular emphasis on the role of the laity as Asian Christians in carrying out the Church’s mission in the world.*

In the FABC’s rich ecclesiology, lay people are the principal redemptive agents of the Church’s redemptive mission in the world. They are not the bridge in the world: they are the Church in the world.”

for further reading the full paper can be viewed at <http://compassreview.org/pdf/winter12.pdf>

Dr Peter N V Hai
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