**FORMATION OF FORMATORS**

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**1. The journey of the congregation**

A good picture of the journey of the congregation up to 2009 may be found in the letter of Francesco Cereda in AGC 404, entitled “Formation of formation guides in initial formation.” The letter spoke of the need for selection and formation of formators, described the tasks of formators (helping transformation, accompanying, fostering primacy of the spiritual life, communicating don Bosco’s charism, working as a team), and listed the various occasions for formation of formators (self-formation, within the community, province and region; and the opportunities available at the level of the congregation, mainly at the UPS).

This letter comes in the wake of two important magisterial documents: PDV of 1992 and VC of 1996, with the *Directives* *concerning the preparation of seminary educators* of 1993 following soon after PDV.

Since 2009 we have had the pontificate of Francis, with EG, LS and AL, the Year of Consecrated Life in 2014-2015, and the forthcoming synod on youth, the faith and vocational discernment. Francis does not innovate doctrine; he connects it with real life and with concrete persons. The great way he is offering the church is the way of discernment (see the repeated references to this in his conversation with the USG, 25 November 2016).[[1]](#footnote-1) In his discourse to the CIVCSVA recently, the two key words are *accoglienza* (hospitality / openness) and *accompagnamento* (accompaniment).[[2]](#footnote-2)

And this brings us to one of the interesting points in the 2009 letter of Cereda. Despite a certain downplaying of personal spiritual accompaniment, the letter announces the intention to institute a course for the formation of spiritual guides. What became of this? In 2011 the formation sector began the process of drafting a supplement to the Ratio on Salesian personal accompaniment, where personal accompaniment was understood in a broad sense as including personal spiritual guidance but also the friendly chat, confession, psychological accompaniment, the scrutinies, and intellectual, pastoral and liturgical accompaniment – everything except community accompaniment. Drafts were twice presented to the Rector Major and his council, but never approved and promulgated. Instead, in 2015, the formation sector was asked to work with the youth ministry sector on the topic – seeing that the Youth Ministry sector had itself been working on an allied topic, the spiritual accompaniment of youth – with the aim of offering guidelines t the congregation after having first listened to the young Salesians in initial formation and to their guides. This work is currently in process.

As don Pascual Chavez said in his letter, “Vocation and Formation,” it is clear that the congregation needs to learn to prepare formators and not just professors.[[3]](#footnote-3) It is a fact that, while the congregation has learned to invest time, money and effort in the preparation of professors, it has not yet learned how to prepare formators. At the very least, we can say that the preparation of formators is still sporadic rather than systematic.

**2. Formation: method and content**

Various documents of the church since 1990 have been calling for the formation of formators. They tend to be much clearer in the description of the various elements in the formation process, a bit less clear on the model of formation that they propose, and much weaker on how to go about preparing formators.

However, it would seem that we have a clear new direction since *Vita Consecrata* (1996). Here I am particularly inspired by a talk given by Amedeo Cencini in 1998 to the special General Chapter of the OFMConv, with the title “La formazione oggi: Ministero e mistero.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In this talk – coming soon after *Vita Consecrata* – Cencini notes that while we have several theological models of consecrated life, we have not yet worked out with sufficient clarity the methodological aspects, the paths of growth in consecrated life. “This is a really paradoxical situation: *a wealth of theological models on the one hand, and a remarkable poverty of methodological itineraries on the other*.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Cencini clarifies immediately that by ‘method’ he means neither a set of techniques nor an educative praxis based on theories of human growth but substantially independent of Christian growth and consecrated life. He thinks of method as something that is strictly tied to the content and connatural to it. Method in this sense would be the ‘logic’ of the content and its inevitable operational consequence, and somehow already an anticipation allowing a foretaste of the goal. “And if method is in some way the declination of operational translation of the model, *an authentic educative goal must be capable of transforming itself into a method*… otherwise it is not a real goal.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Against this consideration, we might ask about the goal of formation to consecrated life proposed in VC.

We note that VC has only 8 paragraphs dedicated explicitly to formation, admits Cencini, but says that the richness of the text goes far beyond these paragraphs. Fundamentally the document approaches the problem of formation from a double point of view: method and content.

So what is the goal of formation? It is configuration to Christ, “putting on the sentiments [*phronein*] of Christ” (Phil 2,5), sharing the Son’s total self-giving to the Father and to his brothers, becoming a living memorial of him, to the point of sharing even his concrete life choices. (VC 66, 22) This goal is not an abstract perfection, not a set of skills and behaviours to be learned, but rather the formation of the heart of the consecrated person, so that he becomes able to love with the very heart of God and of the Son on the cross.

From this goal follow certain consequences:

*A dynamic of call and response.* Formation is not a merely human process; it is divine and Trinitarian. It is God the Father who is the first formator, he who, through the Spirit, forms the inner attitudes of the Son in the heart of young people. (VC 66) Formation is therefore a dynamic of call and response, a dialectic of two freedoms and two loves, a divine work with which we are called to collaborate. This is how our Constitutions see formation: as response to vocation.

*A dynamic of beauty.* The situating of formation *in sinu Trinitatis*, in the bosom of the Trinity, makes consecrated life participate in the beauty of God himself. In VC, beauty becomes a key to the reading of consecrated life (and it is significant that Pope Francis is extending the *via pulchritidunis* to evangelization, to formation, to the life of the church). Vocation ministry and formation must know how to communicate the beauty of the *sequela* (VC 64, 66). The young person must be formed to see and taste the beautiful and not merely the holy and the duti-ful – the beauty, the attractiveness, the splendour of the Lord who calls and the life to which he calls. This is the whole dynamic of example, witness, testimony. Fire can be lit only by fire.[[7]](#footnote-7)

*A dynamic of freedom.* “If we must form the ‘heart,’ in the biblical and full sense of the term, so that the young person might have the attitudes of Christ and discover the beauty of the *sequela*, the process of education has to be a formation to freedom (VC 66).”[[8]](#footnote-8) Grace influences our freedom but never takes it away - not even the most powerful grace. Because grace is love, and freedom is a constitutive element of love: without freedom there is no loving and no possibility of a loving response to love. “It is significant and something rather new in this kind of document, that the Apostolic Exhortation emphasizes ‘formation to freedom’ as content and method of formation.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

If the goal of formation were preparation for a certain kind of apostolate or a certain style of life, or the possession of certain virtuous qualities in view of the ministry, the pedagogical methodology could be different (e.g., the strengthening of the will, the capacity for ascesis and renunciation, preparation for the apostolate), but if it is formation of the heart so that the young person has the attitudes of the Son, the only possible way is the way of freedom. The heart of man can and must be educated and evangelized, purified and liberated with all the suffering that this involves, the point of experiencing those attitudes always more naturally and almost connaturally, thanks to a wise discipline. There is no authentic education to consecration to the kingdom that does not pass through the phases, negative and positive, ascetical and mystical, of a formation to freedom, to freedom – in concrete – as awareness of one’s own internal conditioning, even unconscious, and the ability to be ever less dependent (freedom ‘from’); freedom as a gift received from God in Christ and continually revitalized by the gift of the sacraments and of the new life in Christ (freedom ‘in’) and freedom as the richness of the interior life and of love for God, as the consequent quality of desires and the strength to pursue them (“freedom ‘for’).

The impression, if I may say so, is that there has rarely been a theoretical and methodological attention to this area. It appears that there is no place in many programs of formation for a formation to freedom, as if man were born free or as if freedom were not a virtue. In fact freedom is not a virtue but rather that interior attitude that is the indispensable condition for any virtue to be truly such; or it signifies that disposition of heart-mind-will, of the whole of man, that allows one to love virtue, be attracted by it, experience the happiness tied to virtuous action. Perhaps, then, we could say that education to freedom is or should be “the” method of the process of formation to consecration.[[10]](#footnote-10)

This model of formation as education to freedom is strongly backed up by Pope Francis, as can be seen in his now famous conversation with the Superiors General in 2013:

Problems are not solved simply by forbidding doing this or that. Dialogue as well as confrontation are needed. To avoid problems, in some houses of formation, young people grit their teeth, try not to make mistakes, follow the rules smiling a lot, just waiting for the day when they are told: ‘Good. You have finished formation.’ This is hypocrisy that is the result of clericalism, which is one of the worst evils…. I summarize by some advice that I once received as a young man: ‘If you want to advance, think clearly and speak obscurely.’ That was a clear invitation to hypocrisy. We need to avoid that at all costs.[[11]](#footnote-11)

A dynamic of *learning from experience*. If God is at work in us forming in our hearts the attitudes of the Son, the more attentive we are to this work, the better we can respond to it and collaborate with it.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Given the strong biblical inspiration of VC, seen also in the biblical icons such as that of the Transfiguration and, w.r.t. formation, of the kenotic Christ, we must speak of the place in formation of *prolonged exposure to the Word of God*.[[13]](#footnote-13) One of our Rector Majors pointed out quite acutely that our key attention has to be to personal prayer: without investment in personal prayer, our community prayer slowly loses its meaning. We could of course ask whether there is place in Salesian life for “prolonged exposure” to the Word of God and for substantial moments of personal prayer. It would seem that in Don Bosco’s own there was a clear place for this, if we are to go by what Rinaldi tells us. As for what he expected of his followers, we need to examine the important of the remarkable illustrations of prayer in the three *Lives*, as also in the Biographies of young Salesians who died in his lifetime.

It would not be out of place to speak also about the transformative potential of “spiritual” reading in general. While it is true that our formation is stronger on the intellectual dimension rather than on the human and spiritual dimensions, we cannot forget that meditative, prayerful reading of spiritual literature is not only very simple and possible but also powerful.

We need to say a word also about *personal spiritual accompaniment* and the *friendly chat* with the director – especially since AGC 404 is somewhat diffident on the matter:

There is often a way of thinking in initial formation which attributes excessive importance to personal conversation between the formation guide and the one in formation. There is no doubt that the spiritual guide plays a crucial role, but that should in no way minimise the need for a team of formation guides.[[14]](#footnote-14)

VC is, however, unambiguous on the point: “The chief instrument of formation is personal dialogue [*colloquio personale*], a practice of irreplaceable and commendable effectiveness which should take place regularly and with a certain frequency.” (VC 66) Cencini comments: “This is another precious methodological indication…. Formation, even though it takes place in community, is in itself an individual phenomenon; it is the individual who must be helped to know himself, to make his interiority emerge, even in its most hidden and problematic areas, and to overcome defence mechanisms and fears in order choose to follow Christ…: all operations which call for… that climate of confidence and confidentiality, of understanding and attention to the individual that can be guaranteed only in the relationship between two persons, and always in the hope of an integration between the human-psychological and spiritual-charismatic aspect.”

Christ is our living Rule, says C 196, and we find him present in Don Bosco. But we need to say that the two are not on the same level. The whole purpose of Don Bosco is to lead us to Christ. Don Bosco cannot be our end, our goal; that end and that goal is Christ, and to Christ and to him alone belongs primacy. Don Bosco forms part of the glorious body of Christ in time, but his job is to lead us to Christ, he wants to lead us to Christ.[[15]](#footnote-15) At the feet of Christ we learn to sit, and from there we are sent forth. And with Don Bosco and like him we feel sent to the young, and to the poorest among them.

So mission is revelation, it is epiphany: like Christ reveals to us the Father and is the merciful face of the Father, so we are called to be revelations of the Father, signs and bearers of his love to the young. Formation and mission fuse together wonderfully.

**3. Formation of formators**

*3.1 The need*

The need to form formators and not only teachers is a constant refrain in the documents of the church in the last three decades.

Thus *Pastores dabo vobis* (1992):

It is evident that much of the effectiveness of the training offered depends on the maturity and strength of personality of those entrusted with formation, both from the human and from the Gospel points of view. And so it is especially important both to select them carefully and to encourage them to become ever more suitable for carrying out the task entrusted to them. The synod fathers were very aware that the future of the preparation of candidates for the priesthood depends on the choice and formation of those entrusted with the work of formation, and so they describe at length the qualities sought for in them. Specifically they wrote: "The task of formation of candidates for the priesthood requires not only a certain special preparation of those to whom this work is entrusted, one that is professional, pedagogical, spiritual, human and theological, but also a spirit of communion and of cooperating together to carry out the program, so that the unity of the pastoral action of the seminary is always maintained under the leadership of the rector. (PDV 66)

And *Vita Consecrata* (1996):

Because sensitive tasks are involved, the training of suitable directors of formation, who will fulfil their task in a spirit of communion with the whole Church, is very important. It will be helpful to establish appropriate structures for the training of those responsible for formation, preferably in places where they can be in contact with the culture in which their pastoral service will later be carried out. (VC 66)

The *Directives concerning the preparation of seminary educators* of 1993 observes that common sense alone is not enough; what is needed is a capacity for discernment that has been sharpened and refined by a good knowledge of the human sciences so as to be able to go beyond appearances and “to help the seminarian to know himself in depth, accept himself with serenity and to correct himself and to mature….”[[16]](#footnote-16)

The 1998 document *Inter-Institute Collaboration for Formation* insists, like many documents before it, on accurate selection of formators, but goes further to say that the criteria of selection, the qualities required, the preparation and the updating be defined by the norms proper to each institute and elaborated in the *Ratio Institutionis*.[[17]](#footnote-17)

*3.2 Contents and methods*

Talking about the formation of priests, PDV had underlined the necessity of a “special preparation of those to whom this work is entrusted, one that is professional, pedagogical, spiritual, human and theological” and had distinguished between an initial phase and a successive phase of periodical updating. (PDV 66)

In general the church documents of the last three decades are abundant on the conditions of formation (the team, the content, the method, the formators) and on the qualities required in formators. See, for example:

* *The Directives on formation in religious institutes* (Potissimum Institutioni) (1990), which cites *The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life*[[18]](#footnote-18) of 1980
* *Pastores dabo vobis* (1992)
* *Directives concerning the preparation of seminary educators* (1993)
* *Vita Consecrata* (1996)
* *Inter-Institute Collaboration for Formation* (1998)
* *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation:* Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis (2016)

The *Directives* of 1993 appeal to the immediately preceding PDV (1992) and the earlier *Optatam Totius* to insist on the necessity of a good preparation in the pedagogical and the human sciences. As we have seen, the educator must not think that common sense is enough; but he must neither underestimate nor absolutize the relationship with and contribution of the human sciences.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The *Directives* (1993) speak only towards the end, under ongoing formation of formators, and in a section called “Revision,” of studying the personality of the educator and his ministry, his way of understanding and living out his educative mission; and it calls for courses with practical exercises so that the educator can become aware of his own capacities and attitudes, accept his limitations, update and improve the criteria of his action; also of spiritual renewal through the Ignatian month, spiritual exercises, desert.[[20]](#footnote-20)

However, the same *Directives* (1993), when speaking of the *spiritual director*, says that he must refine his ability to be open, listen, dialogue, understand, along with a good knowledge of spiritual theology, other theological disciples and the human and pedagogical sciences. Don’t spare means to prepare him![[21]](#footnote-21) *The Directory on the Ministry and Life of priests* (new ed. 2013) says: priests themselves must receive spiritual direction so as to be able to impart spiritual direction.[[22]](#footnote-22)

As far as formation of formators to Salesian consecrated life is concerned, we could talk broadly about *three* components: the human, the spiritual, and the Salesian. Clearly, and without in any way downplaying the importance of a sound doctrinal background, such formation cannot be predominantly theoretical.

*3.3 Concrete possibilities*

The *Directives* of 1993 admit that the possibilities for the initial preparation of formators are not many, also because institutions for the preparation of formations are very few.[[23]](#footnote-23) The document calls for the setting up of such courses[[24]](#footnote-24) – something that is taken up again in VC (1996) 66.

The task before us is threefold: (1) a change of formation model – from a formalistic and vertical one to “putting on the attitudes of Christ”; (2) a change of attitude on the part of formators: seeing the need and urgency of their own preparation; (3) finding concrete possibilities for the initial preparation of formators.

The letter of Cereda (AGC 404) makes a comprehensive list of formation of formators possibilities on personal, local, provincial, regional and world level – and all these still remain valid and useful.

It is useful and necessary to distinguish, with the *Directives* (1993) between initial and ongoing aspects of this preparation. We are at the moment stronger on the ongoing aspect. It is the initial and prior preparation that calls for serious attention.

At the present moment, twenty-five years down the line from the *Directives* of 1993, the possibilities are still not abundant, especially within the congregation, but they do exist (see Appendix). Here we need to say that the formation of formators does not necessarily involve a PhD and not even a licentiate or master’s degree. A good course should (1) touch and involve the person of the formator in the human and spiritual areas; (2) and only then try to equip him with the skills and tools that might be useful in his work of formation. We might need a certain flexibility and creativity. The Salesian component cannot be neglected and has to be provided by us. The human and spiritual components can be provided by us, but we could also take advantage of what is being offered in other parts of the Church as far as the personal human and spiritual growth of the formator is concerned. The integration of the good “technology” that is available with the Salesian charism is something that requires to be done, and hopefully, with the ongoing efforts of the Youth Ministry and Formation sectors, this will become a reality.

APPENDIX

*Rome*

UPS: licence in formation of formators (in the FSE and in the FT); licence in spiritual theology, and in spiritual theology with specialization in Salesian studies (FT); the course for ongoing formation of formators (“Roggia course” of four months).

Other ecclesiastical universities: the Gregoriana; the Claretianum; etc.

*India*

Don Bosco Renewal Centre, Bangalore

Sadhana, Lonavla

Sadhana, Patna

*Philippines*

Galilee Center, Tagaytay

Emmaus

*America*

Argentina

*Africa*

Nairobi

Burkina Faso

*Europe*

France

*Australia*

Montreal

1. Francesco, *Conversazione del Papa Francesco con i Superiori Generali*, 25 novembre 2016 (edited by Antonio Spadaro). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Francesco, *Discorso del Santo Padre Francesco ai partecipanti alla Plenaria della Congregazione per gli Istituti di Vita Consacrata e le Società di Vita Apostolica*, 28 gennaio 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. P. Chavez, “Vocation and Formation” 416:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See <http://www.ofmconv.org/x/CENCINI.htm#N_13_> (as of 11 February 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cencini. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cencini. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See the talk of J. Finnegan at the Spirituality Congress during the Bicentenary. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cencini. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cencini. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cencini. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “Svegliate il Mondo.” Colloquio di Papa Francesco con i Superiori Generali. *La Civiltà Cattolica* 2014 I 3-17 3925 (4 gennaio 2014) 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See “Formation is lifelong,” AGC 425 (forthcoming). See also Ivo Coelho, “Lonergan and Formation,” *Salesianum* **79** (2017) 133-153. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See *Directives* 1990 31, which itself cites *The Contemplative Dimension* 20. In some of our documents, this biblical rootedness is sadly absent – but perhaps this is because these documents are meant to be “Guidelines and Orientations.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cereda, AGC 404:67. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. But see what Adrienne Von Speyr says: “it is not very easy for [Don Bosco] to lead his fellowmen into the world of his prayer… and if his helpers pray too little and take more joy in the action, in the undertakings, in the work, or in the outer shell than they do in God, then, he becomes sad and, at the same time, is at a loss about what to do. He doesn’t know how to convey his own enthusiasm to them.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. CEC, *Directives concerning the preparation of seminary educators* (1993) 57. See *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 23/32 (27 January 1994) 558-571, at <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/priesthood/priestly-formation/upload/preparation.pdf> (as of 11 February 2017) The English text is not available at <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. CIVCSA, *Inter-Institute*… 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, *The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life*, <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccscrlife/documents/rc_con_ccscrlife_doc_12081980_the-contemplative-dimension-of-religious-life_en.html> (as of 11 Feb 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Directives* 1993 57, 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Directives* 1993 70-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Directives* 1993 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Directory* 2013 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. CEC, *Directives* 1993 49, 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. CEC, *Directives* 1993 73, 74, 78, 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)