

CANDIDATES AND COMMUNITY: MUTUAL FORMATION

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EXCITING CHURCH-RELATED communities are springing up outside the traditional religious life. Their purposes and goals are varied: for instance, an affinity group gathered to protest a nuclear weapons test site, a Jesuit Volunteer Corps community living and working in an American ghetto, a community of divorced persons working to rebuild their lives and offering a spiritual programme for other divorced persons. Once a group is established, questions arise about new members. How do we accept them and how do we incorporate them into our group? How do we use creatively the inevitable tensions between new and old members? Much depends on the model of community operative for a group as well as on their principles and procedures of selection of candidates. While the agents of formation are crucial, corresponding attention needs to be paid to the 'one who is formed'. Some of the recent experience of religious life could prove helpful to other groups who are now also struggling with these important issues.

Who is formed?

'Who is formed?' was an easy question not long ago, at least in religious life. Obviously, the candidate was formed by the novice director or directress. The process was passive. The underlying assumption was: I, the director, (or we, the group) have the truth; you, the novice, have something (everything) to learn.

Yet even in the classical formation of religious, the process worked best when the director was open to learning and the novices were able to contribute to the process. Good novice directors and directresses never needed to have all the 'answers' or to 'call all the shots'. For some questions, problems and situations they sent novices right to the chapel and tabernacle, realizing that only Jesus could deal with some experiences. Directors also recognized that

some input from people in formation was important to a good programme. They would check with some regularity how people were doing and make adjustments accordingly. The adjustment might be as simple as calling an extra holiday when novices were more than usually high strung, or as dramatic as the revised programmes that responded to Vatican II.

Recently, the mutuality of the formation process is more conscious and central. Factors ranging from educational praxis to the age and background of candidates have influenced this. Just as a good educator must also be a good learner and good education helps persons to educate themselves, so too with formation. Candidates now are often older and often bring more education, professional experience and mature spirituality to religious life.

Who is formed? The question is deceptively simple. As I began to reflect on it I came up with this preliminary list: (1) the candidate by the novice director/mentor, (2) the candidate by other candidates, (3) the candidate by other people who are actively involved in mission, (4) the candidate by God, (5) the novice director/mentor by the candidate, (6) the novice director/mentor by the group of candidates, (7) the novice director/mentor by the active community, (8) the novice director/mentor by God, (9) the community by the candidate, (10) the community by the group of candidates, (11) the community by God, (12) all of the above by the world. What is clear is that many relationships are involved. The more open a group is to the world, the more influences there will be in formation and, correspondingly, the more need there will be to sort out and evaluate those influences.

For the sake of simplicity, let us look at issues that involve the individual as the one formed and that involve the community as the one formed. My language here is that of formation of religious, but much of what is involved belongs to any attempt to build a community.

Something still rings untrue with the words 'formation' and 'director' and 'novice' as these are used in religious communities. Perhaps it is only their connotations. Nevertheless, every group needs to be suspicious of arrogance or false confidence that those who direct have all the answers and those who join have none. Unfortunately, for many people even the term 'education' still has strong undertones of adult-child relationships. Several truths must be kept in tension: a candidate has something to bring and

something to learn; a group has something to give and something to receive.

My assumption is this: after God, the one most responsible for a candidate's formation is the candidate him or herself since adults take responsibility for themselves. God is the prime 'former' of Christian community. Paul and Apollo play their part, but God gives the increase. This fact is so central and so obvious that we often take it for granted. If something is wrong in formation, the first thing to look at is: what is God saying to us? If something is right in formation, then we still need to look for God.

But 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. If the candidate fails, then I fail. If the candidate is unhappy, then I must have done something wrong. At times candidates will project unrealistic expectations on a group: to be the home I never had, to be a constant support and never a challenge. At times the candidate may expect a formation person to be a good father or mother he or she never had or to be a bad father or mother who always judged and was never satisfied. A formation person can put those same unrealistic expectations on him or herself. While one set of strengths of formation personnel is to resist being an 'answer person' or the saviour, another set is to resist being bad mother or bad father. Especially in working with new candidates, this can be quite a struggle for candidates, community and formation persons.

Good formation rests on the acknowledgement that we are in formation, initial or ongoing, and that the Spirit of God is forming and reforming us and will continue to do so. Formation stands or falls according to how well we work with the Spirit. We are called and held together by one Spirit. At the heart of 'formation' is a search for the Spirit, a search that we are making together. Granted that some have a longer, deeper, and richer history of responding to the Spirit, there is a fundamental equality before God of the baptized: as Paul says so forcefully in Galatians 3,28, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ'.

Both the candidate and the community need to look at three areas: what is the present attraction to this life? What is the history of this life in light of one's personal life? And what are the opportunities for growth? Essential questions for each area are:

where is God in all this? What is God like? What happens when you engage God about this? They may sound simple and repetitive, but when we live them we are centred and enter more profoundly into the life of God and our own true life.

Present attraction

A good group helps a candidate to look at what is attracting her or him. Why have you come? What do you seek? These questions are as old as Jesus speaking to James and John or Magdalene. They are still crucial. 'No one can come to me unless the Father draw him or her.' What is this drawing? One candidate is drawn by the level of involvement of community members in an important protest of nuclear arms. Another is drawn by the level of support for each other that a group manifests. These attractions may be multiple and complicated or singular and simple. Yet they are at the heart of formation.

To the extent that we are talking about Christian community we are talking about an explicit relationship to Christ. Jesus is the one who draws. He draws in and through this group. It is crucial to notice this and not just take it for granted. Our gravest mistake in formation today is not making this dimension of our lives central enough. Is the Jesus who draws me warm and accepting, comforting the discouraged as he comforted the disciples at Emmaus? Is he the Jesus who drives the moneylenders out of the temple? Is this group attractive because it mediates Jesus the just or Jesus the compassionate? It takes time and attention to know what I seek and whom I seek. The story of Samuel and Eli exemplifies this in a touching and humorous story of God's call and a very human response (1 Sam 3,1ff.) Samuel is attracted. He thinks it is Eli calling. Eli needs to help him realize that it is God. It takes time, even for Eli, to catch on.

What is it that the candidate wants to do? What has he or she to bring and to give? How does Jesus look at those desires and talents? A candidate's talents and desires provide the raw material of formation. A candidate's limits help shape those talents and desires. Because an integral part of formation is what one brings, the selection and acceptance of candidates is crucial.

New candidates challenge the group in two ways: (1) to define better who we are and what we are about, that is, our mission and our community lifestyle; (2) they also challenge us to say whether we find the candidate attractive, that is, do we want this

person as part of our group as a contributing member. The God questions might go something like this: what is God attracted to in this person? What is God offering to our group in this candidate? Is this candidate like Paul or Stephen offered to the Jerusalem Church? Is she a Mary or Martha? Is this candidate a blind person who looks for sight or a leper who longs to belong to a community? In any case, is this the kind of person that we want to associate with? Whom we want to be part of our group? Will this person be a helpful addition to our group, help us to do what we want to do, help us to become the kind of people we want to become? Are our responses of God?

In terms of mission and community, new candidates challenge us to look at what is essential to our group and what is life-giving. The puzzled or bewildered responses of candidates can help us realize where cant and cliché have infiltrated our ranks or where we must define and acknowledge our limits. The type of candidates we attract and want help us to define our future. Until we are in dialogue with God about what attracts us, what we want, what our limits are, we will be missing important dimensions of the life to which God's spirit is calling us.

Past history

Both a community and a candidate will profit from reflecting on their history. The community needs to ask itself what has attracted us here? Why do we stay? What has nourished us? Why have we found this candidate attractive, perhaps sought him or her out, invited him or her in? New candidates encourage us to reappropriate our history and keep our history open-ended.

A good group helps a candidate explore where he or she has come from. A candidate's personal history, family history, religious history are not only influential factors in what has brought this person to this particular group, but also sources of grace for what will sustain the person in the group and protect what the person has to bring to the group. Even though a candidate is beginning life in this group, he or she is not beginning life. A group needs to know and respect the personal and individual history of this candidate and a candidate needs the inner strength that comes from knowing and accepting where he or she has come from. God did not just begin to deal with this candidate. This candidate brings a history of relationships, talents, desires and limits. How

has God been present to the candidate over time? Has the candidate's attraction to this group grown over time, changed, developed, become weaker or stronger? What have been important moments of growth or decline? How has God been in all that?

As candidates know their history, they may come to see that God has been calling them for a long time, in subtle ways. Perhaps God has helped her to put aside her fears, to deal with her family, to decide to end a relationship or change a career. Or candidates may come to know that they have many enthusiasms. They have a pattern of getting caught up in causes and groups, staying with them for a short time, then getting bored and dropping out, only to discover a new enthusiasm. God may have been a recent arrival on their scene, perhaps even a new enthusiasm. No matter who the God is who has called and dealt with candidates over time, they need to be in dialogue with that God and eventually see if that God is the God of Jesus.

Just as the candidate is not just beginning life, neither is the group joined. It needs to articulate its history for itself and for its candidates. Why were we founded? Who have been our important members? How have we changed over the years? What have we learned? What mistakes have we made? Where has God been in this process? When has God been most present and when most absent? How has God confirmed us and how has God challenged us? Have we had moments as exciting and illuminating as Pentecost? Have we had conflicts as difficult as the Council of Jerusalem or the hard words between Peter and Paul? A group's history gives flesh to its idealism and its rhetoric about who it is. Its history shows over time what a group has been and is about. We have not always been perfect or known all the answers. We are not all saints and wizards. We do not have it all together. We have something to learn and expect that candidates have something to contribute. We do not study history so that we can tell candidates that 'this is the way that we have always done it', but to help them see that this is a human enterprise and of God.

Future—opportunity to grow

The most important thing that a group can do for a candidate is to love him or her. At times, only God can help us to love an individual. Perhaps it is in those times when we most clearly recognize that what is most important to us is that we love with the love that comes from God. Love begins with respect both for

the candidate and group. We embody our respect when we desire to get to know and love a candidate, when we share our lives, when we share our histories and our hopes, when we share our God. As this process continues it will become more and more evident whether or not this candidate will be good for this group and whether this group will be good for this candidate. This mutuality is an essential sign of 'vocation'.

A good group affirms its candidates. The group looks for and affirms what gifts the candidates have, what they do well, what they want to do. The group asks how it can help. The group affirms the candidate when it says, 'I want you to work alongside us, with us. We will care for you, offer you friendship, a place to rest and relax, companions to share concerns and hopes and dreams. We will also offer you some challenges and hard times'.

When a group has loved candidates, the candidates can begin to look at areas of their lives that are at least embarrassing and perhaps sinful: past hurts, fears, doubts, failings. This is often a moment of great turmoil and vulnerability for a candidate. I have seen moments when this is an opportunity for a meeting between God and 'the gods'. The gods tend to be judgmental, harsh, unforgiving, possessive, frightened of freedom, taking themselves all too seriously, scrupulous guardians of their prerogatives, and so on. God is the merciful one, the faithful lover, the one who seeks out the lost and binds wounds, the one who brings tears to our eyes, sometimes because he has tears in his own. He is happy to see us alive, glad when we are healthy, enjoys it when we see and walk. When a group and candidate focus on God, these moments of turmoil and vulnerability become sacred moments, an opportunity for healing, for reconciliation, forgiveness, mercy—another level of self-acceptance, of acceptance of one's own history, one's own salvation, of God's mercy and love mediated through this community.

Certainly a tension in community life are the candidates who either are totally satisfied with everything the group does, or are mostly dissatisfied. As a wise older religious, who had been through this many times, said: '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. The opposite type of person can, ultimately, be just as troublesome. It can be gratifying for a formation person to deal with someone who thinks that every idea and plan one has is terrific. Unfortunately, that is often a sign of

someone who is trying too hard to please and to fit in. This was brought home to me in a supervision session. I had been speaking with my supervisor about various people with whom I was having a hard time. When I had finished, he asked me if there was anyone with whom I never had any trouble. Right away I mentioned a particular candidate. My supervisor asked me to reflect on this person and what was going on. That became the topic of my next meeting with that candidate and led to his maturation and mine.

Formation and beyond have some very difficult moments. We do live in a challenging world. Those difficult moments are not necessarily a bad sign. They need to be looked at with the Lord. God may be saying 'Get behind me Satan'. God may be saying, 'Fear not. It is I'. Difficult moments can be a sign of going backwards or forward. They need to be looked at, dialogued with, and moved with or against. What formation does is help people to learn how to read the 'signs of the times', to become one's own authority, to work with a group as a contributing member and as a receiving member.

A candidate needs to be reminded that there is a 'cost of discipleship' but these moments do not need to be manufactured artificially. This cost will be evident to anyone engaged with the real world, the real Church and a real group. If this is a Christian group, it is involved in the pascal mystery. The death and resurrection of Jesus have their difficult moments. Belonging to a group or community includes some benefits, one of them is the death of some 'ego'. Often 'ego' dies kicking and screaming and not softly and gently.

Good formation does not give the 'one who is formed' all the answers. It does not expect the community to have all the answers, nor does it expect this of a candidate. It is a commitment to looking at God, alone and together, and learning how to discern God's ways. Together with God we hope to build the kingdom, a place where we can work together and live together with joy and satisfaction, a kingdom where we are concerned for the poor and outcast, concerned that justice be done, and even more, concerned that the mercy of God abound so that we are bathed in God's light.