

For a Culture of Ongoing Formation "Until Christ is formed in us" (Gal 4:19)

Pope Francis, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, deals with the proclamation of the Gospel.¹ This proclamation of the Good News of Salvation is open to all regardless of race, language, people, nation and, therefore, to diverse cultures. However, "the revealed message is not identified with any of them; its content is transcultural" (EG 117). This message will only take flesh gradually in the life of any person called to achieve "the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13).

This long process of growth and appropriation of the message is challenging and demanding. Pope Francis opens up a gap in the midst of these requirements and stresses the importance of "personal accompaniment in processes of growth" (EG 169–173), hence the "need for 'a pedagogy which will introduce people step by step to the full appropriation of the mystery'."² It is with this approach that we will deepen the concept of the culture of permanent, ongoing formation in consecrated life, a universal notion and one easily transferable from one cultural context to another.

A Refined Approach

Appropriating the concept of a culture of ongoing formation leads to a refinement of meaning. On the one hand, we can consider culture in its general sense (a person keen for knowledge), approach it from the angle of an interest in one particular area (pastoral theological culture), from which a skill or competence might emerge (homiletic culture). These details appeal rather to the interest of an individual.

On the other hand, we can also talk about the "culture of 'something' that one wishes to promote by getting everyone involved in the action. In this case, it is not just a generic cognitive fact or an interest or a skill, but a personal commitment to building something in which one believes and which increasingly becomes a common heritage."³ The culture of ongoing formation responds to this orientation.

A New Perspective

The terms "doing one's seminary" or "doing one's novitiate," or one's "post-novitiate" bring out the concept of an initial formation framed in a period of time. But building upon a culture of ongoing formation or lifelong learning means going beyond the notion of a definite time and entering into a permanent attitude of letting oneself be formed.

This basic attitude or permanent state of formation is the result of a daily response to an unceasing call reiterated at the birth of a new being according to the Spirit. Formation, considered in this way, is no longer presented as a time for training, followed by a time to put into practice the results of the newly acquired learning. Certainly, an intensive time of basic formation is required, but it must be oriented above all else towards a deeper call that allows oneself to be shaped by life, in an incessant inner availability to the calls of the Spirit.

That is a continuous route that, in fidelity to the first call, leads the person to interiority, for that is where the calls for permanent transformation are heard. At the bottom of this crucible, while everything is being received in its pure truth, the otherness (alterity) can then live in total freedom, for genuine formation is called to clear up, to free this space of communion and dialogue between God, others and oneself.

¹ Pope Francis. The Proclamation of the Gospel in *The Joy of the Gospel*. Apostolic Exhortation. Montreal: Novalis. 2013. Chapter 3, 110–175. Henceforth in the article, we will use the abbreviation EG to refer to this exhortation.

² *Ibid.*, 171,

³ A. Cencini. *La formation permanente... Y croyons-nous vraiment?* Bruxelles : Lessius, 2014, p. 16.

A Mentality to Be Converted

Talking about the culture of ongoing formation requires a change in mindset. It involves moving from an approach of updates (*aggiornamento*) through sessions, retreats or activities of that kind, to a daily reading of experiences and, by extension, understanding that this renewed vision cannot be limited to activities proposed by a permanent formation team, no matter how competent they may be. In both cases, the risk is great to remain mired in concepts and content that are not integrated, to not delve more deeply into personal and community growth.

This change of mindset or mentality in the individual creates a permanent inner willingness, an openness, to allow oneself to be taught. This is *docibilitas*.⁴ This *docibilitas* can sometimes be confused with docility (*docilitas*). While docility appears as acquiescence to the will of another, *docibilitas* is in fact letting oneself be freely affected by both life and other people. It also points to the Son receiving Himself from the Father and offering His life as a gift to others. Thus, *docibilitas* leads the individual to focus more on conforming his or her life to the sentiments of Christ Jesus (Phil 2:5) rather than complying with external acts. This inner attitude predisposes the individual to revisit his or her life while discovering within in it all of the formation resources that daily life reveals.

Life: A Permanent Place for Theology

God now says: "Today Salvation has come to this house" (Lk 19:9). Formation is grafted onto life and life brings formative invitations: "A purification of motivations, an increasingly strong and consistent loyalty to life's major choices, a realistic awareness of the need to be helped by others, joined with an effective freedom to ask for this aid."⁵ The person truly in ongoing formation has the firm conviction that life is a permanent place in which God is present and forms the heart of his people.

In Conclusion

A culture of permanent formation does not exclude formation time or shorter or longer experiences such as thirty-day retreats, or sabbatical years. These times will be even more formative if the individuals are aware that they are not starting at zero, but that they are continuing this uninterrupted relationship of love between Master and disciple. Let us be among those women and men who have the passion to "appropriate the mystery" by delving deeper and deeper into God's pedagogy of accompaniment towards his people, and let us dare to risk the culture of permanent, ongoing formation⁶ "until Christ is formed in us" (Gal 4:19).

Questions:

1. How do the comments in this article challenge me?
2. "Imitate Christ," "follow Christ" and "let me be shaped according to the feelings of the Son:" What are the resonances of these expressions in me?

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⁴ A. Cencini. *La formation permanente... Y croyons-nous vraiment?* Bruxelles : Lessius, 2014, p. 48–49. The word *docibilitas* has no equivalent in English.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 81–112. By providing concrete leads, this chapter enables one to clarify what might seem obscure in the call for a culture of ongoing formation.

Bibliography

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