**FORMATION**

*Maria Iadanza*

**Historical Developments**

Discernment Process

Before Jesus began his ministry, immediately after His baptism in the river Jordan, he went into the desert for forty days and forty nights preparing himself (Lk 4:1), and as if it was not enough during his ministry, he continued to take time for prayer (cf. Lk 6:12. 11:1; 18:1). So it was also with Francis of Assisi, who began his spiritual journey by searching for God in many different ways. He had to listen to God’s voice from the Cross at San Damiano and then he embraced God through the lepers. Francis’s obedience and humility are easily traced from the beginning of his call. Recall the episode of his acceptance to be taken by his father to the bishop of Assisi rather than to go to the civil authorities, and his journey to Rome to ask for the Pope’s approval of his way of life.

Like Jesus who was constantly in tune with His Father through prayer and fasting, so each Franciscan member, whether in initial or ongoing formation, must continue to take time in prayer, reflection on the Word of God, and reading the signs of the times. Each member must know what is going on in the world, and read and reread the OFS Rule and General Constitutions in order to nurture the personal relationship with Christ and our neighbour.

Thus, “*Franciscan formation seeks to facilitate growth in that relationship with an ongoing awareness of how persons share in the charism of Francis and Clare, so that the life of a Franciscan in today’s world might conform more and more to the example of the Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ.”*

Jesus gave a practical example to his first disciples and continues to do so even to us today, as he said “I will never leave you alone but I will send you the Holy Spirit, the Advocate” (cf. Lk 14:16, 18). The disciples in seeing Jesus praying, asked him to teach them how to pray (cf. Lk 11:1) This has to be understood also in the context of formation of both formators and those entering the Order. Formators have to be the living example of the life and Rule, which can be the means of attracting more vocations. Thus, in the formation project prepared by the USA in 2011, there are topics such as:

*-Social doctrine of the Church.*

*-Better understanding of the significant social and political problems of the day;*

*-Social and political commitment of Secular Franciscan in the world;*

*-Development of aids for a more focused and deeper study of the OFS’s own legislation- Rule, General Constitutions and Ritual; and*

*-The most important documents of the Church and of the Magisterium.*

They were proposed in order to promote not only “the intellectual and spiritual formation, but also to instil in the minds of those preparing for formation the need to implement a practical level of concrete charity to all the fraternities in the world” (cf. *For Up To Now,* pg. 12), which are meant to reinforce the Charism and the service to the world and the Church as a whole. Therefore, it is vitally important to strike a “balance of learned fact and lived experience” (cf*. For Up To Now,* pg. 11) so that those who are formed will be able to know and experience God through their brothers and sisters. Remember that what attracted the early followers of Christ as well as St Francis were not only words but actions. *“Actions speak louder than words.”* Jesus showed how much he cared for the sick, the downtrodden and marginalized. His approach to sinners was tangible action that somehow led those hearing His call to be willing to leave everything and follow Him. They saw, heard and experienced the love of God through His Son. Therefore, vocation without developmental stages of discernment becomes a personal initiative but not God’s call. This is what the National Formation Commission of the National Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order in USA meant by saying that a formation program needs to provide a solid foundation to fall back on when feelings fade.

**FORMATION: THE EMMAUS EXPERIENCE**

Most of us have heard the Scriptures being read to us year after year and yet the more we listen to them with an open mind and heart, we find a new meaning that enables us to come closer to God. This can happen only when one is willing to let the Word of God transform one into a better Christian. The Word of God recreates, transforms and forms those who listen to the Word, eager to become closer to God.

Were the disciples hearing about Jesus for the first time as they were on their way to Emmaus? Of course not! Although they lived with Jesus and heard him say what was going to happen, still at the end they couldn’t understand when Jesus was crucified. Therefore, why did the experience of Emmaus once again bring them back to faith and understanding of the Son of Man? Because they were once again willing to listen to the stranger who joined them on their way and because at the end they invited the stranger to stay with them. “Didn’t our hearts burn as he was explaining the Scriptures to us?” (Lk 24:32) Any stage of formation should be exactly like this: allowing the Word of God to revive that flame of faith within us that seems to be fading away. In other words, creating space within us for the “*Word of God to dwell among us…”*not once but every day. This is what Amedeo Cencini refers to: that *"the commitment to formation never ends.”*

“St Francis read and meditated upon the Word of God until it was integrated into his very being. In body and soul, as a result he was altered by the gospel*” (Cf. Our Identity as Secular Franciscan, by Anne Mulqueen, OFS,* pg. 12*),* just as the disciples on the way to Emmaus allowed Jesus to enter into their life, so it is for each one of us if we are really serious about following Christ. Formation is a journey with Christ through the Scriptures, discovering Christ in the breaking of Bread and by recognizing Him through others. It is like hearing St Francis saying *"Let us begin again, for until now we have done nothing. May each of us do our share to spread the Gospel, the true Catholic faith!".* The disciples had to begin again to believe what Jesus had told them, and they had to start again that journey back to Jerusalem to relive their faith with their brothers and sisters. Franciscan Formation, therefore, becomes a true dynamic process of spiritual growth that guides each Franciscan member to recommit himself or herself to follow Jesus Christ ever more faithfully in the spirit of St. Francis. (*Cf. Ratio Formationis Franciscanae no. 41)*

**THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN FORMATION**

Jest before the Ascension, Jesus promised his disciples the Holy Spirit, the Advocate who will guide and inspire them in their missionary work. Therefore, each member ought to listen to the Holy Spirit for a continuous and proper discernment of one’s vocation and for a proper witnessing of the Gospel.

It is not by chance that our beloved founder St Francis of Assisi, in his life and Rule, emphasized the importance of living our way of life according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Word of God accompanies, uplifts and strengthens us in our earthly pilgrimage. Therefore, when it comes to formation, it is important to understand that we cannot talk about initial as well as ongoing formation unless we cast our anchor first and foremost in the Word of God, that is, in Jesus Himself. Such a process begins with initial formation, whereby each member invests the amount of time in laying a strong and solid foundation by spending time to know God, and to come closer to God as He came closer to us through his Son. Such an expression of God’s love for humanity helps us to realize how important it is for us to love God in return.

*Ongoing formation should continually make us attentive to the formative action of the Father who patiently forms and re-forms the consecrated person into the image of the Son. Such an action embraces all of life and requires a daily resolution to set out again on the journey toward the New Jerusalem, the way of conversion, of renewal, of giving, and of holiness of life…*which requires the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order to live out the Rule, the Constitutions and the Statutes, and to know the history of the Order. Before even one begins to be attracted to St Francis’s way of life, first, one has to fall in love with Jesus Himself. Just take the example of Francis. In so many ways, his life illustrates how much he embraced Christ wholeheartedly. Remember his unforgettable reconstruction of the scene of the Nativity at Greccio, and that so many other events in his life reflected his personal devotion and love for Christ. He allowed himself to be continuously guided by the Holy Spirit. Thus, when we allow ourselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit “let nothing hinder us, nothing separate us, nothing come between us. Wherever we are, in every place, at every hour, at every time of day, every day and continually, let all of us truly and humbly believe, hold in our heart and love, honour, adore, serve, praise and bless, glorify and exalt, magnify and give thanks to the Most High and Supreme Eternal God Trinity and Unity…*” (Chapter 23 of the Rule 1221).*

Any Secular Franciscan member, just like any member of the First and Third Order before joining the Franciscan way of life, goes through a discerning process and such requires a proper guidance and listening to the Holy Spirit in order to be able to know if one is really called to the Franciscan way of life and how to live it.

“When we look at the Secular Franciscan formation process, it is important to see it as a continuum, that is, each stage flowing into the next. Aspects that are essential in the first phase of Orientation, will still be essential in the second phase of Inquiry, and in the third phase of Candidacy, and into the Ongoing Formation of professed members. And in all these dimensions, it is vitally important that any member allows himself or herself to be accompanied by the Holy Spirit. A true commitment to the Secular Franciscan lifestyle depend entirely on personal openness to the Holy Spirit. When one continuously avails oneself of the guidance of the Holy Spirit, one will be able to embrace one’s vocation with charity, joy, peace, patience, faithfulness, tolerance and chastity, be it in family life as well as in the Secular Franciscan Order. These fruits of the Holy Spirit are beneficial for one’s continuous conversion for the proper fulfilment of one’s mission in the Church and in society. *(Cf. General Constitutions OFS, article 44.1 and 3).*

**PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS**

God the Father, in the continuous gift of Christ and the Spirit, is the formator par excellence of the one consecrated to Him. But in this work God is also served by the mediating role of human persons, older brothers and sisters whom He calls and places at His side" -"older" in the sense of maturity of faith and discipleship**.**

The practical application of a Franciscan way of life depends entirely on how the formators themselves are living witnesses to the Gospel way of life. Jesus said “I came not to be served but to serve…” (Mt 20:28).

Any finally professed Secular Franciscan member or a finally professed member of the First or Third Order can be a formator on condition that he/she has gone through a proper formation process and possesses a sound knowledge of the Catholic faith and above all his/her life reflects what he/she teaches. As Christ sent his first disciples to go to the whole world and make disciples (Cf. Mt 18: 18-20), such a mandate still stands even today because the labourers are still few while the vineyard is so great (Lk 10:2).

**GUIDELINES FOR FORMATORS**

Formators should be well informed about the Statutes and the General Constitutions of the Order since this will help them in a proper scrutiny of the prospective candidates.

Formators have to be aware that “the formation program should be slow and careful, well planned and yet flexible and sensitive to the needs of each individual candidate.” *(For Up To Now, pg. 11)*

Besides all these, it is vitally important to remember that when choosing a person to be a formator it is essential that such person at least should meet certain standards stipulated in the Guidelines for Formation of the OFS which are: psychologically, culturally, and spiritually reliable Secular Franciscans.

**Psychololgically:**

* The formator is to be mature, well-balanced, self-controlled, open to dialogue, of good judgment, and able to apply and express what he or she has learned.

**Culturally:**

* The formator is to know doctrine, understand methodology, be able to convey information in a concrete fashion, and possess good communications skills.

**Spiritually:**

The formator is to be committed to personal ongoing conversion and such can only be possible if one realizes the importance of ongoing formation. These guidelines are so important for formators since they serve as an instrument for the proper formation of candidates and vice versa since while the formators are "getting to know them," we expect them to "get to know us," our roots and our charism. Therefore, some form of introduction to the lives of Saints Francis and Clare are appropriate as early as possible and throughout the entire formation process.

The formation resources used should encourage ample dialogue and sharing since this type of interaction is invaluable in assessing whether the aspirants’ circumstances will allow them to commit themselves to the Secular Franciscan lifestyle. Orientation is a favorable time to observe the whole person, physically, spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and interpersonally.

**STAGE OF DISCERNMENT AND RECEPTION IN THE OFS**

The stages of formation are meant to guide the candidate not simply for final profession but rather for lifelong commitment to the charism of Francis and Clare and above all to “nurture the personal relationship one has with Christ.” *(Cf. For Up To Now, Formation Methodology, pg. 16)*

Although the Rule has given a clear indication of the time in regard to the stages of discernment and reception of the candidate, this should not be taken as a “Commandment”. Certain candidates may need a shorter period of time while others do not. Take the case of a Catechumen who has just been received into the Church and has recently been baptized. He or she still needs to know more about the Catholic faith and the charism of the Secular Franciscans, and become familiar with the Franciscan way of life and build up a good relationship with the members of the fraternity, etc.

**Article 40**

*1.* Rule 23 *The time of formation lasts at least one year. The national statutes can establish a longer period. The purpose of this period is the maturation of the vocation, the experience of the evangelical life in fraternity and a better knowledge of the Order. This formation should be carried out with frequent meetings for study and prayer and with concrete experiences of service and of apostolate. These meetings should be held, as far as possible and opportune, in common with the candidates of other fraternities.*

*2. The candidates are guided to read and meditate on Sacred Scripture, to come to know the person and writings of Francis and of Franciscan spirituality, and to study the Rule and Constitutions. They are trained in a love for the Church and acceptance of her teaching. The laity practise living their secular commitment in the world in an evangelical way.*

***3****. Participation in the meetings of the local fraternity is an indispensable presupposition for initiation into community prayer and into fraternity life.*

**Article 44.3**

*Ongoing formation, - accomplished by means of courses, gatherings, and the sharing of experience – aims to assist the brothers and sisters:*

*-* Rule 4 *in listening to and meditating on the Word of God, "going from Gospel to life and from life to Gospel";*

*-in reflecting on events in the Church and in society in the light of faith and with the help of the documents of the teaching Church, consequently taking consistent positions;*

*-in discerning and deepening the Franciscan vocation by studying the writings of Saint Francis, Saint Clare and Franciscan authors.*

Although the Constitutions and the Rule of the OFS say that the formation should be at least one year, it is important to bear in mind that in any life situation one never stops to learn and be informed. The particular Statutes are there to interpret and facilitate a proper adoption of the local situation in which the fraternities are found, with the aim to safeguard the formation policies in different regions. These adaptations can be implemented only if there is a continuous/ongoing formation and reading of the signs of the times.

“The Franciscan formation is practical, inasmuch as it aims at transforming whatever is learned into action” (Cf. Adm 7). This is applicable to all the Franciscan Family because the “formation is a single process of daily ongoing conversion which continues beyond profession”, be it for the First Order, the TOR or the Secular Franciscan Order. There should be always a commitment to live out our Franciscan charism for the rest of our lives. The entire Order has taken this responsibility by establishing different offices for formation in order to guarantee the proper pathway to profession and lifelong commitment, so that each member of Franciscan Family can become a light and salt, and witness to other Christians and, indeed, to everyone.