

2.2 FORMATION IS LIFELONG

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*He shall drink from the stream by the wayside
and therefore he shall lift up his head. (Ps 110,7)*

A Salesian once gave a stirring conference about the importance of spiritual accompaniment. After his talk he overheard one confrere saying to another: “Thank God I am now a priest. I don’t have to go to spiritual direction anymore”.

Is formation something that “gets over” with perpetual profession or with priestly ordination, or is it something quite different, something that is lifelong? Taking inspiration and encouragement from the recent document of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Per vino nuovo otri nuovi*,¹ the present letter will go back to our Constitutions and to that wonderful commentary on the Constitutions that is *The Project of Life*, to remind us of the “adventure in the Spirit”² that is formation, and to offer a few practical suggestions.

The expression “ongoing formation” or “lifelong formation” has become familiar in the last few decades, especially in the context of the priesthood and religious life.³ The reality to which it refers, however, is something as old as humanity itself, even if only recently it has become a focus of reflection.

¹ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Per vino nuovo otri nuovi: Dal concilio Vaticano II la vita consacrata e le sfide ancora aperte: Orientamenti* (6 January 2017), see esp. Nos. 16 and 35.

² See Ángel Fernández Artime, *Strenna 2016*: “With Jesus, let us journey together in the adventure of the Spirit!”

³ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church* (2015) uses the expression “lifelong formation” at No. 35 of the English version.

It was the merit of existentialism to have emphasized the historicity of the human being as the space of his realization, in contrast to an essentialism that tended to consider the human being as somehow “already constituted”. No doubt there were exaggerations, like the famous phrase of Jean-Paul Sartre, “existence precedes essence”; but in its very exaggeration this was a salutary correction to a static way of conceiving human life. A more balanced way of speaking would be to consider the identity of the human being as constituted in a major way by his concrete life experiences, by his projects and choices.

In this context, the concept of experience is fundamental, with all its etymological connotations, especially those of risk and danger: *ex-perior*; *ex-perto*, *periculum*, etc. Without entering into the complexity of this concept and what it indicates, I would like to note two elements that it would be convenient to distinguish: the *happening as such* (*evento*, *acontecimiento*, *événement*), and its *impact* on the person – what one learns from it. Here the German language makes possible a useful distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, between “experiences” on the one hand, and “experience” in the sense of what one learns from the many “experiences”. It is quite possible, in fact, to have plenty of experiences without learning anything. As one Salesian said of another who was boasting of his 25 years of experience: “He has really had only one year of experience repeated 25 times”. Turning life into a *formative space* does not consist in going through (“experiencing”) many things, but rather in *learning from what one has gone through* (“becoming experienced”). This will be important when we look at what our Constitutions have to say.

1. “Lifelong formation”: the expression

In the light of the above we could ask: what does the term “lifelong formation” mean? Clearly, it does not refer to the *set of activities* organized by an institution (whether religious or professional or whatever) for the updating, qualification or *aggior-*

namento of its members, many of which take place outside the context of ordinary life and work. Much less does it refer to a *phase* that begins after the so-called “initial formation”. In fact, General Chapter 22 examined several other expressions in an effort to avoid ambiguity – continuous formation, post-initial formation, etc. –, none of which was considered adequate.

To get to the heart of these expressions, we could ask ourselves: are we using the term “lifelong” or “permanent” as an *adjective* or as a *predicate*? More simply, we could ask which of these two expressions would be more correct for our purposes:

Lifelong formation is... (adjective)

Formation is *lifelong* (predicate)

Obviously it is the second expression that we want. It is within formation understood as lifelong that the so-called “initial formation” takes its place. In this regard, the remarks of the *Ratio* on “formation at the service of Salesian identity” are remarkably lucid: evidently, formation here does not refer only to the initial phases.⁴ Permanent or ongoing formation, in other words, is not a natural continuation of initial formation. It is the *habitual form of living out our vocation*. It is a new way of understanding consecrated life, as participation in the action of the Father who, through the Spirit, forms and shapes in the heart the inner attitudes of the Son.⁵ Formation, in other words, is lifelong – until the hour comes when our consecrated life is brought “to its highest fulfilment”.⁶

2. Lifelong formation in the Salesian Constitutions: analysis

As we have said already, the concept of “lifelong formation” is relatively new. In our Congregation it was first considered ex-

⁴ *Formation of Salesians of Don Bosco: Principles and Norms: Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis et Studiorum* (FSDB), 4th ed. (online, 2016) chapter, section 2: Formation at the service of Salesian identity. See <http://www.sdb.org/en/formation.html> (28.01.2017).

⁵ *Vita Consecrata* 66.

⁶ C 54.

plicitly during GC22 (1984), in the context of the elaboration of the definitive text of the Constitutions. The commission drafting the articles concerning formation was the only one that did not begin from the earlier text (the *ad experimentum* one of 1971-72), precisely because this way of understanding formation was so new. We must not be misled by the presence of two articles in chapter 9 dedicated exclusively to lifelong formation (C 118 and 119). As *The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco* (1986) notes, the whole of Part III of the new text has been organized with lifelong formation in mind.⁷ *Lifelong formation, in other words, is the mother-idea and the organizing principle of all that our Constitutions have to say on formation.*

- a) Formation is, first of all, a response to a **call**: “Jesus called his Apostles to be with him” (C 96). It is very important to distinguish *call* from *choice*. In our age, *choice* has become one of our most important ways of framing reality, including the religious dimension of our existence. Positively, this word encourages personal responsibility and intentionality, moving people beyond blind acceptance and passive membership. Its principal weakness as a framework for the spiritual life, however, is the way it puts the individual at the centre. *Call*, instead, presupposes that we stand before Someone who Calls. To speak of call is to acknowledge a Caller, to see that God’s gracious initiative precedes all our projects and plans. Clearly, consecrated life is not a choice that we make. It is a response to a call.

- b) Formation is our **response** to the call of God. Art. 96 says: “We respond to this call by committing ourselves to an adequate ongoing **formation**, for which the Lord daily gives us his grace”.⁸ From this statement we can draw two points:

⁷ *The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco: A Guide to the Salesian Constitutions* (Rome, 1986) 731-733. We will not hold ourselves bound to repeat here all that these key texts have to say on the topic of formation understood as lifelong.

⁸ “To respond to God’s call means to live in an attitude of ‘formation’”. *The Project of Life* 743. “Formation is the joyful acceptance of the gift of one’s vocation and its actualization at every moment of one’s life and in every situation”. (FSDB 1)

- We can understand formation as lifelong only if we understand vocation also in the same way, as ongoing, which is to say: the Lord continues to call me day after day: “Every morning, the Lord wakens my ear” (Is 50,4). The Protestant martyr D. Bonhoeffer notes beautifully that the first and last words of Jesus to Peter are the same: “Follow me!” (cf Jn 21,22).⁹
 - Life is not *formative* if it is not seen from the point of view of vocational growth. Blessed J.H. Newman used to say: “Don’t be afraid that your life will end. Be afraid that it has never begun”. When it comes to formation, the real risk is that for some of us formation has never really begun.¹⁰ It is possible that much of our discernment is inadequate and even wrong because it does not take as its point of reference growth in vocation, understood as a *response to the Lord who calls*. And, on the contrary, many negative experiences and crises can be paradoxically formative, if only the person knows how to confront them from the point of view of growth in vocation.
- c) Our call is **to follow Jesus** in a particular way – **as consecrated persons in the spirit of Don Bosco**. To follow Jesus is to become like him, sons in the Son, allowing the Father to form in us his heart and his mind, so that we experience and feel, think and understand, evaluate and judge, decide, love and act like him, so that we can say with St Paul: “I live, no not I, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2,20). To follow Jesus as consecrated persons is to be living memorials of him, following him even in his concrete choices of celibacy, poverty and obedi-

⁹ But the apostle to whom these words are addressed is far from being “the same”: in the second case he is less cocksure, but far more centred, because his centre is now Christ and his merciful love. Peter’s ongoing transformation up to the point of martyrdom provides theology with a starting point for a reflection on grace and freedom that begins in Augustine and that comes down through Aquinas to our own times, a reflection that has everything to do with formation as lifelong.

¹⁰ See A. Cencini, *Formazione permanente: Ci crediamo davvero?* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 2011) 131.

ence for the sake of the kingdom, anticipating already now what we all one day hope to be.

- d) The call is never “for oneself”: the Lord **calls in order to send**. So the mission is the way of living the election. The formation of the Salesian is oriented and motivated by mission (C 97).¹¹ “Immersed in the world and in the cares of pastoral life, the Salesian learns to meet God through those to whom he is sent”. (C 95) The *goal* is to meet God in the midst of our life and work; the *journey* is the formation process. So we do not have to jump out of life in order to be formed; the point is to get into it properly. The point is to be able to make the shift from *simply living our lives* to *learning from experience* in the way indicated in our Constitutions. In this way we will live in a “permanent state of mission” that is also a *permanent state of formation*.¹²
- e) Formation is not a phase or a part of Salesian life, but rather **a dimension that embraces the whole of life**, in such a way that prayer, fraternal life, apostolic commitment and the living out of the evangelical counsels all become *formative*, which is to say: *response* to the Lord who calls us (at every moment, the *whole of our life*).¹³
- f) Article 119 indicates to us the nature of our life understood as formation: “Living in the midst of the young and in constant contact with working-class surroundings, the Salesian *tries to discern the voice of the Spirit in the events of each day, and so acquires the ability to learn from life’s experiences*”.¹⁴

¹¹ “Ongoing formation must take its direction from the ecclesial identity of consecrated life. It is not a question merely of updating oneself about the new theologies, ecclesial norms or studies about the history and charism of the Institute. The task is to consolidate, or often even to rediscover, one’s place within the Church at the service of humanity”. (*Per vino nuovo* 35)

¹² See EG 25 echoed in GC27 74.1.

¹³ See VC 65, and Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Starting Afresh From Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium. Instruction*, Rome, 19 May 2002, 15.

¹⁴ The Italian original speaks simply of “la capacità di imparare dalla vita”.

Towards the end, the article states: “[The Salesian] feels it his task to make the best formative use of any situation, and to see it as a favourable opportunity for growing in his vocation”. No experience is irrelevant or useless if we are able to learn from it. Obviously, it is not merely a question of human effort, intelligence or shrewdness, but of faith: “[he] tries to discern **the voice of the Spirit** in the events of each day”.

- g) This brings us to an important question: what is **the role of initial formation**? The first thing to be said is that initial formation is not the *princeps analogatum* of formation (as we tend to think even now). It gets its identity from what “comes after” (otherwise it would not be initial). It is part of “formation as lifelong”, but it has its own peculiar characteristics. It is like what university study is for a professional: not an end in itself, but a time for picking up the indispensable tools and instruments for what comes after. Thus, for example, “spiritual direction,” far from being reserved to initial formation, is something that lays the foundations for a *spiritual accompaniment* that ought to last all through life. With the text of article 119 in mind, we could say, simply, that the aim of the initial part of life understood as formation is **learning how to learn**.¹⁵ And when in the “rest of life” the learning continues, life becomes formation, an ongoing response to the love of the Lord who, *miserando atque eligendo*,¹⁶ never ceases to call and never ceases to love.

¹⁵ Initial formation “cannot be satisfied with formation to docility and to the sane customs and traditions of a group, but must make the young consecrated person truly *docibilis*. This means forming a heart that is free to learn from the events of every day for all one’s life in the footsteps of Christ in order to put oneself at the service of all”. (*Per vino nuovo* 35)

¹⁶ Coat of Arms of Pope Francis, taken from the homilies of Bede the Venerable on the call of Matthew (CCL 122, 149-151).

3. Lifelong formation in the Salesian Constitutions: synthesis

Having tried to list some features of lifelong formation as it appears in our Constitutions, I think we could conclude with an extraordinary synthesis, which we find in article 98: **the formation experience.**

Enlightened by the person of Christ and by his Gospel, lived according to Don Bosco's spirit, the Salesian commits himself to a formation process which will last all his life and will keep pace with his maturing in other ways. He learns by experience the meaning of the Salesian vocation at the various moments of his life and accepts the ascetical demands it makes on him.

With the help of Mary, his Mother and Teacher, he gradually becomes a pastor and educator of the young in the lay or priestly state which he has embraced.

We find here, first of all, formation understood as a *process*: "the experience of the meaning and values of vocation". During the initial phases of formation we come to know these fundamental values, but "knowing" is not the same thing as "learning from experience". To make the perpetual profession it is not enough to merely know the Constitutions by heart; one needs an experience of Salesian life, one needs to have learnt from life.

Further, the article highlights the *lifelong character* of formation: "a process which will last all his life". When formation is understood as response, and when mission is understood as revelation, the excitement never ends, for even in old age the dialogue of love between God and us continues, and the Salesian becomes, more clearly than ever, sign and bearer of his love, *vultus misericordiae*.

Moreover, one cannot ignore the *ascesis* involved in our life understood as formation. The roses of Salesian values also have thorns, as Don Bosco tried to teach us in his dream of the Pergola of roses.

And then, it bears insisting that formation takes place essentially in a context of faith, lived within the Salesian charism: “*Enlightened by the person of Christ and by his Gospel – lived according to Don Bosco’s spirit*”. To be like Don Bosco is to be always with Jesus, in an adventure of the Spirit – and to be a consecrated son of Don Bosco is unthinkable without a personal, passionate, splendid relationship with Christ.

Finally, we must take into account the concluding words: the Salesian, every Salesian, is essentially an **educator-pastor**. He is educator-pastor before being brother, deacon or priest. A Salesian brother who is not a *pastor* is not a Salesian; a Salesian priest or deacon who is not an *educator* is not a Salesian. And our effectiveness stems, in the final analysis, from our relationship with the Lord, from our being con-formed to the heart of Christ. For we educate by what we are, by what we love. Out of the fullness of our heart we speak, and act, and are. *Cor ad cor loquitor*, as Francis de Sales used to say.

And all this, “*with the help of Mary, his Mother and Teacher*” who leads us to the fullness of our offering to the Lord”. (C 92) We are invited to be sons in the Son, allowing Mary to give each of us a body and heart like that of Christ, allowing her to teach us to love as she taught Don Bosco (C 84), or better still, as she taught Jesus himself.

4. How to be in formation all our life

So far we have been talking mainly about the “what”. But it is necessary to indicate also the “how,” based on the Constitutions themselves and the *Ratio* – while also recalling that a good “what” is already a “how”.¹⁷

¹⁷ *Per vino nuovo* 35 reminds us that we do not yet have a culture of ongoing formation, and that at the pedagogical level we have not yet been able to create concrete processes, whether individual or communitarian, that would make ongoing formation effective. The document also calls for a reflection on the structural-institutional dimension

Article 119, cited above, contains some words that we deliberately ignored: “the Salesian **tries** to discern... and so acquires the ability to **learn** from life”. This learning and effort takes place all through life, even though it has a special place in “initial formation”.

Articles 118 and 119 both indicate areas to be developed if our Salesian life is truly to become a *formative space*: “We try to grow in our human qualities, to conform ourselves more closely to Christ, and to renew our fidelity to Don Bosco, so that we can respond to the ever new demands arising from the situation of the young and the poor” (C 118). “Even when he is fully occupied he finds opportunities for renewing the religious and pastoral meaning of his life, and of learning to carry out his work with greater competence” (C 119). Two aspects typical of formation show up here very clearly: process and personal responsibility. In line with this, I list some methodological points that refer especially to the phase of initial formation.

- a) The **qualitative** dimension must prevail over the *quantitative*: the point is to learn from experience rather than to merely have many experiences.
- b) We need to develop the ability to **learn from our experiences**, even those that could be considered “negative”.
- c) Even before insisting on learning from our experiences, with Pope Francis we could learn to **dwell** before the mystery of life, the beauty of nature, the mystery of the other, whether it is a young person or our confrere or one who shares with us the mission. We take to heart the pope’s repeated insistence on the “pastoral look” and “serene attentiveness”.¹⁸ So let us not neglect our *lived experience*, if we would truly “learn

of ongoing formation: “Just as, after the Council of Trent, seminaries and novitiates were created to take care of initial formation, so now we are called to give rise to forms and structures that can sustain the journey of each consecrated person towards ever greater conformity to the sentiments of the Son (cf. Phil 2,5). This would be an extremely eloquent institutional signal”. (ibid.)

¹⁸ Cf. EG 51, and also 125, 141, 169; and LS 225-226.

from,” we need to first learn to dwell, remain, stay before the mystery. Dwelling there we know we are on holy ground and before the burning bush.

- d) In our learning and discernment, the **Word of God** is the hermeneutical criterion. The Word gives light and strength, and is our nourishment for the way (C 87). Salesian life makes place for prolonged exposure to the Word of God¹⁹ through personal reading as well as *lectio divina* in community.
- e) Formation also includes constant access to the **Constitutions** that are for us the concretization of the Word of God, and to the Salesian Sources that encapsulate the adventure of the Spirit lived by Don Bosco and so many Salesians after him. We can and must think of initial formation also as an *initiation to the sources*: learning to go regularly to our sources, so as to dwell in them and draw life from them.
- f) Such learning calls for **accompaniment**. There is no learning without a master, without, indeed, an **expert** (we might recall that this word comes from *ex-perior*, which is the root also of *experience*). We might insist here again that, like vocation and formation, personal spiritual accompaniment is also ongoing and lifelong.²⁰

¹⁹ Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, “The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life” (March 1980) 20: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/rc_con_ccsrlife_doc_12081980_the-contemplative-dimension-of-religious-life_en.html (28.01.2017).

²⁰ While our Constitutions speak of entrusting oneself with simplicity to a spiritual director as one of the attitudes and means for growing in chastity (C 84), and the Regulations encourage each confrere to “maintain his openness to... personal and community spiritual direction” (R 99), the FSDB notes that “the methodical direction proper to the first period of formation is ordinarily not necessary in the adult age” (n. 267). *Vita Consecrata* (1996) had restricted itself to saying that “Confident and humble recourse to spiritual direction is of great help on the path of fidelity to the Gospel, especially in the period of formation and at certain other times in life” (VC 95). Our recent General Chapters, however, call for a modification in the direction of ongoing accompaniment, given that the goal of formation is conformity to Christ (see GC26 62 and GC27 67.2). *The Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests* (new edition, 2013, No. 73) speaks of spiritual direction as a necessity for priests: “In order to contribute to the improvement of their spirituality it is necessary for priests to practice spiritual direction with respect to themselves”. The new Ratio of the Church (2016) presents personal accompaniment

- g) This learning is far from being unidirectional, and always takes place in the network of relationships that is the **community** – the Salesian community (C 99) as well as the larger educative-pastoral community.²¹ “It takes a village to raise a child,” goes an African proverb cited by Pope Francis²² Art. 101 of the Constitutions reminds us that it is the provincial community that welcomes and accompanies the vocation of each confrere, and that, in turn, each confrere, “through prayer and personal witness, contributes to the sustaining and renewal of the vocation of his brothers”.
- h) We acquire the ability to give *formative quality to ordinary life* – and the creative formator will make use of all the means at his disposal to encourage learning from experience, prayerful reflection, and spiritual discernment as a form of life. Here I would like to insist also on the importance of reading.²³ Let us not underestimate the power of good reading to change us, in the first place the reading of the Word of God and of the Constitutions, as we have said already.²⁴
- i) We make place for the **ascesis** implied by our life and mission, not merely by accepting it but by learning from it. Once again, here, the place of our daily meditation, our moments of personal prayer, personal spiritual accompaniment, and even the faith sharing to which our recent General Chapters invite us.²⁵

as one of the most important dynamics of ongoing formation: “The priest must not isolate himself: he will need support and accompaniment in the spiritual and/or psychological areas. In any case, it will be useful to intensify the relationship with the spiritual Director so as to draw positive fruit from the difficulties, learning to accept the truth about one’s life and understanding it better in the light of the Gospel”. (Congregation for the Clergy, *Il dono della vocazione presbiterale: Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, No. 84)

²¹ FSDB 560.

²² Address of Pope Francis to Students and Teachers from Schools across Italy, Rome, 10 May 2014.

²³ See R 99: “Each one should cultivate the habit of reading...”.

²⁴ On the Word of God and the Constitutions as the two poles of our formative reading, see *The Project of Life* 759.

²⁵ GC27 67.4.

In our Constitutions and Regulations we find, in addition, a whole series of **instruments and means relevant to formation**. We remind ourselves that every personal plan of life (R 99) needs to be placed firmly within the optic of formation as response to a call, and in view of the needs of the province (R 100). The same holds for the ordinary and extraordinary initiatives promoted by the province or groups of provinces, the church or society (R 101), and obviously for periods of personal renewal (R 102).

This note on lifelong formation cannot end without a word on *devotion* – which, for Francis de Sales, is the ability to find God in everything, and to live life with freshness and joy, “running and leaping in the way of God’s commands”.²⁶

We pray that the Lord assist us everyday to be faithful – to “drink from the stream by the wayside” (Ps 110,7) so that our hearts be constantly lifted up to him who is the fount of living water, and that fountains of living water might burst forth in us (Jn 7,88) to give life to many.

²⁶ “Even as a man just recovering from illness, walks only so far as he is obliged to go, with a slow and weary step, so the converted sinner journeys along as far as God commands him but slowly and wearily, until he attains a true spirit of devotion, and then, like a sound man, he not only gets along, but he runs and leaps in the way of God’s Commands, and hastens gladly along the paths of heavenly counsels and inspirations”. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part 1, chapter 1.