
FATHERS OF FATHERS

**A Reading in the Spirit
of the new Ratio**

Regard the patience of our Lord as salvation
(2 Peter 3:15)

Introduction

I have been asked to offer a '*Reading in the Spirit*' of the new *Ratio*. This subject allows me to go beyond a purely didactic presentation or a literal interpretation. These are important interpretations, but here I shall endeavour to highlight certain turning points, certain key developments, and the intentions hidden between the lines of the text which can be grasped through experience. The aim is to foster a *different* perspective to enrich our approach to formation.

The Word of God through which I shall explore the various passages is the Emmaus story in the gospel, a text commented on in one of the *lectios*.¹

I shall refer to a number of writers in this '*Reading in the Spirit of the new Ratio*'. In his *Letter on the role of literature in formation* (17 July 2024), Pope Francis sought to offer a clear indication of the great attention that must be paid to literature in the context of the formation of candidates for the priesthood, and similarly in religious life.

Clearly, this presentation is not exhaustive. Only a study (and not merely a reading) of the entire *Ratio* can provide the full picture.

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¹Salesian Society of St John Bosco, *The Formation of the Salesians of Don Bosco. Ratio Fundamental Institutionis et Studiorum. Principles and Norms (fifth edition)*, Rome: Sacred Heart – Salesian Headquarters, 26 January 2026, pp. 136–137. Hereafter, I shall refer to the document as the *Ratio*.

1. BURNING LIKE FIRE

The aim of formation

Don Bosco – *Love, therefore, for God and for one's neighbour must always be like a fire burning in our hearts.*² He wrote to the young Giovanni Garino: I need you to go out and catch souls.³

Lk 24:32 – *'Were not our hearts **burning** within us whilst he was speaking to us on the road, whilst he was explaining the Scriptures to us?'*

Allowing Christ to draw near to us, walking with him, listening to him along life's paths – in a *lectio divina* that is a *lectio vitae* – kindles the heart and sets it ablaze. It is essential to be set alight, to have that fire within, to burn with zeal if we are to possess missionary fervour and dare to live a consecrated life capable of overcoming stagnation, which is sometimes evident and at other times latent. Let us keep our gaze broad and realise that to speak of formation today is to speak of the consecrated life of tomorrow. Asking ourselves what kind of formation we want for our young Salesians and for all of us means asking ourselves what kind of consecrated life we can dare to live today. Only a formation journey that sets the heart alight can dare to embrace a credible consecrated life. Accompaniment must lead to being set alight, to being ignited, and not merely to delving within oneself to find the roots of one's own ashes. Whilst this is important, *Don Bosco was a great formator, capable of setting his spiritual sons alight with enthusiasm and joy.*⁴ The Emmaus disciples returned to Jerusalem without delay because, set alight by Christ, they had a fire to carry. So writes Cormac McCarthy (1933–2023) in his novel *The Road* (2007):

He woke in the night and lay listening. He couldn't remember where he was. The thought made him smile. Where are we? he said.

What is it, Papa?

Nothing. We're okay. Go to sleep.

We're going to be okay, aren't we Papa?

Yes. We are.

And nothing bad is going to happen to us.

That's right.

Because we're carrying the fire.

*Yes. Because we're carrying the fire.*⁵

★ ★ ★

*He tried to remember the dream but he could not. All that was left was the feeling of it. He thought perhaps they'd come to warn him. Of what? That he could not enkindle in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own.*⁶

² Cf. Giovanni Bosco, *Il cattolico provveduto per le pratiche di pietà con analoghe istruzioni secondo il bisogno dei tempi*. Torino, Tip. dell'Oratorio di S. Franc. di Sales 1868, pp. 87-91.

³ John Bosco, *Letter to Giovanni Garino*, Calliano, 10 October 1860, in *Salesian Sources I*, p. 768.

⁴ *Ratio* no. 44.

⁵ Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, Vintage 2007, p. 64.

Does our formation – all of it, both initial and ongoing – carry the fire? Does it kindle it? Is the fire of God, for God, for young people, for the poor, burning within us as formators? These questions are not rhetorical, given that *for some time now, formation seems to have had little impact on the lives of those who have chosen to follow Christ. Today we are witnessing a whirlwind of meetings and projects, yet their impact on the cultivation of the inner life seems to be very limited indeed. Let us reflect on formation, for we feel deep down that it must be re-founded, not merely rethought.*⁷

These are thought-provoking words, as they are written by a confrere with experience in this area. We need a fire capable of transforming us from within – that is, one that leads us to internalise what we experience. The alternative is to remain on the surface; it is the pretence of perfectionism, the cold of hell. This is a place where fire is lacking, without any warmth, without any passion.⁸ It is not a wealth of knowledge that warms, nourishes and satisfies the soul, but feeling and savouring every fragment of life from within.

The theme of fire recurs at certain key points in the *Ratio*, such as union with God, mission amongst young people and consecrated chastity. It is a concise and clear image of what the document aims to achieve through formation programmes: to kindle the Salesians, to enable them to keep the fire alive and to carry it to everyone and in every situation *until the end* (Jn 13:1). A true father is on fire, and a father can be said to be fulfilled when he has set another father on fire.

Here are some passages that suggest that formation touches the heart when it kindles a fire, rather than merely modifying external behaviour or developing skills, however valuable these may be.⁹

▪ **The inner fire of *Da mihi animas***¹⁰

Don Bosco ‘*wanted the active and contemplative life... to go hand in hand through the ardour of charity*’ (GC22 20). ‘*We need to reach out, almost touch, the inner fire of the Da mihi animas, in which prayer and work are united in sharing the pastoral charity of the Risen Lord*’ (GC29 17).¹¹ We find the full version of this very stirring quotation from GC29 in no. 28: ‘*We need to reach out to, almost touch, the inner fire of the Da mihi animas, in which prayer and work are united in sharing the pastoral charity of the Risen Lord. This is being passionate about the Lord!*’ (GC29 17).¹²

The repetition of this quotation within the space of just a few paragraphs is significant! It shows just how much the theme of the *inner fire* is close to our hearts. It is not a mere decorative metaphor: it is the precise point where contemplation and action physically meet. The expression *almost touch* is extraordinary: it suggests that *Da mihi animas* is not a motto but an inner ember to be sought out, to be drawn near to, and by which one allows oneself to be consumed. And the outcome of this touch is stated in no uncertain terms: *being passionate about the Lord*. This is the aim of every formation journey.

⁷Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, Vintage 2007, p.117.

⁸Don Mario Guariento, *Riflessione sulla formazione in tempo di cambiamento* [Reflection on formation in a time of change].

⁹Cf. Luigi Epicoco, *Per custodire il fuoco. Vademecum dopo l'apocalisse* [To Keep the Fire Alive: A Guide for the Post-Apocalypse], Einaudi 2023, p.61.

¹⁰Cf. *Ratio* no. 7.

¹¹*Ratio* nos. 22 and 28.

¹²*Ratio* no. 22.

¹³*Ratio* no. 28.

The inner fire of 'Da mihi animas.' is both a mystical and an apostolic restlessness, a form of contemplative charity that is authentically Salesian and which we find summarised in the *Ratio* with the term *apostolic zeal*.¹³ It is, therefore, not a spiritual option but rather an indicator of vocational discernment. Apostolic restlessness is the fruit of contemplation; it is its measure. The more authentically contemplative a Salesian is, the more apostolically ardent he is. And vice versa. Apostolic ardour becomes the measure of authenticity and of the depth of our contemplation.¹⁴

▪ **Fire is kindled by fire**

Formation takes place by contagion, as illustrated by Don Bosco's experience with Fr Cafasso: As the young Don Bosco learnt at the school of Fr Cafasso, fire is lit by fire.¹⁵ It is a formation principle: it is not transmitted through doctrine but through ardent closeness, through one's witness. A formator (and we are all formators) who is uninspired cannot inspire anyone and gives a counter-witness. 'Fire is lit by fire' is a principle that runs through the *Ratio* and, more generally, throughout our entire pastoral work. *It must be remembered that every teaching of doctrine must be rooted in an evangelising attitude that awakens the heart's commitment through closeness, love and witness.*¹⁶

▪ **The faint little flame**

Quoting *Christus Vivit*, the *Ratio* offers a beautiful passage on the formator's gaze towards those who are vulnerable (cf. Isaiah 42:3): *Anyone called to be a parent, pastor or guide to young people must have the farsightedness to appreciate the little flame that continues to burn, the fragile reed that is shaken but not broken* (cf. Is 42:3).¹⁷ It is a fire to be nurtured rather than lit. The art of the formator lies in discerning what vocational sign – particularly in initial formation – is conveyed by a flame that has grown faint. The reasons may be varied and diverse, and require skilful and honest discernment. Sometimes it is simply a lack of the oxygen needed for the wood to burn; at other times, it is the wood itself that refuses to burn despite everything. It is an image that calls for great sensitivity and requires prayerful accompaniment.

▪ **Rekindling the gift**¹⁸

The verse at the beginning of Chapter 9, 'I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you' (2 Tim 1:6), reminds us that the fire can also be extinguished. Fidelity and perseverance were at the heart of Pope Francis' address on 28 January 2017 to the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Here is an extract. *We may well say that at this moment faithfulness is being put to the test; ... We are facing a 'haemorrhage' that is weakening consecrated life and the very life of the Church. The abandonment of consecrated life worries us. It is true that some leave as an act of coherence, because they recognize, after serious discernment, that they never had this vocation. However, others, with the passage of time, have less faithfulness, very often only a few years after professing their perpetual vows. What has happened?* In these cases of people leaving, there is often both personal and institutional responsibility. In some cases, the fire was never really there; in others, the wood was green and would have needed more time in the woodshed to mature; in yet

¹³ *Ratio* no. 27 and no. 846.

¹⁴ *Ratio* no. 27.

¹⁵ *Ratio* no. 64.

¹⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 42.

¹⁷ *Ratio* no. 107.

¹⁸ *Ratio* pp. 340-341.

others, it was not sufficiently stoked. Then there are situations where the flame has gone out due to poor formation, a consecrated life that has betrayed its own ideals, a promise not kept, or a formation that fails to touch people's hearts. And bear in mind: it is possible to abandon one's vocation whilst remaining within consecrated life. The *Ratio* reminds us that *the Salesian vocation, like every Christian vocation, is not a static reality. It is a gift that accompanies the whole of one's existence and that must be continually welcomed and renewed.*¹⁹ The stages of life bear witness to the fact that *Vocation is something ongoing: the Lord continues to call us day after day. The response to the call is, therefore, also ongoing or lifelong.*²⁰ *To rekindle the gift means allowing oneself to be formed by the Lord in the ordinary life of the mission, in the fraternity of the community, and in the encounter with the young.*²¹

■ Fires that consume rather than protect

This passage warns against the idea that fire is merely apostolic enthusiasm. Rather, it is also what protects us from emotional fragility: *solitude, loneliness, in fact, can be fatal to a soul that does not burn with great passion.*²² To burn is not missionary rhetoric, and to be set ablaze is not merely a passion for souls. It is also a condition of psycho-spiritual resilience: those who do not burn with passion for something great remain exposed to the void that consecrated solitude can open up, a condition that becomes more burdensome when the community is emotionally impoverished. *If our identity is relational, then formation cannot but be relational and synodal*²³ and for this reason, communities for young confreres – whether religious or, more broadly, educative and pastoral communities – must be chosen with care. This is no easy task, because the context in which we find ourselves and the type of organisation we have (for example, the role of the rector in large institutions) risks fragmenting the Salesian community itself. And very often, as Pope Francis has written, *the problem is not always an excess of activity, but rather activity undertaken badly, without adequate motivation, without a spirituality which would permeate it and make it pleasurable.*²⁴

The cold leads us to seek out situations and experiences with which to fill that void – fires that consume rather than protect and propel us forward in the mission. We are aware that *unless our hearts are filled with the love of God* (editor's note: and therefore set alight), *we cannot attempt to follow Jesus in his chastity*²⁵ and we cannot live consecrated life with radical commitment. In this sense, consecration and mission, discipleship and witness are two breaths of a single heart, safeguarded by a life that is not neglected.

2. Building fraternity

On the pedagogy of the environment

Don Bosco – *By the labourers working in the vineyard of the Lord is meant all those who in some way work for the salvation of souls. And note well that labourers here does not only mean priests, preachers*

¹⁹ *Ratio* p. 341.

²⁰ *Ratio* no. 642.

²¹ *Ratio* p. 341

²² *Ratio* no. 113.

²³ *Ratio* no. 60.

²⁴ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 82.

²⁵ *Ratio* no. 113.

*and confessors, as some believe, who certainly are put there to work and are directly involved in gathering the harvest, but they are not alone, they are not enough.*²⁶

Luke 24:33–36 – *That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them.*

The Emmaus Gospel story begins with the description of two disciples who had set out from Jerusalem on their own, both disappointed and sad. And it ends with a communal scene in which *Jesus himself stood among them*. The story of a faith experience requires a communal context. It is there that I share my own story, and it is there that I listen to my brother’s account. The fact that Jesus draws near is a given; recognising this is a grace, but it is then crucial to have a context that confirms us in the faith – a place where Jesus *stands among us* and which, for this reason, forms us. The ‘*we*’ becomes decisive in our formation with Jesus *standing among us*. Whilst acknowledging the responsibility of each individual – both the formator and the person being formed – it is the ‘*we*’ that is the formative womb par excellence. The *Ratio* states this succinctly: *Every vocation and every journey of formation takes place in the bosom of the Church, ‘begetter and educator of vocations’ (PDV 35).*²⁷ Even the most enlightened formator can do little if the environment moves at a different pace, follows a different rhythm, or even heads in a different direction.

I believe that the verb ‘to fraternise’ [in the sense of building fraternity] can bring together all the formative processes that take place through various agents, for every formative relationship is, in essence, a relationship of fraternity. This is why St John Paul II wrote: ‘*The entire fruitfulness of religious life depends on the quality of fraternal life in common.*’ Moreover, *the current renewal in the Church and in religious life is characterised by a search for communion and community.*²⁸

In confirmation of this, GC25 (nos. 78–81) *expanded the core group responsible for animation* [editor’s note: in Reg. 5, this was previously the Salesian community] *to state that the religious community, as a charismatic point of reference, is one of its integral parts.*²⁹ In light of this, the EPC *is the context that can best foster the formation in shared mission of those in initial formation.*³⁰ This does not primarily concern programmes and structures, but people, and requires living relationships.³¹ Therefore, for formation – of both consecrated persons and laypeople – let us recruit people who are inspired, passionate, and in love with God, with young people, with the poor, and with the mission. Let us call upon men and women capable of allowing themselves to be moved by reality and who are not preoccupied with following a set formula. We need people who are ‘distracted’ because they are drawn to what matters and what warms the heart. And this is because God is the formator par excellence, ‘but in this work he makes use of human instruments, placing more mature brothers and

²⁶ John Bosco, *Everyone is called to work in the Lord’s vineyard* in *Salesian Sources 1*, LAS, Rome 2014, p.812. Excerpt from a conference given to 203 young people on 19 March 1876.

²⁷ *Ratio* no. 216.

²⁸ John Paul II, *To the participants in the plenary session of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life*, 20 November 1992.

²⁹ *Ratio* p. 583.

³⁰ *Ratio* no. 71.

³¹ Cf. *Ratio* no. 184.

sisters at the side of those whom he calls' (VC 66).³²

It is dangerous to reduce formation solely to a formal approach and, for example, to be content merely with compliance with the rules. These are *placed at the service of the 'pedagogy of grace'*³³ and, whilst their value is recognised, they are not necessarily the yardstick by which fidelity is measured. *The regular and structured approach is more likely to be transformative and fruitful, but it is equally true that without the various informal interventions and the community environment the efficacy of the formal moments would be diminished. [...] The educational praxis of the Oratory maintained a beautiful balance between the formal approach and the informal one (see 'the word in the ear'), the accompaniment taking place within the environment and that on the individual level.*³⁴ In light of this, being present or absent in informal settings is not the same thing. Not only that. If this is true, there are 'informal activities' – or, if you like, everyday tasks – which are not secondary. Belonging to the house to the extent of looking after it together, cooking meals together, playing, cleaning a room, doing the shopping – all activities which, in religious life, including houses of formation, we risk outsourcing to others – are not secondary. Far from it. And when these tasks are outsourced, we risk inventing 'informal activities' just to spend time together (a day out, a pizza...) when life itself already provides them for us. This is not merely a problem of formation but of consecrated life as a whole, which risks becoming disembodied, losing touch with reality and becoming detached from that blessed everyday life that keeps us grounded. Cut off from reality, fraternity risks becoming ephemeral and, in the long run, complacent and pretentious. The problem is not in inventing activities to share, but in living out fraternity through our daily actions and sharing in the lives of the people.

In the belief that everything educates and that everyone educates, the *Ratio* broadens the spectrum of educational subjects without, however, reducing them to a uniform standard. It states that *Don Bosco cared much about personal relationships, but he was above all the creator of an environment that abounded in educational relationships and models, programmes and exhortations.*³⁵ If this is true, it is the environment as a whole that is formative, that shapes the person, that moulds them. In this regard, Pope Francis' testimony about his experience with the Salesians is highly significant.

Life at boarding school was a 'whole'. You were immersed in a rhythm of life, organised in such a way that there was no time for idleness. The day flew by like an arrow, without one having time to get bored. I felt immersed in a world which, although 'artificially' created (using educational resources), was in no way artificial. The most natural things were going to Mass in the morning, having breakfast, studying, attending lessons, playing during break time, and listening to Fr Rector's 'Goodnight'. Everyone was encouraged to experience various facets of life, and this fostered a sense of awareness within me: not merely a moral conscience, but also a kind of human awareness (social, playful, artistic, etc.). To put it another way: through the awakening of this awareness to the truth of things, the boarding school fostered a Catholic culture that was by no means 'bigoted' or 'misguided'. Academic study, the social values of living together, social concern for the most needy (I remember learning there to do without certain things in order to give them to people poorer than myself), sport, competence, piety... everything was real, and everything formed habits which, taken

³² *Ratio* no. 60.

³³ *Ratio* no. 8.

³⁴ *Ratio* no. 184.

³⁵ *Ratio* no. 219.

together, shaped a cultural way of being. Everything was done with a purpose. There was nothing 'meaningless'.³⁶

— “Pope Francis”

Every fragment contributes to the formation process. The alternative is a diabolical separation of sectors, fields, spaces, roles and people who carry out their work in parallel and schizophrenically without ever meeting (and, alas, this does happen!). One part of the body dies if it is not united with the whole: the heart is precious but dies outside the body; the brain is the most fascinating organ but, detached from the body, becomes nothing. Every gesture, every word, every glance, and even every absence and every silence is capable of making educational activity effective or rendering it futile, or even, at times, malicious. Everything educates; for this reason, nothing can be left to chance, left to improvisation, or delegated to anonymous third parties. Is it not true that in our personal story there has been a word or a gesture that has enlightened our lives? And is it not true that a single intimidating glance was enough to make us sad and fearful? The fragment ‘weighs’ as much as the whole, because within the fragment lies the whole. Formation is shaped by the details. A person’s eyes are capable of conveying the totality of a life. The entire educative and pastoral community educates, just as every individual does, and for this reason, everyone present – even in seemingly secondary roles – makes a difference.

We must therefore always remember, through concrete actions and not merely words, that it is the whole, the ‘we’, that educates. The *Ratio* states this in various passages (including references to the Constitutions and Regulations). Here are a few examples.

- *The natural environment for vocational growth is the community, which the confrere joins with trust and in which he gives his responsible collaboration. (C 99).³⁷*

- *The assimilation of the Salesian spirit is fundamentally a fact of living communication (R 86), the natural context of which is the local and the provincial community [...] The Valdocco community, marked by the Preventive System, was a setting that welcomed, directed, accompanied, encouraged and made demands. Formation is always relational and reciprocal.³⁸*

- *Just as the natural environment for the formation of the human being is the family, so the most suitable environment for Salesian formation is the community and the EPC (GC29 48).³⁹*

- *Good discernment presupposes a climate of communion and trust within the formation team, with full respect for the difference of roles and a great capacity for mutual acceptance.⁴⁰*

Drawing on developments in recent Salesian history, the *Ratio* goes a step further with regard to the laity, offering concrete guidelines:

- *It is particularly helpful for the formation team, in the broadest sense, to include lay people – both men and women – with experience and expertise, especially when they share responsibility for the*

³⁶ Pope Francis, *Ricordi Salesiani*, in *Osservatore Romano* 29 January 2014.

³⁷ *Ratio* no. 219.

³⁸ *Ratio* no. 219.

³⁹ *Ratio* no. 97.

⁴⁰ *Ratio* no. 693.

*mission or are members of the Salesian Family (GC29 49; cf. FSDB 249–251).*⁴¹

▪ (in the pages regarding the novitiate) *It is advisable for some lay people to participate occasionally in the processes of formation. These are people with a serious spiritual journey who identify with the Salesian charism (especially members of the Salesian Family and of the animating nucleus of the EPC) and have direct contact with the novices. It would be important to also ensure the presence of one or more women, consecrated or lay (GC29 39e, 49).*⁴²

The involvement of the laity is such that they are to be properly consulted in the run-up to admissions:

▪ *The following steps should be followed in the admission process, allowing for different situations: A talk with the rector, confessor and spiritual guide and the submission of the request (see FSDB 802–803); The opinion of the lay people and families with whom the candidate shares his life and pastoral activities, especially when they are members of the animating nucleus of the EPC, obtained by the rector in a suitable way.*⁴³

▪ *Admission to perpetual vows. The rector of the formation community gathers in an appropriate manner the opinion of the laity and families with whom the candidate shares pastoral life and activities. The opinion of the Salesian religious community to which the candidate belongs is also sought.*⁴⁴

These latter guidelines – for example, the inclusion of lay people within the formation team – are very clear and call on us to find ways of putting them into practice, without resorting to ‘gender quotas’ or simply allowing the psychologist or lay person on duty a few hours’ attendance merely to tick a box. The presence of lay people should be conceived not as occasional but as systematic and systemic, as an extended fraternity, and as essential participants in fostering fraternity. Is it really impossible to imagine families living in fraternity with us? This is an issue that touches on religious life itself. Why not dream of an extended Salesian fraternity that is not limited to the monthly retreat or little more?

The role of young people is also central to formation. The Ratio states: *If the mission is with and for young people, and if it is communal – shared between Salesians and lay people – then being formed for the mission means entering into a circle of mutual formation. It is a living dynamic in which Salesians and lay people form young people, young people and Salesians form lay people, and young people and lay people form us Salesians.*⁴⁵ This vision is most inspiring; it is true even when it is not explicitly addressed, because it is what actually happens in reality. Whether we like it or not, for better or for worse, there is *always mutual formation*, and this is also true with young people. *Forming oneself for the mission, therefore, means allowing oneself to be shaped by the mission itself, where it takes substance: in the community, among young people, in the Word, in life.*⁴⁶ This reciprocal formation process, which inevitably exists, requires us to be aware of the formative influence of each of the actors involved and of the fact that no one is ever neutral. This *force* requires a *form* that cannot be reduced to a stamp

⁴¹ Ratio no. 232.

⁴² Ratio no. 407.

⁴³ Ratio no. 811.

⁴⁴ Ratio no. 849.

⁴⁵ Ratio no. 891.

⁴⁶ Ratio no. 891.

to be affixed and that cannot be devised at a desk, but must be learnt through humble and patient listening to reality.

The insight that *everything educates*⁴⁷ is valuable and true. We must work to translate it into appropriate educational choices and practices – which will likely differ from the current ones. In particular, treading carefully and mindful that we are walking together – precisely because *everything educates* – I would venture to say that we need to reconnect more closely with everyday life by humbly taking our place at the ‘lecture podium’ of reality. In this regard, the issue of work and the sustenance of our communities – including our formation communities – can be of great help, but we struggle to find suitable tools to assess our commitment and our standard of living so that we may then act accordingly.

One final point. In formation – both in houses of formation and in apostolic works – the *Ratio* reaffirms the role of the rector as a key figure.⁴⁸ We all recognise the complexity of this role in apostolic works, particularly those involving multiple sectors. When this is the case, it is precisely his task as a spiritual animator – and, therefore, as a formator – that suffers. It is a raw nerve that remains exposed.

3. Make yourself...

Formation, transformation and responsibility

Don Bosco - ...***Make yourself*** humble, strong and energetic...

Lk 24:28-31 - *As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But **they urged him strongly**, saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’ So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. 31 Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.*

*The goal of offering oneself to God in religious consecration is not just any ideal of perfection whatsoever, nor even availability for a particular work, but the formation of the inner attitudes of the Son in the heart of the consecrated person, sharing his total self-gift to the Father and to his brothers and sisters.*⁴⁹

Everything serves this single purpose: that the sentiments of the Son may take shape in the heart of the Salesian. Not moral perfection, not apostolic efficiency, not institutional conformity. The sentiments of the Son – those sentiments capable of penetrating and inhabiting life, the whole of life, capable of internalising, that is, of ‘taking within’ motivations and convictions. Formation is not an enclosure in which to remain, but a path upon which to walk and live – a path which, in many cases, must be cleared and levelled with effort, yet with equal exuberance. The *sentiments of the Son* prefer the uncharted path – the ascent from Jericho to Jerusalem – to the safety of the enclosure.

This goal is to be interpreted in the light of what is written in *1.2 Nature and objectives, content and those to whom the Ratio is addressed: The Ratio is an authoritative and binding guide for formation,*

⁴⁷ *Ratio* no. 249.

⁴⁸ The term appears 226 times in the document

⁴⁹ *Ratio* no 58.

with its own intrinsic normative character. It is essential to understand that this normative character aims to overcome a purely legal or prescriptive approach. The intention is not at all to abandon the rules, but rather to reposition them in an essential way: the norms contained in this document are placed at the service of the 'pedagogy of grace,' which is the true and profound charismatic norm of our mission.⁵⁰ It is, first and foremost, Grace that works, that breaks through, that creates the conditions, that transforms, that takes us by surprise. St Paul writes, *And all of us... are being changed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.*⁵¹

For the plough of formation to turn the soil and create a furrow in which to sow the sentiments [the mind that was] in Christ Jesus (Phil 2:5), various forces are required.

The first is the Spirit, which is why the document says that *Formation... cannot be a merely human action; it has to be divine*, therefore an action in which God himself is the farmer. *But*, it goes on to say, *the divine fashioning is not something that happens without our free response and ongoing cooperation.*⁵² This change, this transformation, this transfiguration, is not only a human effort but a divine work accomplished by the Holy Spirit, who dwells in us and makes this transformation possible.⁵³

At the same time, there can be no passive observers in the process of formation and transformation, let alone paths where we are constantly carried along and where the longed-for goal is handed to us on a silver platter. *The work of the Holy Spirit in no way diminishes the responsibility of the consecrated person.*⁵⁴ In the sentence *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus* (Phil 2:5), the subject is *you*. Transformation demands personal responsibility. Let us translate all this into Salesian terminology: we arrive at the verb *Make yourself*. It is a clear invitation to ensure that the purpose of our existence is fulfilled. It is a workshop of hope; it is a call to personal responsibility; a task that cannot be delegated to others; it is a call to work on one's own frailties. *Make yourself* seems to be telling us: *You are better than this,*⁵⁵ you can be better than you are now; you can – and must – contribute to your own transformation.

Those in formation (and that is all of us!) are the first to cultivate the soil of their own vocation, whilst at the same time they must be grateful for the hard work carried out by others. Vocation and formation are a call and a response,⁵⁶ recognition of the Word and adherence to the Word, wonder and initiative. And all this in freedom. *The heart cannot be constrained, but it can be attracted. Those in charge of formation will 'above all... disclose the beauty of following Christ and the value of the charism by which this is accomplished' (VC 66; see EG 167). It is by the beauty of their own lives that formators radiate their influence and communicate the joy of the gospel (EG 15, 167). This is the dynamic of example and witness. As the young Don Bosco learnt at the school of Fr Cafasso, fire is lit by fire.*⁵⁷

At the same time, *Discretely and delicately, [the formator] walks alongside his confrere and helps him to interpret his entire life and religious experience from a believer's perspective. When the time is*

⁵⁰ Ratio no. 8.

⁵¹ Cf. *Lectio* on 2 Cor 3:18 in *Ratio*, p. 84-86.

⁵² Ratio no. 58.

⁵³ Cf. *Lectio* on 2 Cor 3:18 in *Ratio*, p. 86.

⁵⁴ Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, The Gift of Fidelity, the Jpyoy of Perseverance. *Manete in dilectione mea* (Jn 15:9). Guidelines, LEV 2020, no.39.

⁵⁵ Enrico Galiano, *Dormi stanotte sul mio cuore. Ricordati di fare ciò che ti fa sentire vivo*, Garzanti 2020, p.193

⁵⁶ Ratio no. 58.

⁵⁷ Ratio no. 64 where we find the quotation: G. CAFASSO, *Esercizi spirituali al clero, I: Meditazioni* 641–642.

right, he also knows how to take a step back and, like the Risen One, disappear. In this way, he helps the confrere to spread his wings and act with full responsibility and freedom.⁵⁸

Whilst affirming the indispensable role of accompaniment, the *Ratio* repeatedly emphasises that young confreres are *active partners in the processes of formation*.⁵⁹ This theme is reiterated in several passages, for example with regard to intellectual formation: *The confrere in formation considers himself as bearing prime responsibility for his intellectual formation*.⁶⁰ The phrase ‘prime responsibility’ also recurs in other contexts and indicates that the primary responsibility does not lie with the formator, the provincial or the institution, but with the confrere himself.

At the same time, formation is not intended to be a solitary process. In the section on the document’s key interpretative principles, the *Ratio* sets out a structural principle: *Such a formation will obviously be participatory and synodal*: our young people in initial formation cannot be seen as passive recipients, they need to be actively involved as agents of their own formation.⁶¹ The phrase ‘actively involved’ is not redundant: it indicates that participation is not merely formal or consultative but constitutive of the process. The contrast with ‘passive recipients’ reveals an implicit critique of non-participatory formation models. *This involves shifting from a top-down style that is quick to judge and relies heavily on control and rules, to a synodal style that involves much listening, dialogue, patience and participatory decision-making (GC28 23; GC29 39g)*.⁶²

The *Ratio* introduces the concept of *docibilitas* (taken from *Novo Millennio Ineunte*) defining it as follows: *Docibilitas is a responsive attitude to grace, an openness to the Spirit, the freedom to let ourselves be touched and educated by life, by persons, by existential situations. It is our ability to learn from life. It is not merely docile, obedient and passive acceptance, but the full, active and responsible involvement of the person, a fundamentally positive attitude towards reality, and the inner freedom to let oneself be instructed by any fragment of truth and beauty around oneself*.⁶³ Being docile does not mean being passive: it means being actively open. The formee’s central role does not lie in self-sufficiency, but in a conscious and free openness to grace, which does not suppress the formee’s freedom: it demands it.

It is important to develop practical approaches that foster a growing sense of responsibility, otherwise there is a risk of a loss of accountability and a regression to childish behaviour. With regard to houses of formation, the lives of many young people of the same age who have to work, study and cook for themselves may, I believe, offer food for thought. This complex interplay – active participation, freedom, grace, *docibilitas*, and the assumption of responsibility – is a fruitful theme, but one that requires consensus. Are we developing a shared understanding of what it means to assume responsibility and foster a sense of responsibility? Do we agree on shared practices to help our confreres take the lead in formation processes? Let us remember that formation is not transformation if it produces people who will cause no trouble or who will conform to the system, but if it shapes men and women of God, people of attractive inner stature. If a consecrated person exudes the presence of God, people sense it immediately. If they do not, the void is felt at once.

⁵⁸ Miguel Ángel Moreno Nuño in *Ratio*, chap.5: *Walking together: accompaniment and discernment*.

⁵⁹ *Ratio* no. 219.

⁶⁰ *Ratio* no. 173.

⁶¹ *Ratio* no. 7.

⁶² *Ratio* no. 65.

⁶³ *Ratio* no. 63.

I fear that this issue of participatory formation models is not interpreted or applied in the same way across the formation sector. More generally, I have the impression that there is a task that can no longer be put off: we need to reach a common understanding of certain terms, of the weight and significance of certain formation practices, and of certain expressions that are understood differently depending on the context and the people involved, thereby effectively creating a variety of formation models. The very charism that once had a common interpretation now risks being understood very differently depending on the context. This is an issue that emerges strongly within international communities and which will require ongoing effort to avoid the temptation to settle for a compromised charism.

4. Restlessness

Not even God is at peace

Don Bosco - *But in view of so many needs, such a lack of labourers for the Gospel, noting that all of you here, in one way or another can work in the Lord's vineyard, **could I just stay quiet** and not manifest the secret desire of my heart? Oh how much I would like to see you encouraged to work like the apostles! All my thoughts turn to this, all my concerns, all my efforts.*⁶⁴

Lk 24:15,25-27 - *While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?'... Then he said to them, 'Oh, **how foolish you are, and how slow of heart** to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.*

This restlessness, which dwells in the heart of every person and particularly in the saints, is especially evident both in the search for God and in the desire for a ministry marked by sleepless nights, for the heart never sleeps. In Pär Lagerkvist, this theme emerges clearly in his poems, works that reveal an inner turmoil in which we can easily recognise ourselves and which forms the bedrock of every journey of formation.

⁶⁴John Bosco, *Everyone is called to work in the Lord's vineyard* in *Salesian Sources 1*, LAS, Rome 2014, p.817.

You who existed before
the mountains and the clouds
before the sea and winds.
You whose beginning is before
the beginning of all things,
and whose joy and sorrow
are older than the stars.
You who eternally young
wandered among the stars of the Milky Way
and then the great darkness between them.
You who were alone before loneliness
and whose heart was full of disquiet
before any human heart,
Do not forget me.

But how could you possibly remember me?
How could the sea remember
the shell through which it once whispered?⁶⁵

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**

May my heart's disquiet never vanish.
May I never have peace.
May I never reconcile myself with life,
and even less with death.
May my path be endless
with an unknown destination.⁶⁶

In Pär Lagerkvist's poetry, disquiet or restlessness emerges as something which fills the heart of the One who is Infinite, as a force capable of drawing us towards that which we yearn for with all our hearts and yet do not even know. The second poem is a marvellous poetic summary of what a formative process ought to be: a journey of restless souls, never satisfied with anything, always seeking a new path to follow, as if the goal were to walk the path rather than to reach its destination. Feeling that one has arrived leads to losing one's way, to stifling the heart's yearning, to presuming that one has already attained the same mind as Christ Jesus (Phil 2:5).

Pope Francis, speaking at the *General Chapter of the Order of Saint Augustine*, proposed three forms of restlessness: the restlessness of the spiritual quest, the restlessness of encountering God, and the restlessness of love.

- The restlessness of the spiritual quest. *Augustine is an 'accomplished' man. He has everything, but in his heart remains the restlessness of the search for the profound meaning of his life; his heart is not asleep. I would say that it is not anesthetized by success, by things, by power. Augustine does not close in on himself, he does not rest, he continues to search for the truth, the meaning of life, he continues to search for the face of God. Of course he makes mistakes, he also takes wrong paths, he sins, he is a sinner; but he does not lose the restlessness of the spiritual quest. And in this way he discovers that God was waiting for him, on the contrary, that He never gave up looking for him first.*

- The restlessness of the encounter with God. *The restlessness of the search for the truth, of the search of God, becomes the restlessness to know him more and to come out of himself to make him known by others. It is the restlessness of love. He would like a quiet life of study and prayer, but God calls him to be Pastor of Hippo, in a difficult moment, with a community divided and war at their gates. And Augustine lets himself be disquieted by God, he does not tire of announcing Him, of evangelizing with courage, without fear, he looks to be the image of Jesus, the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep (cfr Jn. 10,14), indeed, as I love to repeat, he 'smells of his flock', and goes in search of those that are lost.... Always restless! And this is the peace of restlessness.*

⁶⁵Pär Lagerkvist, *La Terra della Sera* [Evening Land], Bari 2007, p.57. English translation JBF.

⁶⁶As above, p. 83

■ The restlessness of love. *Augustine is heir to Monica, from her he receives the seed of restlessness. Here, then, the restlessness of love: always seeking, without stopping, the good of the other, of a loved one, with that intensity that leads to tears... How are we with the restlessness of love? Do we believe in the love of God and towards others? Or are we nominalists on this? Not in an abstract way, not only in words, but the real brother that we meet, the brother who is next to us! Do we let ourselves be restless for their needs or do we remain closed in ourselves, in our community that many times for us is a 'comunita-comodita' [community-comfort]? There are times where you can live in an apartment without knowing who lives next door; or one can be in a community, without truly knowing his own brother: with pain I think of those who are consecrated that are not fertile, that are 'zitelloni' [elderly bachelors]... The restlessness of love gives us the gift of pastoral fruitfulness, and we should ask ourselves, every one of us: how is my spiritual fruitfulness going, my pastoral fruitfulness?*

The *Ratio* never uses the word 'restlessness' directly, preferring a more formal vocabulary befitting a document such as this. Nevertheless, in presenting the Salesian, it sketches a profile that must remain in a state of constant dynamic tension: between grace and freedom, between identity and mission, between contemplation and action, between the gift received and the fire to be rekindled (cf. 2 Tim 1:6), in a challenging balance that is salvation and which must not be resolved.

No. 22 of the *Ratio*, entitled *Our Apostolic Consecration*, summarises what has been said so far in Salesian terms, using expressions such as *the ardour of charity* and *inner fire*. No. 138 reminds us that *ardour for the mission springs from the mystery of God*. It is this restlessness for God that shapes the apostle, and at the same time it is *apostolic action [...] the privileged place for encountering God [...] so that we can say that we called to sanctify ourselves by educating (ACG 337 38)*. In confirmation of this, no. 107 states that *one of the great marks of Salesian spirituality is that we meet God through the young and young people are not at rest but are on a quest*.

Formation, then, is not a place where we can quell our restlessness, nor is it a process in which we bring our inner stirrings down from the barricades, succumbing to a 'light', complacent and accommodating form of consecrated life (that would be tantamount to self-sabotage!), but rather a battlefield where inner restlessness can become a persevering and never-ending search for God and a desire to bring fire. *Ours is a spirituality of active life*⁶⁷ in which 'zeal', 'fervour' and 'courage' are key words both for our relationship with God and for our apostolic life. *Saint Benedict, the tenacious seeker of God, affirms that the monk is not one who has found God: he is one who seeks God for a lifetime. In the Rule (58:7), he calls for an examination of the young monk's motivations in order to know, first of all, if 'si revera Deum quaerit'— if he actually seeks God.*⁶⁸ At the same time, *if something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life.*⁶⁹

Certain expressions that are particularly our own – which we find in the *Ratio* – such as *apostolic interiority*, *apostolic spirituality*, *apostolic consecration* and *the grace of unity*, are the place where these

⁶⁷ *Ratio* no. 138.

⁶⁸ Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. *Contemplate. To consecrated men and women on the trail of Beauty*, no.12

⁶⁹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 49.

two loves converge,⁷⁰ these two longings, these two systolic and diastolic rhythms which, in order to be and remain as such, need to be nourished by the desire to go further which dwells within those who love and who know that love is never enough.

The Christian disciple's restlessness is rooted in the heart of God, who is ever concerned for the fate of humankind. *The restless heart of which we spoke earlier, echoing Saint Augustine, is the heart that is ultimately satisfied with nothing less than God, and in this way becomes a loving heart. God's heart is restless for us. God is waiting for us. He is looking for us. He knows no rest either, until he finds us. God's heart is restless, and that is why he set out on the path towards us – to Bethlehem, to Calvary, from Jerusalem to Galilee and on to the very ends of the earth. God is restless for us, he looks out for people willing to "catch" his unrest, his passion for us, people who carry within them the searching of their own hearts and at the same time open themselves to be touched by God's search for us. Dear friends, this was the task of the Apostles: to receive God's unrest for man and then to bring God himself to man. And this is your task as successors of the Apostles: let yourselves be touched by God's unrest, so that God's longing for man may be fulfilled.*⁷¹

One word that translates this perspective in the *Ratio* is *urgency* (Cf. also C. 11).

- *At the end of the novitiate, the newly professed... has grasped in the *Da mihi animas* the urgency of working for the evangelization and salvation of the young, and values collaboration with the members of the EPC.*⁷²

- *typical aspects of living the priesthood as Salesians are a deep sense of the Church and of its presence and mission in the world of today, some of the indications of which are [...] apostolic zeal, concern for the needs [urgenze] of the Kingdom, openness to the brotherhood of all human beings.*⁷³

In consecrated life, it is restlessness⁷⁴ that will save us, and in formation it is the ability to recognise, name and listen to the stirrings of the heart that will save us. I shall leave the summary to Emmanuel Mounier (1905–1950), who, in a letter to his mother dated 12 January 1928, wrote: '*The more one lives, the closer one comes to Pascal: the only thing that matters is the divine restlessness of unfulfilled souls.*'

5. Hard work and sacrifice

Loving hard work

Don Bosco - *When I dedicated myself to this part of the sacred ministry, I fully intended to consecrate **every effort of mine** to the greater glory of God and to the good of souls.*⁷⁵

Lk 24:30-31 - *When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and **broke it**, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.*

⁷⁰ *Ratio* no. 27.

⁷¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 6 January 2012.

⁷² *Ratio* no. 404

⁷³ *Ratio* no. 846.

⁷⁴ Cf. Giorgio Vittadini, *Ci salverà l'inquietudine*, in *Avvenire* 14 June 2026.

⁷⁵ John Bosco, *Draft Regulation for the boys Oratory of St Francis De Sales in Turin in the Valdocco district – Historical Outline*, Salesian Sources I, p. 29.

*Our father was an admirable example of a life dedicated to work, and he wanted the members of the Salesian Society to be known for their spirit of enterprise and industry. Valdocco became a school of work where a pedagogy of duty was developed, one that did not shrink from fatigue but became a path of asceticism and a concrete expression of spirituality.*⁷⁶

The journey of formation – both the initial phases and the one that accompanies us throughout our lives – cannot be separated from the labour of birth. It is something to be taken into account when one wishes to climb a mountain, and the presence of this labour is not necessarily a negative judgement on the reality one is experiencing, although this labour must have a say in the process of discernment and may sometimes prove to be a decisive factor. Similarly, the toil of formation should not be dismissed as merely a price to be paid, whilst overlooking the significance of the cross.

In a broad reading of the *Ratio*, I discern an implicit call not to be afraid to face hardship and not to be afraid to make others face hardship. A willingness to endure hardship, fuelled by the passion of a heart in love, is the response to that call to risk one's life. We would like to experience *intensity without risk*,⁷⁷ but that is not how it works. And today more than ever. The disciple must always take risks because risk is the very essence of love. *Passion demands a leap into the infinite, a hyperbole.*⁷⁸ The Rector Major speaks of the *audacity of faith*,⁷⁹ inviting us not to seek the comfort of a first-class pastoral ministry. Consecrated life must banish all that is comfortable and must learn to dare, to cultivate desires that border on madness. *But if consecrated life stands for no more than this, if it does not give rise to deeper sentiments and less common resources, why become a religious? If there is nothing extraordinary, or unusual, or a bit of "madness" about the vows, could it not be because we have reduced them to our own terms of measurement. If consecrated life is no more than the normal way of living it means it has lost its prophetic force; if it does a bit of everything but nothing in particular, if it aims at nothing better, neither proclaiming nor denouncing anything at all, what purpose does it serve?*⁸⁰

The book *Alzarsi all'alba* [Getting up at dawn] features a precious quote from Veronica Yoko Plebani, an Italian Paralympic athlete, whose story of resilience and dedication – after battling severe meningitis as a young woman – served as the inspiration for Mario Calabresi's novel. *We had just finished a long chat and she had to go for a training session. She put on her wetsuit, tucked her long hair under her swimming cap and, before setting off with some effort along the beach towards the icy water, she told me one last thing. The very thing that set this book in motion. Veronica has had both feet amputated halfway down; the sand is an obstacle, but she set off with a smile. I watched her until I saw her dive in and swim out to sea. I envied her; I envied that passionate strength, and found her final words extraordinarily bold: 'You have to love the struggle.'*⁸¹

When there is no taste for hard work, there is no vocation; when we do not regard the struggle as a fundamental part of the process, we water down vocation. On this subject, I shall hand over to René Voillaume: *How I would love, first and foremost, to convince each and every one of you that this state of inner struggle is a normal state! It is the absence of struggle that is abnormal, and is often a sign of having given up on the effort to better oneself and to grow in love. In any case, rest and calm can only*

⁷⁶ *Ratio* no. 88.

⁷⁷ Anne Dufourmantelle, *Elogio del rischio*, Vita e pensiero 2020, p.33.

⁷⁸ Anne Dufourmantelle, *Elogio del rischio*, Vita e pensiero 2020, p.33

⁷⁹ Cf. Fabio Attard, *Do whatever he tells you*. Strenna 2026, p. 55-57.

⁸⁰ Pascual Chávez, *I say to the Lord: "You are my God. My happiness lies in you alone."*, Circular letter in AGC 382.

⁸¹ Mario Calabresi, *Alzarsi all'alba*, Mondadori 2025, p.12.

*ever be temporary. The peace of which Jesus speaks is not the absence of struggle, but lies in a sense of order which presupposes precisely a strenuous and painful effort at self-correction. Jesus was not afraid to speak of violence, amputation, war, contradiction. It is important to have understood this clearly and to have accepted, as a principle, struggle as our normal state until death.*⁸²

It is clear from these words that spiritual life is not the same as spiritual well-being, and that we must take everything from Jesus. Everything. I recognise the risk of making only certain aspects of him our own – those that make us feel good, those that shield us from the hardships of love – whilst forgetting that the form of Christian love is the cross. Today, even in our consecrated life, it seems that what matters is feeling good and having no problems. This way of thinking carries with it the risk of sidelining the Paschal Mystery and turning the cross into an obstacle or, at best, an optional extra, an ornament, a mere theological topic. Formation cannot fail to take into account risk, toil, sweat and boldness. Jesus, too, passed through these trials.

The word in the *Ratio* that best sums all this up is ‘sacrifice’. It states that the Salesian *knows that the main purpose of his ministry is not self-fulfilment, and not even the successful outcome of all his ventures but a spending of his life for others with all the love and sacrifice it entails, knowing full well that in this way he is working for the One without whom we can do nothing.*⁸³ Being men of God springs from the cross, and from nothing else.

The experience of trial is formative because, if embraced rather than endured, it bestows upon you an awareness that can be transformed into strength, into inner power, into courage. Similarly, moments of vulnerability must never become an excuse to lower your sights. Rather, they are places where God speaks and reveals you to yourself. They require demanding and arduous work on oneself, for it is you who decide what to make of what life has brought you, knowing that *discernment compares the personality structure and life experience with the project of life of the Salesians of Don Bosco.*⁸⁴ With regard to the family environment, *it is not so much a question of ensuring that a candidate has a perfect family background, as of creating the conditions that will enable him to process his experiences.*⁸⁵ Finally, it is worth remembering that formators must be able to recognise whether the vulnerabilities that emerge are absolute counter-indications⁸⁶ or counter-indications that may be absolute or relative,⁸⁷ and have the courage to act accordingly.

6. Lectio vitae

A matter of perspective

Don Bosco - *The first thing [Fr Cafasso] did was to begin to take me to the prisons, where I soon learned how great was the malice and misery of mankind. I saw large numbers of young lads aged from 12 to 18, fine, healthy youngsters, alert of mind, but **seeing** them idle there, infested with lice, lacking food for body and soul, horrified me.*⁸⁸

⁸² René Voillaume, *Come loro nel cuore delle masse. Vita e spiritualità dei Piccoli Fratelli di Gesù*, San Paolo 1987 (1a ed. 1950), p.221

⁸³ *Ratio* no. 572.

⁸⁴ *Ratio* no. 758.

⁸⁵ *Ratio* no. 93.

⁸⁶ *Ratio* no. 754.

⁸⁷ *Ratio* no. 755.

⁸⁸ John Bosco, *Memoirs of the Oratory*, Salesian Sources I, p. 1395.

Lk 14:27 - *Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, **he interpreted to them** the things about himself in all the scriptures.*

One of the expressions that recurs in the *Ratio* is *learning from experience*. Let us make one thing clear from the outset: this is not synonymous with ‘having experiences’. The difference is subtle but fundamental. The text is clear: *As far as experience is concerned, we can distinguish between the happening as such and its impact upon the person. In this sense we can talk about ‘experiences’ on the one hand and ‘experience’ on the other, meaning what we learn from the experiences.*⁸⁹ In formation, the aim is not to pad one’s formative CV with a thousand different experiences, but to become capable of interpreting and discerning what life presents: *‘learning from experience’, which is really the permanent attitude of discernment that is the ability to listen to the Spirit in everyday life and ‘to make the best formative use of any situation’ (C 98, 119).*⁹⁰

‘Providing formation’ is an expression we often use in the formation field. Rather than something to be done, it is a way of life, of living out our humanity; it is a *Lectio* of what we experience. Every formative process finds its fulfilment when I allow myself to be transformed from within by what I sense and understand to be important for me.

Don Bosco knew how to listen to the voice of God, which permeated his dreams and the voices of young people – the theological setting par excellence. We too are called to listen to history,⁹¹ to see what is happening, to read and interpret those currents that seem to carry us far out into the open sea, where dropping anchor serves no purpose. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we are called to undertake a theological reading of history, convinced that *God’s will emerges from the events we experience.*⁹²

All this is *Lectio Vitae*, a term that encapsulates learning from life: reading, listening to and interpreting everyday life. *Turning life into a formative space does not consist merely in ‘experiencing’ many things but rather in ‘becoming experienced’ or learning from what one has gone through.*⁹³ This is the depth of formation to which we are invited: *As far as initial formation is concerned, quality must prevail over quantity: the point is to learn from experience rather than to merely have many experiences [...] We need the ‘pastoral look’ and ‘serene attentiveness’ (EG 51; LS 225–226).*⁹⁴ With regard to practical training: *Reflection on experience is the principal path of intellectual growth for the practical trainee.*⁹⁵ *The examination of consciousness lived as a daily reflection on one’s educative and pastoral experience is fundamental as a way of learning to live the Preventive System as a spiritual experience.*⁹⁶

A practical consequence of this premise is that the formation journey is not necessarily a positive one. At times, a certain formational *stabilitas* is preferable – not only in terms of location but also of teaching staff and, above all, of the approach to formation – as this helps one to delve into one’s daily life, to explore it deeply, and to become familiar with who one is. It is a highly complex yet equally compelling issue that we cannot resolve through the Curatoriums, however important they may be.

⁸⁹Ratio no. 73.

⁹⁰Ratio no. 7.

⁹¹Cf. Fabio Attard in *Evangelii Gaudium con Don Bosco*, ed. Antonio Carriero, Elledici 2018, p.192.

⁹²Fabio Attard, *Do whatever he tells you*. Strenna 2026, p. 32.

⁹³Ratio no. 73.

⁹⁴Ratio n.78.

⁹⁵Ratio no. 498.

⁹⁶Ratio no. 503.

The *Lectio Vitae* offers us a living learning experience, an opportunity to hear God's voice amidst the twists and turns and the wounds of history: this is what Jesus did with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. It is an opportunity to remain firmly rooted in reality, allowing reality itself to be our teacher. The *Lectio Vitae* is beneficial when our formation does not shield us from life. *The possibility of finding joy in life does not stem from the absence of pain, but from the realisation that all of life's events — both happy and sad — have a purpose and meaning; they are all steps on a journey embraced by a greater love.*⁹⁷ The people who love you do not merely lift you up after your inevitable falls, but give you the strength to recognise the value in them.

Artificial formation utopias, formative interludes that numb us to our own history, pathways designed more with the head than with the heart – these are approaches that stand in the way of the kind of learning advocated in the document we are discussing.

I leave it to the *Ratio* to sum up this point: *We grow as educators and pastors by reflecting on pastoral experiences in a spirit of faith. We become attentive to what God is doing in the lives of the young and in our own lives, and we learn to respond with a contemplative attitude, with wonder, praise and thanks, lifting up each one in prayer.*⁹⁸

7. Formative tensions

Polarity in the Ratio

Don Bosco - *We must each of us be willing to sacrifice our own will, even at heavy cost. There is no need to sacrifice one's health or money or to undergo privations, penances, or extraordinary fasts. The sacrifice that is needed is the sacrifice of the will. **Each of us must be equally prepared** to preach or to cook, to teach or to sweep, to catechize or to pray, to supervise or to study, to command or to obey.*⁹⁹

Lk 24:13, 33 - *Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus... That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem*

I would like to focus on some fruitful polarities that should be held together, as they help us to avoid making one-sided choices. The *Ratio* emphasises: *We have to learn to treasure the polarity between the particular and the universal, between the one and the many, between the simple and the complex; to annihilate this tension 'would be to go against the life of the Spirit'*.¹⁰⁰ The source is Pope Francis (cf. *Veritatis Gaudium*), and the context is intellectual formation, but the principle has a general hermeneutical scope. These tensions are not flaws in the document: rather, they are a sign of its maturity, its concreteness and the complexity of life. A document that eliminated them would be ideological. A document that ignored them would be superficial.

(a) Norm and grace: the fundamental tension

This is one of the most profound tensions underpinning the entire document. The *Ratio* is a normative document — as it openly states in no. 8 — yet at the same time it states that its normative

⁹⁷ Oscar V. Milosz, *Miguel Mañara commentato da Franco Nembrini*, Centocanti Edizioni 2014, p.47.

⁹⁸ *Ratio* no. 890.

⁹⁹ *Biographical Memoirs* VII, p. 35. Don Bosco said this to Salesians as part of a talk on the vows.

¹⁰⁰ *Ratio* no. 123.

character is intended to *move beyond a purely legal or prescriptive approach*¹⁰¹ and that *the norms contained in this document are placed at the service of the 'pedagogy of grace', which is the true and profound charismatic norm.*¹⁰²

The document does not reject rules, but does not regard them as the primary tool. No. 64 is unequivocal: formation is a pedagogy of grace, it can never be first and foremost a matter of rules and standards. Yet there is no shortage of prescriptions, particularly in Part III (Criteria and Norms for Discernment and Admissions).

This tension is structural and deliberate, but anyone reading the document without recognising it risks applying it either in a libertarian or a legalistic manner. We must maintain this tension, bearing in mind that the law is at the service of Grace. In this regard, there are institutional procedures that must be observed, which the Church and the Congregation, drawing on their experience, point out to us. At the same time, history is dynamic, so we move forward whilst listening to the Spirit.

b) Unity and diversity: the institutional tension

No. 9 says: *Formation is therefore one in its essential content and diversified in its concrete expressions.* Article 7 devotes one of its five Keys to reading the Ratio precisely to this.

This tension becomes particularly acute when one considers that the *Ratio* applies to over 13,500 Salesians in 138 countries, each with radically different cultural, religious and socio-political contexts. The document responds by establishing a hierarchy of tools — Ratio → Provincial Directory → Provincial Plan → Local Plan → Personal Plan — but the question remains open: to what extent is diversity legitimate before it leads to the fragmentation of the charism?

No. 13 states that *Pluralism in the manner of carrying out Salesian formation in line with the needs of a particular cultural context (C 101) requires that the charism be the basis of unity.* But the charism is not a mathematical concept; it cannot be easily measured. Who decides whether a local formation choice constitutes faithful inculturation or a departure from the charism? The issue is particularly significant in the light of the various international formation programmes, where those in formation come from Salesian backgrounds that are not always in perfect harmony. It is a delicate matter that can only be addressed by tackling, on a case-by-case basis, the delicate and never-resolved relationship between unity and diversity. Constant and faithful reference to the experience of Don Bosco and to the Salesian tradition serves as an important guiding principle.

(c) Initial and ongoing formation: the time-related tension

The *Ratio* overturns the common perception and states: *Initial formation gets its identity from formation understood as lifelong [...] Lifelong formation is the mother-idea and organizing principle of all that our Constitutions have to say on formation.*¹⁰³ It is not ongoing formation that depends on initial formation: it is the other way round. Yet the structure of the document (and the Congregation's actual practice) devotes the majority of its resources, tools, regulations and institutional attention to

¹⁰¹ *Ratio* no. 8.

¹⁰² *Ratio* no. 8.

¹⁰³ *Ratio* no. 74.

initial formation. Part II describes each stage of this in minute detail; ongoing formation is covered in Chapter 9, which is shorter.

There is therefore a tension between the founding statement (ongoing formation is the point of reference) and the documentary framework, in which initial formation is the practical centre of gravity. This is not a contradiction, but an asymmetry that must be acknowledged, one that invites us to develop a vision of learning that spans the whole of life.

I fear that the term ‘*ongoing formation*’ has become overused and has lost its driving force, whilst retaining its specific significance intact.

One term used by the *Ratio* to describe ongoing formation is ‘conversion’: ‘[By] *ongoing formation*, we mean an itinerary of the whole of life, both personal and community, [...] It is therefore a process of continuous conversion of the heart, “an intrinsic requirement of religious consecration” (VC 69).’¹⁰⁴ It should be noted that the ‘therefore’ does not mean that ongoing formation also entails conversion, but that, by definition, to be in a state of ongoing formation is to be in a state of continuous conversion. I believe that emphasising the word ‘conversion’ helps us to better understand ongoing formation, all the more so if we use the expression ‘*conversion of the heart*’, as found in the *Ratio*.¹⁰⁵ It is important to understand that formation, whether initial or ongoing, is not a path of ‘self-improvement’, but a relationship which, by its very nature, remains open. Formation is about touching the heart. Forming the heart is a difficult task. When the initial phases of formation come to an end, the Salesian’s heart is not yet fully formed for the rest of his life. When laziness and superficiality in formation take hold, they leave a residue of mediocrity within us.

*Formation understood as lifelong does not, therefore, refer to a set of activities organized by an institution for the updating or qualification of its members.*¹⁰⁶ nor is it a phase that begins *after* initial formation, almost a ‘second opportunity’. Instead, it is *the habitual form of living out our vocation*.¹⁰⁷ In this regard, the *Ratio* speaks of the stages of life,¹⁰⁸ united by ongoing conversion.

Another term we can draw from the document to maintain the time-related tension between initial formation and ongoing formation is ‘*docibilitas*’, which is explicitly defined in the Glossary:¹⁰⁹ *A responsive attitude to grace, an openness to the Spirit, the freedom to let ourselves be touched and educated by life, by persons, by existential situations* (and more extensively in no. 106).

The *docibilitas* of the *Ratio* is a disposition of the heart to allow oneself to be shaped by events, relationships and everyday life. The text states this explicitly: the aim is not to foster a generic docility, but to make the person truly *docibilis*, *forming a heart that is free to learn from the history of day-to-day living throughout one’s life*.¹¹⁰

Docibilitas does not replace the relationship between formation and conversion that we were discussing; it complements it. If ongoing formation is the ‘what’ (the lifelong journey) and conversion is the ‘where’ (the transformation of the heart), then *docibilitas* is the ‘how’: the concrete attitude,

¹⁰⁴Ratio no. 74.

¹⁰⁵Ratio no. 73.

¹⁰⁶Ratio no. 73.

¹⁰⁷Ratio no. 73.

¹⁰⁸Cf. *Ratio* no.644 and no.930.

¹⁰⁹Ratio p. 584

¹¹⁰Ratio no. 74.

the inner disposition that makes it possible for formation to be true conversion and not merely an accumulation of experiences.

Drawing on the monastic tradition that speaks of *studiositas*, we might say that the *Ratio* transfigures the monastic contemplative *studium* into an experiential and apostolic framework. *Docibilitas* is, in other words, a *studium vitae* rather than a *studium litterarum* – the latter which we nevertheless need and which cannot be limited to refresher courses.

These last two paths outlined – *conversion and docibilitas* – help us to adopt a more unified perspective on initial formation and ongoing formation. The question of terminology, specifically the use of the expression ‘ongoing formation’, remains, in my view, an open one.

d) The formee’s active role and the formator’s role: the pedagogical tension

The *Ratio* states that the formee is *a necessary and irreplaceable agent in his own formation*¹¹¹ and that young Salesians *are actively involved in their own formation*.¹¹² The *Ratio* emphasises this point, also noting that *vocational values are best passed on through a genuine family spirit and through the active involvement of younger confreres, enabling them to take responsibility for formative choices*.¹¹³ And with regard to intellectual formation, those in formation are identified as bearing *prime responsibility*.¹¹⁴ ‘*The challenge is to strengthen the “inner man”, that is, the attitude of continuous conversion, avoiding a sterile formality that does not help one mature*’ (GC29 31).¹¹⁵

Whilst recognising the active role of the candidate, a tension arises because the formator is called upon – particularly within institutional settings – to offer guidance regarding the candidate’s journey. These are delicate stages that require truth, prayer, honesty, parrhesia, and the ability to discern the signs of a genuine journey of conformity to Christ, as well as the *absence of any absolute counter-indications*, particularly in the early phases. In the appropriate settings, *it is a matter of ascertaining – during the various admission procedures and at other stages of discernment – whether the candidate has attained the necessary maturity to take on the corresponding commitments on the path of Salesian consecrated life*.

e) Charismatic identity and shared mission: the ecclesiological tension

The decree of promulgation says it clearly: *But precisely because of this growing closeness to a large number of lay people and members of the Salesian Family throughout the world, which reflects the synodal and communal ecclesiology that animates the Church, we Salesians are asked for ever greater fidelity and charismatic transparency*. No. 48 of the *Ratio* states that *shared formation between Salesians and lay people is therefore a priority*, and no. 72 states that *Charismatic communion among vocations does not imply a levelling or neglect of specific identities*.

¹¹¹ *Ratio* no. 74. It quotes John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992), no.69.

¹¹² *Ratio* no. 80.

¹¹³ *Ratio* no. 65.

¹¹⁴ *Ratio* no. 173.

¹¹⁵ *Ratio* no. 65.

The tension lies here: the more the mission is shared with the laity, the more the consecrated Salesian must be charismatically identified, whilst taking care that this does not lead to separation and/or clericalism. Let us bear in mind that GC29 criticises the lack of ability to live out the shared mission, and speaks of Salesians who are *not adequately prepared for collaboration with the laity*.¹¹⁶ It is an issue that requires, first and foremost, interiority.

The approach set out by the *Ratio* for maintaining this balance is *formation lived in shared mission, according to the style of the first Oratory: an experience typical of a Church that goes forth, in which the mission itself becomes a place of formation*.¹¹⁷ This theme has been taken up again by recent General Chapters and is, therefore, a work in progress, given that different states of life entail formation pathways and timeframes that are necessarily different and varied. The *Ratio* is, however, clear and decisive: *Given that we were born as a communion of vocations and sharing of gifts, we are not only formed in mission, but in a mission that is shared (cf. Charter, 10). We need, therefore, a formation that is shared*.¹¹⁸ I believe that this needs to be preceded by a concrete reflection on *shared life* in order to truly take root.

f) Formation for mission and formation in mission: the formative tension

This is the most distinctive new feature of the fifth edition of the *Ratio*, drawn from Pope Francis's address to the 28th General Chapter: *It is important to say that we are not formed for the mission, but that we are formed in the mission. Our whole life revolves around it, with its choices and priorities*.¹¹⁹ This is a genuine shift already foreshadowed in *Evangelii Gaudium*: *Genuine spiritual accompaniment always begins and flourishes in the context of service to the mission of evangelization [...] Missionary disciples accompany missionary disciples*.¹²⁰ Yet the formation structure described by the *Ratio* — prenovitiate, novitiate, postnovitiate, practical training, theology — is still, in its underlying logic, a chronological sequence in which one is first formed and then goes on mission. Practical training is the only phase explicitly lived out within the mission.

The tension lies between two poles which, when taken to extremes, are both misguided. If formation is confined solely to the mission, the risk is that of a pastoral approach lacking backbone and depth; whereas if formation is solely spiritual and intellectual, the risk is to offer a disembodied spiritual and academic preparation, where the Salesian community is experienced as a boarding school. The *Ratio* states: *We have been called and sent to poor young people at risk. Like Don Bosco and the first Salesians, we welcome them, form them and are in turn formed by them: without our poor young people we cannot become the Salesians we are called to be*.¹²¹ The issue is open to discussion and is also the subject of debate.

Expressions that help to strike the right balance are 'experience' and 'learning from experience'.¹²² The *Ratio* states: *Formation takes place first and foremost in daily life (GC24 43). Learning from*

¹¹⁶ *Ratio* no. 71.

¹¹⁷ *Ratio* no. 66.

¹¹⁸ *Ratio* no. 71.

¹¹⁹ The quote is found in the *Decree of Promulgation of the Ratio*.

¹²⁰ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 173.

¹²¹ *Ratio* no. 7.

¹²² Cf. *Ratio* nos. 121, 441, 457, 498.

*experience and community discernment, which the EPC experiences internally, are a natural place for shared formation.*¹²³ This does not exclude the need for specific moments of formation. And continuing in the pastoral sphere: *It is clear that at the heart of pastoral accompaniment lies the ‘experience’ of the values of the Salesian vocation, that is, discerning and responding to the voice of the Spirit in the experience of ministry (C 98, 119). We grow as educators and pastors by reflecting on pastoral experiences in a spirit of faith.*¹²⁴

GC29 offers us a perspective that challenges this polarisation: We recognise with gratitude that, in recent years, the Congregation has embarked on a significant journey towards personalised accompaniment, emphasising that *Formation is not primarily about programmes and structures, but about people: it is a process that aims at the growth of the confreres in their passion for Christ and for the young. Not rigid schemes, but living relationships* (GC29 29).¹²⁵ This text is highly significant both because it sets out the kind of formation the Salesian Congregation desires¹²⁶ and because, through the lens of personalisation, it can offer new avenues for formation in the mission.

8. It's Jazz time

From orchestra to jam sessions

Don Bosco - *They want me to state what my method is! Really... I would not know what it is myself. I have always gone along as our Lord inspired me and as the circumstances demanded.* The author of the *Biographical Memoirs* comments as follows: *Certainly these simple words say a lot! They do not mean, as Father Bartholmew Fascie points out, that Don Bosco was in the habit of drifting along without any directive, but that **he was not rigidly bound to any stereotyped pattern**, which might “restrict his freedom of action in the face of new initiatives or new demands.”*¹²⁷

Lk 24:15-16 - *While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were **kept from recognizing him**.*

In the orchestra of the Salesian mission, there are many different instruments called upon to play, and they are all valuable. This is precisely why we can only create music that is beautiful, infectious, endearing and powerful if we do it together. The important thing is that the musical theme is the same, that the instruments are in tune, and that the variations on the theme spring from the same passion for young people. I have always believed that our Salesian communities and our educative and pastoral communities must play from a single score under the humble direction of a conductor – who is himself part of the orchestra – capable of bringing out the best in everyone.

In the work drafted so far, however, a slightly different perspective emerges. The Constitutions, as set out in the *Ratio*, describe the Salesian as one who, *Living in the midst of the young and in constant contact with low-income 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* (C 119).¹²⁸ This is not a marginal observation.

¹²³ *Ratio* no. 71.

¹²⁴ *Ratio* no. 890.

¹²⁵ *Ratio* no. 184.

¹²⁶ Cf. Koldo Gutiérrez, *Una introduzione al Capitolo 1 della Ratio nella sezione “Aspetti generali della nostra formazione”*.

¹²⁷ *Biographical Memoirs*, XVIII, p. 96.

¹²⁸ *Ratio* no. 76.

In the section devoted to the stages of life, the *Ratio* goes so far as to state it almost as a thesis: *ongoing formation is not simply a series of initiatives or programs, but an attitude of openness to the grace that works within personal and communal history.*¹²⁹ Faithfulness, here, is not measured by how much of a pre-established path is followed but by the extent to which the person remains capable of actively listening to the unexpected and the unprecedented contained within the fabric of daily life: *it is in daily life that we learn to discern the voice of the Spirit in the events, joys and frailties we encounter along the way*¹³⁰ These are not calls to be wary of programmes as such, given that the *Ratio* itself recognises that a regular and structured approach is more likely to bear fruit,¹³¹ but rather not to regard them as the primary locus of formation. The programme remains a useful framework, but the process of formation cannot be separated from the ordinary fabric of encounters, struggles, the small surprises of each day, and the merits and scars of one's personal history, where the Spirit speaks in a language that no plan can fully anticipate. It is a guideline that calls upon both the formator and the person in formation to exercise the same virtue: the inner freedom to allow oneself to be surprised and amazed by what happens, without presuming to already be in control of the situation.

In light of this, it seems to me that the image of an orchestra performing a score is no longer appropriate. Another image comes to mind: that of a jam session at a jazz concert.

This is a performance in which the musicians have not decided in advance what to play, but all improvise on chord progressions and themes that have been assigned or are familiar to them. This creates a situation in which each individual expresses themselves musically, demonstrating their full potential, whilst at the same time mixing in with the others to create a single musical expression. The traditional roles of the instruments are set aside in favour of a process of mutual exchange through which each performer influences the others. In a jam session, the ability to interact musically and listen to one another is crucial in order to respond to what the various musicians are proposing. It is a matter of seizing upon a musical inspiration that arises from the improvisation of others. In this way, one musician's spark becomes another's brilliant idea, and notes that have grown tired can be revitalised by being reworked in a new way. In this context, even mistakes can become assets. On the other hand, the self-absorption of improvisers is detrimental and irritating when, proceeding independently, they ignore the ideas of others. Even the audience finds such excessive self-centredness hard to bear.

The challenge lies in recognising that others, too, can play something beautiful, even if it is different. The jam session is a clear example of how freedom and discipline can coexist: the freedom of improvisation stems precisely from a shared understanding of harmonic and rhythmic rules. The only score we need is trust: it is this that gives others the joy of existing and, therefore, of acting. *It is the Holy Spirit who gives rise to the Church's jam session, the rhythm of her youth. You see, one must not imagine the Church [ed.: formation] as a structure made of different Lego bricks that all slot together in exactly the right place, in the correct proportions. That would be a mechanical image of ecclesial communion. We might better think of it precisely as a symphonic relationship, of different notes that together give life to a composition. It is not a symphony where the parts are already written and assigned, but a jazz concert, where one plays following the inspiration shared in the moment. This is the rhythm of the future: jazz.*¹³²

¹²⁹ *Ratio, Meditatio*, p.341.

¹³⁰ *Ratio, Meditatio*, p.341.

¹³¹ *Ratio* no. 184.

¹³² Antonio Spadaro, *Crisi e futuro della Chiesa*, in *La Civiltà Cattolica - Quaderno* 4140, p.521-536, 17 December 2022.

Formation, the place of listening par excellence, cannot be separated from this act of listening in which the Spirit – who is always prophetic – weaves history in surprising, unprecedented and unplanned ways. Such is life. In jazz, it is from listening imbued with trust, amazement and wonder that a new piece of music is born. This is the answer to *one of the most serious temptations facing the Church today: [...] rigid formation schemes* (Pope Francis).¹³³

Although the leader of a jazz jam session does not have a formal role like an orchestra conductor, they do have certain specific characteristics. Among the qualities of a jam session leader are knowledge of a wide repertoire of jazz standards and commonly played pieces, an understanding of music theory and typical jazz structures such as chord progressions, the ability to coordinate the musicians present, decide the order of solos and ensure that everyone has the opportunity to play. Above all, the leader of a jazz jam session must be flexible, as there is no written score, and must be able to manage shared leadership amongst the musicians. The leader may emerge as an informal leader, but every musician has the opportunity to influence the direction of the session. In this context, the leader must be adept at recognising the unique qualities and creativity of each musician and channelling them into a communal, collaborative session setting. In short, the leader of a jazz jam session must combine musical knowledge, improvisational skills and communication skills to create an environment of learning and creativity, whilst keeping the session organised and enjoyable. Are these not precisely the qualities we would hope to find in a formator?

It is a way of entrusting the guidance of our formation to the Spirit who groans within us, in our works, and in young people (cf. Rom 8:26–27).

Ed. Fr Igino Biffi
Rome, 28 June 2026

¹³³Pope Francis, Address to participants in the course for rectors and formators of seminaries in Latin America, 10 November 2022.