Rome, 15 April 2015

Dear confreres,

We have just concluded the International Congress for Formators to the Consecrated Life here in Rome, with the theme “Living in Christ according to the form of life of the gospel” (*Perfectae caritatis* 2). It was a wonderful event that evoked a huge participation: we were 1,260 of us, men and women, from all over the world (many more had to be refused because of lack of space), among whom, I am happy to say, 27 Salesians.

I thought I would write to you to share some feelings and thoughts. First of all, the atmosphere: from the very beginning, there was an atmosphere of friendship, cordiality and simplicity, and in this the two bishops had a very big role to play: Cardinal Joao Braz de Avis, Prefect of the CIVCSA, and Archbishop José Rodriguez de Carballo, Secretary. The ‘table methodology’ also helped tremendously: we were seated in groups of 10 around tables, rather than in the classic auditorium rows. This enabled us to form ‘little communities’ and to easily engage in moments of sharing, of which there were many. Besides this, there were the talks (most of them good, and several even very good), workshops, video inputs, and panel discussions. I must make a mention of the moments of prayer: the whole congress, we might say, was enveloped in prayer, the prayer service on the first day, which I regret very much to have missed, the morning and evening sessions of prayer, assisted beautifully by the choir composed of our very own FMAs from different communities of Rome and the Legionaries of Christ.

The highlight of the congress was certainly the audience with the pope, who came across as very tired, but wonderfully inspiring as ever. I keep wondering how the man, with all the work that he has, manages to say just the right thing at the right time to the right people. Surely it is a question of “entrusting oneself to the Holy Spirit who teaches us what we must say at every occasion” (see his homily at the Chrism Mass, 2 April 2015). Almost as good was the final session, which was a panel consisting of three bishops, Cardinal B. Stella of the Congregation for the Clergy, Archbishop Zani of the Congregation for Catholic Education, and Archbishop Carballo.

Rather than reporting, let me try to put down some of the points that struck me.

* **Formation is a question of Christ being formed in us** (see Gal 4,19), of putting on the mind and heart (“sensibility”) of Christ (Phil 2,5). It is the work, first and foremost, of the Father, forming the face of the Son in us, making us sons in the Son. It is easy to see that this kind of formation is not something that ‘ends’ at perpetual profession or ordination. It is something that takes place over the whole of our life. And so, as Bernanos said, “Everything is grace.” There is no moment left out of the process of formation.
* **Ongoing formation** – ‘formazione permanente’ – is therefore the key idea, the basic and fundamental thing. And initial formation is not so much a ‘socialization,’ ‘a fitting into the structures,’ a matter of ‘order and discipline,’ but rather ‘learning to listen to one’s inner self,’ to identify there the work of God in us. Not so much docility, therefore but *docibilitas*, which might be translated as “willingness to learn.” Or else a permanent attitude of discernment, the contemplative intelligence that is able to see God in all things and everywhere.
* **Formation, therefore, is formation of the heart.** Mere change of behaviour is not formation. Cardinal Stella recalled the words of Pope Francis to the Union of Superiors General in November 2013: Formation is an art; it is not police work; it is formation of the heart. Otherwise we create monsters.
* **Formation is above all by contagion**. Formators, therefore, need to be authentic – not perfect, but authentic. (Carballo reported the formee who said to him after a conference: Don’t worry: today we do what you say; tomorrow we will do what you do.) The pope spoke of forming (he used the verb ‘plasmare’) in the heart of the young the heart of Christ, referring once again to Phil 2,5 and also to *Vita consecrata* 65, and this is done by testimony: “I am convinced that there is no vocational crisis where there are consecrated persons capable of transmitting, through their own personal testimony, the beauty of the consecrated life. And witness is fruitful…. This is your ministry, your mission. You are not just ‘masters’; you are above all witnesses to the following of Christ within your own charism.” Formation is also done by love: love is enkindled by love. The pope again: “One of the qualities of a formator is that of having a great heart for the young, in order to form in them great hearts, capable of welcoming all, hearts rich in compassion, full of tenderness. You are not just friends and companions in the consecrated life of those who are entrusted to you, but true fathers, real mothers, capable of demanding as well as giving them the maximum. Generate life, give birth to a religious life. And this is possible only by means of love, the love of fathers and of mothers.”
* Because we are not just masters but witnesses, we have to **take care of our personal formation**, rediscovering every day the joy of being disciples of Jesus.
* Our personal formation begins with **friendship with Christ**, the only Master. Either we are madly in love with Christ, or else with someone else. In the resurrection narratives, the pope said, the disciples are invited to “go back to Galilee,” to that place “where everything began.” The pope invited us to return to our personal Galilees, to the beginnings of our vocation, to rediscover there our first wonder and joy (‘stupore’). “Also our life began in a ‘Galilee’: every one of us has had an experience of Galilee, of an encounter with the Lord, that meeting which we cannot forget, but which often is covered over by things, by work, by restlessness, and even by sins and worldliness.”
* The **gospel is the vademecum**, the basic manual, of all formation – even before the Constitutions of each congregation.
* “**It is beautiful to be formators**, because it is a privilege to participate in the work of the Father who forms the heart of the Son in those whom the Spirit has called. Sometimes we look at this service as a burden, as something that takes us away from something more important. But this is a deception, a temptation. The mission is important, but it is equally important to form to mission….” (Pope Francis)
* We need to **believe in our young people**. The pope reminded us, as we saw already, that one of the great qualities of a formator is that he has a great heart for the young. “It is not true that the young people of today are mediocre or less generous; but they need to experience that ‘it is more blessed to give than to receive!’ (Acts 20,35), that there is great freedom in a life of obedience, great fruitfulness in a virgin heart, great riches in not possessing anything.”
* Cardinal B. Stella, who is Prefect of the Congregation for Clergy that deals with requests for dispensations, remarked that departures are often due to poor discernment. The signs of future crisis are always present in early life.Good **discernment** is therefore absolutely important. Formators need to be capable of paying attention to these signs. The great danger in formation is formalism: observing all the rules is not a good criterion of formation. What is needed therefore is an adequate formation of formators. This is a permanent and grave exigence. As far as selection of formators is concerned, the words of Pius XI to bishops in 1935 are still extremely powerful and relevant: when you are looking for directors, novice masters, spiritual guides, the pope said, choose your best priests, removing them if necessary even from work that is apparently very important. Make sure they are people who can teach by their example and by their word. Pope Francis himself insisted on courageous and competent discernment: “Hence the need to be lovingly attentive to the journey of each one and evangelically demanding in every phase of the formative journey, beginning from vocational discernment, so that the crisis of quantity might not lead to a much more serious crisis of quality. And this is the danger. Vocational discernment is important: all those who know about the human personality – psychologists spiritual fathers, spiritual mothers – tell us that those young people who unconsciously have some lack of balance or some problem of equilibrium or deviation, unconsciously also search for security in strong structures that will protect them. And here enters discernment: knowing how to say no. But don’t throw them out: no, no. ‘I accompany you, go, go, go…’ And as we accompany the entry, let us accompany also the departure, so that he or she might find a path in life, with the necessary help. Not that kind of protection that is ‘food for today and hunger tomorrow.’”
* “Thank you, dear formators, for your humble and discreet service, for the time given to listening – the apostolate of ear –, for the time dedicated to **accompaniment** and to the care of each of your young people.” Here the pope adds a recommendation to patience: God has a virtue about which we don’t speak so much: patience. “God is patient. He knows how to wait. You also, learn this, this attitude of patience, which is often a bit of martyrdom.” As far as accompaniment is concerned, “we should spare neither time nor energy.” Archbishop Carballo echoed this, and even said that the personal chat was the main instrument of formation.
* Along the lines of the pope’s insistence on being lovingly attentive and evangelically demanding in all the phases of formation, Carballo used a colourful phrase: no decaf formation, **no “Formation Lite.”**
* The **mission to the peripheries** is necessary, but it should be **accompanied**. The formators need to be present! Otherwise we have experiments but not experience. Then again, pastoral involvement should be proportionate to the phase of formation. It should not obscure and overwhelm other important values such as community, study, prayer, time for oneself. Be careful of ‘pastoralism’! (Carballo)
* The **quinquennium** is a delicate phase: we need to make sure the young religious / priest is accompanied and has a mentor; we also have to take care of the kind of ministry to which he is assigned. In almost all the requests for dispensation, said Cardinal Stella, there is mention of a ‘spiritual cooling down’ or a marginalization of prayer and the practices of piety. There is the danger of ‘martalismo’ that Pope Francis spoke about to the Roman Curia, the Martha tendency to exaggerate work, to the neglect of the “the better part,” and this leads to spiritual weakness, lowering of defences, superficiality, and eventually defection.

We thank the Lord for the gift of this Congress. It was a beautiful moment, a moment of grace, a precious moment of ongoing formation for those who took part. Good news calls to be shared, so it has been good to be able to write this letter to all of you, dear confreres who are involved with the work of formation. I hope you will derive as much enthusiasm, inspiration and encouragement from it as we did from the congress itself.

Affectionately in Christ,



Ivo Coelho, SDB

Councillor for Formation