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Cultivating Self-Awareness & Maturity Through Human Formation Processes

We can recount many sad stories concerning candidates who have proceeded through vocational inquiry and discernment. Many departed or were asked to leave during Postulancy or during the early years of diocesan philosophy or seminary. In addition, looking around the community and diocese, we are aware of people many years professed and/or ordained about whom we are left scratching our heads. We wonder, how in the world did we encourage and permit them to continue as consecrated persons? We know that within Institutes of Consecrated Life, Societies of Apostolic Life, and Dioceses that there are many people with harsh and immature personalities, significant emotional problems, and troublesome behavioral histories. They have wreaked havoc on many individuals within communities and society.

When these stories are traced back and reflected upon, it becomes clear that these individuals' vocational discernment and early initial formation years lacked proactive and helpful human formation structures and processes. Thus, specific helpful processes were lacking in order to facilitate persons-in-formation moving toward self-awareness and full maturity. Our research and experience at FCS indicate clearly that a holistic approach to the vocational inquiry and discernment stage requires being proactive. It necessitates prioritizing human formation processes. Of most importance, it calls for formators to be trained and formed through in-depth, tried and true human formation processes.

Our Church calls for comprehensive formation that leads to self-awareness and fullness of maturity. Without well-designed, comprehensive, interlacing, and consistent human formation processes supported throughout the early years of initial formation, self-awareness and fullness of maturity will be left to chance, to crossing our fingers and hoping for the best. Growing into fullness of maturity, becoming a reflective human being, and maturing into a confident and competent human being do not just happen. They have everything to do with the heart and the transformation and cultivation of the human heart. Self-awareness and maturity has less to do with functional professional training.

Every Province, community, and Diocese has in the past and continues today to be impacted by the hurt and suffering resulting from the lack of comprehensive human formation of many of its members during their early years of initial formation. For FCS, proactive human formation includes cultivating with persons-in-formation researched, structured, and organized sets of practical, consistent, comprehensive, in-depth, and dovetailing human formation oriented

processes (Human Formation: Transforming and Cultivating the Human Heart, Structured Autobiography and the Formative Process of Awareness, Being a Boy Becoming a Man, Being a Girl Becoming a Woman, Reflective Living, Reflective Leadership).

These processes focus and support the transformation and cultivation of the human heart. They are processes based in the art of *Reflective Living*, reflecting on human experience and extracting its meaning for everyday living. Human formation processes are further focused on cultivating dispositions of the heart, dispositions that unclog and open up (e.g. appreciation, gentleness, humility). These are often dispositions we did not learn and practice while growing up within our particular family or culture.

Our spiritual, community, professional, and ministerial dimensions depend on self-awareness and fullness of maturity, and on an open and receptive heart. Often quoted from *Vita Consecrata*, this sentence punctuates the urgency for human formation: "Formation is a dynamic process by means of which individuals are converted to the Word of God in the depths of their being and, at the same time, learn how to discover the signs of God in earthly realities" (VC 68). We "discover the signs" with human eyes that see, human ears that hear, and a human heart that feels.

Much has happened during life's journey that impacted and continues to impact candidates for consecrated life. Many are left with dimmed eyes, blocked up ears, and clogged hearts. Vocational discernment and initial formation need to uncover and explore the human areas that not only facilitate but also hinder living out the life of a consecrated person in a joyful, helpful, peaceful manner.

Human formation is not so much about healing past family pain, resolving emotional problems, and remolding self-image and self-esteem. Rather, human formation addresses and attends to the heart. In cultivating openheartedness, Reflective Living disciplines, and practicing heart-opening dispositions (reflection, appreciation, gentleness, humility, hospitality, and simplicity), psychological problems and past family pain are slowly placed into perspective and context. Their unhelpful impact diminishes as we cultivate and consciously live out heart-opening dispositions.

Furthermore, fullness of maturity comes about through self-awareness. The Church has requested that candidates for the consecrated life grow in heightened self-awareness. There are four important dimensions to self-awareness.

First, self-awareness is the knowledge and appreciation of who we are, from where we have come, and the significant people, events and things in our lives that have shaped and formed us in helpful/openhearted ways and in unhelpful/closed-hearted ways.

Second, self-awareness also includes attentiveness to the residual impact that past experiences continue to have on us. The impact has supported our wonderfulness and giftedness. It has also fostered insecurities within us (feeling lousy about self, feeling unimportant, rejected, not good enough, unworthy). This results in unhelpful compensations (addictions, hunger for

control and power, overwork, worrying). Helpful and unhelpful impact from our family of origin influences our trust and distrust, security and insecurity, well-being and shame.

Third, self-awareness involves insight into *how* people, events, and things impact us today, in the here and now, in helpful/openhearted and unhelpful/closed-hearted ways. For example, how does the harshness of a co-worker in ministry impact me? How does the way that I enter into my tasks today impact me, influence the way I think, feel, and thus behave? How does community life impact me?

Fourth and most essential is a self-awareness that has insight into *how*: *How* do my thoughts, feelings, and behaviors have helpful and unhelpful impact on others? Though we are not responsible for how other people react or respond to our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, it is essential to be aware of the way that we have helpful and unhelpful impact on others. This fourth part of self-awareness leads to choice and freedom. By possessing self-awareness about my impact on others, this may lead me to alter my thoughts and thus behavior in a particular situation.

The challenge remains for formators accompanying people in vocational discernment and throughout initial formation to go about cultivating self-awareness, promoting a human formation plan, and executing the plan in a way that will lead to full maturity. In this way, we will not repeat the mistakes of the past. We will be most helpful in assisting persons-in-formation with cultivating self-awareness and maturity.