


WHAT IS CHRISTIAN
FORMATION
AND IN PARTICULAR
FORMATION FOR US
SECULAR FRANCISCANS?

by **Benedetto Lino OFS**



WHAT IS FORMATION?

The word 'formation' contains two parts: *form* and *a(c)tion*. Its meaning is, therefore, an *action that gives form*. The meaning rests on what we mean by *form*, the form to give. As we know, the word *form* implies a sense of harmony, of beauty. *Formosis*, in Latin, means, in fact, 'beautiful', which gives joy, peace and ultimate realisation. Consequently, to *form*, and *formation* mean to give form to what has none or to what needs to be improved or perfected.

The same word *form*, moreover, cannot but remind us of the expression '*form of life*' [evangelical]. But what is a form of evangelical life? It is 'adopting a life style according to the gospel'. And what is the gospel? The gospel [εὐαγγέλιον] is the good news of God who reveals himself as the God who loves without reservations, who gives himself up to us in the Son, and who 'so loved the world that he gave his only Son' [John 3.16]. The gospel, therefore, is the *epiphany* ['manifestation'] of Jesus Christ, Word of the Father, true Man and true God, one God in and with the Father and the Holy Spirit. **The form of evangelical life is, therefore, the form of Christ.**

Thus, for Christians: **FORMATION consists in TAKING AND GIVING the form of Christ**, the *perfect Man*, according to the project God has for each one of us: his vocation for us.

'WE MUST START AFRESH FROM CHRIST' *

Christ is the book of Life. Jesus Christ is our Formation Manual, the living Jesus, with his words, his life, his actions, his total gift of self, his Spirit. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. As a result of this, when we speak of formation, it is essential to remember, and to remind others, that we must always **START AFRESH FROM CHRIST!**

* John Paul II, *Novo Millennio ineunte*, nn. 28-29

There are no other methods; there is no other content

Let us pray the Lord to enlighten us and to grant us his grace. With full confidence, let us pray to the Lord to show our way and to help us to embrace it and walk in it to the very end.



recognised him as an **ALTER CHRISTUS**, another Christ.

The most effective and credible also for us, Secular Franciscans, cannot but be a **living manual** after the example of St Francis, who precisely said: *I have done my part, Christ will teach you yours*.*

Each one of us, by letting Christ teach us, **becomes a ‘living manual’ for his/her brethren**.

The flame and the warmth of love and faith can be transmitted only **by those who want them and render themselves open to the action of the Spirit** and to the living transmission of authentic and credible **witness**.

Only when all this is accomplished, and only then, manuals can be useful. After having received the flame, the enthusiasm, the vital energy and the necessary nourishment also for the mind, we will be able to go back over and retrace, with the help of the manuals, the journey we have already made and full interiorise it, assimilate it and, thus, become other living witnesses and effective formators.

This is what happened with the first disciples, with the early Christians who set the world on fire—while we risk extinguishing this very fire!

Francis, like a new Christ, inflamed his companions, his fellow-citizens, the people of his time and he continues to set the world on fire, just like Jesus’ first disciples.

We, too, must ‘set the world on fire’, dear brothers and sisters, and to do so we need *true faith, certain hope, perfect love, deep humility, sense and knowledge, that we may carry out the Lord’s holy and true command*, exactly as Francis asked the Crucifix after he had revealed to him his mission. We must multiply and, *by living contact*, we must transmit, form, and inflame.

* *Major Life of St Francis*, St Bonaventure, XIV, 3

EVERY ITINERARY OF CHRISTIAN FORMATION must look at JESUS, THE MASTER, who personally formed his apostles and disciples. He himself offers us the method: ‘Come and see’ [John 1.39], ‘I am the way, the truth and the life’ [John 14.6]. His style is the mandatory model for all formators.

Francis of Assisi had well understood this method and clearly witnessed it when, in the imminence of his death, he said to his brethren: ‘*I have done what is mine; may Christ teach you what is yours*’. *

CHRISTIAN FORMATION must provide for every person the most adequate conditions to open one’s soul to Christ and concretely to meet Christ.

The centre of gravity of the itinerary of Christian Formation rests on the event of **the encounter with the living person of Jesus Christ: he is the itinerary**.

The FRANCISCAN FORMATION ITINERARY must be a school in which we are taught and teach always to start afresh from Christ, like Francis. No matter what stage of formation we are at.

MAIN PROBLEMS OF FORMATION TODAY

I have chosen to start with these fundamental remarks because I have the impression that the formation which is implemented nowadays almost everywhere, is not sufficiently centred on what is essential to shape up genuine one hundred per cent Christ-like Christians, like Francis. Formation seems to swing between two extremes: on the one hand, it concentrates too much on methodologies and mostly intellectual teachings, though remaining at generally superficial levels concerning the spiritual and existential aspects; and on the other, in many cases, it remains at a pure and simple devotional level.

* *Second Life of St Francis*, Thomas of Celano, CLXII, 214

It is hard to come across significant results, as a consequence of formation, especially in the direction of a true *conversion-transformation towards a Christ-shaped existence*, the only one which may enable us to accomplish the Eternal Project of the Father: the sharing into the Divine Life. We usually content ourselves with ‘just’ learning a series of things and settle for a ‘weak belonging’ without a firm identity, devoid of a true personality. And, while, perhaps, we do learn even many things (mostly notions), however, *nothing seems to change concretely in our lives!* We have often the impression that, despite the years spent in formation, everything glides over us, hardly leaving any trace.

In formation, it is important not to tackle complex intellectual matters until and unless we have first made sure that **we have established a true personal relationship with Jesus Christ**, that we are truly converted. It is not sufficient to have ‘learned’ just what we ‘are supposed to know’ about Jesus Christ.

“...like the first disciples on the road to Caesarea Philippi, like every generation, like each one of us, Jesus urges us to respond again to a double question. The first is not too compromising: ‘Who do people say I am?’ [Mk 8.27]; the second pushes us up against the wall: ‘**But you, who do you say I am?**’ [Mk 8.29]. This is the central question in our life. Jesus does not ask us: ‘What do the Gospels say?’. Starting from the gospel, he is wanting us to give a **personal answer**...No one will be able to respond on behalf of someone else.” *

When Jesus calls his first disciples, he does not choose them from among the ‘wise men’, the scholars, but rather from the humble ones, he chooses very concrete persons: fishermen. And yet, he chooses them to become *formators* for the whole world! Jesus was not in search of the deep culture of the intellect, in the first place, but rather he was looking for a true conversion of the heart. He needed to make sure that those men did love him from the depths of their souls: subsequently, he would send his Spirit who lead

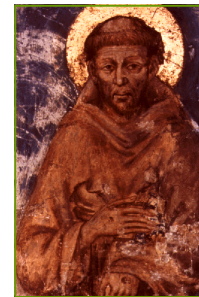
* R Etchegaray, *Jésus, vrai Homme, vrai Dieu*, p 11-12

believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many of you were powerful, not many of you were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption; therefore, as it is written, “Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord.” When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.’

We must form ourselves to be and not to appear (intelligent).

The saints who have had a great impact on the history of Christianity were simple people (not ignorant) who shunned intellectualism. The correct attitude is to learn as much as we can but to use what we learn to stay simple and humble.



Francis strived during his whole life to conform entirely to Christ. He adopted the only valid method and the sole goal of Christian formation: **SEQUELA CHRIST**, the following of Christ. He accomplished his journey in an admirable manner to the point of receiving the seal by God himself through a visible and tangible identification in bodily sharing Christ’s wounds. And the Church has

explicit formation.

7. The attitude of formators is, in most cases, that of a ‘teacher’ who, many a time, dominates and commands. Fortunately, there are happy exceptions everywhere—but they are rare.

Therefore, taking into account these still widespread attitudes, I would like to recapitulate now on **WHAT IS NOT ‘FORMATION’**.

- Formation is **not** academic teaching
- Formation is **not** culture: it creates it
- Formation is **not** more or less impersonal conferences
- Formation is **not** ‘materials’, paper manuals or audio-visuals
- Formation is **not** a series of devotional common-places
- Formation is **not** catechism; it presupposes it [catechism is formation on the basic instruction in the Faith that must precede the journey in a specific vocation]

We should not expect anything highly intellectual from a Formation course. Let us not render vain God’s simplicity and the true conversion of the heart—I Cor 1.17b-2.2

‘...not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart.” Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through he folly of what we preach to save those who

them to the complete truth [John 16.13].

The risen Lord, before leaving this world, asks Peter the same question three times: ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me [ἀγαπας με], more than these others do?...Simon, son of John, do you love me [ἀγαπας με]?...Simon, son of John, do you love me [φιλεις με = do you really care for me]? Feed my sheep’ [John 21.15-17]. Notice that what Jesus asks is expressed by the Greek verb ἀγαπαω which means ‘to love’, and Peter answers always with the verb φιλεω which means ‘to love’ but more in the sense of ‘to care for’, at the end Jesus contents himself with φιλεω! *

As we have just said, with rare exceptions, we swing, in our fraternities, between a devotional approach, which remains on the surface and is often devoid of any consistency, and an intellectualistic approach which tends to be devoid of spirituality. Unfortunately, these approaches lead us nowhere.

This, however, is not a typical situation of just our Fraternities. It is a fairly spread phenomenon in the whole Church. We have the impression that it is sufficient to ‘study’ and learn a number of

* Two Greek verbs are used to mean ‘to love’: *phileo* which means ‘to have affection’ and expresses tenderness and trust, and *agapao* which corresponds to a religious attachment which translates into a free obedience, a faithfulness and a service. Some commentators consider there is no reason to underline a difference between these two verbs and that they ought to be considered synonymous. Nevertheless, the subtle but significant differences assume their entire sense in this crucial dialogue. In the first two questions, Jesus uses *agapao* and Peter answers always with *phileo*. Peter, actually, intends to express his deep friendship without, by this, necessarily implying his fidelity (since he has denied him). The third time Jesus himself uses the verb *phileo*, thus showing to Peter that he accepts his friendship and that, without it, he does not demand an oblation love. Between the disciples and the Master, both types of love find their place. However, the first two questions, formulated with the verb *agapao*, have in fact called the disciples to a kind of love that will lead him to give his life just as the Master has given his. Affection and the gift of one’s life for the person we love, are intimately connected. [cf John 15.13f, where love/ἀγαπη is given for the friends/φίλοι]

things and the game is over! So, we end up having people who can probably teach something, but...do these people transmit also a living faith in action, contagious emotions, intimate convictions which go beyond the merely intellectual sphere?

‘...Today, when reading certain papers by historians, theologians or exegetical scholars, I have the impression that Jesus Christ is the object of anatomy lessons, to anatomical dissections, from which it is almost impossible to recognise his living person as “true God and true Man”. *

THE HEART AND THE GOAL OF FORMATION

The **Formation** that, on the contrary, must be implemented by a formator **must be** a living and impelling transmission

- of **faith**
- of the **personal discovery of God** which has transformed us into new creatures
- of the **truths that have opened our eyes and have given immediate and ultimate sense to our life**
- of the **experience of living of Christ and in Christ**, of remaining in him and he in us
- of the **beauty and joy of our common vocation**
- of the **ardour** to accomplish God’s project for us.

It is necessary to observe closely the Divine Master. He is the only valid and indispensable point of reference. He calls some people (humble and concrete). These people follow him and start sharing everything with him. Jesus, little by little, teaches them the fundamental elements of God’s revelation. He uses simple and intuitive images, taken from everyday life, demonstrating to us that there cannot be any message without comprehension.

He shows us, also, that it is possible to reveal very deep truths without using too complex and abstruse language. The disciples, certainly, do understand a number of things but they are not

* R Etchegaray, *Op Cit*, p 13

- results** of the formation received.
3. Formation in the local Fraternities is usually entrusted to Seculars or, still quite often, to Religious, who sometimes have no formation on the OFS or on the specific problems of the laity.
 4. The formators of the local Fraternities are usually the persons elected during the local Chapters as ‘*responsible for formation*’, irrespective of whether these persons may or may not be suitable and prepared as formators. We are still rooted in the belief that the people elected as *responsible for formation* must be the formators. It is not necessarily so. The responsibility of the persons elected as *responsible for formation* consists in: **conceiving and developing projects** that may be suitable to satisfy the **needs of the people** and of the **concrete situations of the fraternities**; **submit** them to the respective Councils for the discussion and approval; and to **implement** them through **competent persons** who can do it—obviously including those who have been elected if they are capable of doing it. Election *per se* does not bring about the infusion of science and wisdom from on high.
 5. The formation that is implemented in the vast majority of the local Fraternities in the world is based on a **one-way transmission** of catechetical notions, devotional practices, narrations and typical common-places on the life of St Francis. Formation is usually done without any verification, without a real discernment of vocation. The majority of people who give formation sessions do not have a precise idea of what is the nature and identity of OFS and of Secular Franciscans.
 6. Formation rarely aims at an authentic development, at a spiritual growth and at a living experience of Fraternity and prayer, as fundamental elements of the formation itself. Exhaustive or superficial as it may be, formation is almost always based on things to learn, to memorise, a nourishment for the intellect rather than for the ‘whole’ person, in his/her journey of conversion. The word ‘conversion’, applied to the individual itinerary of the candidates, is rarely heard in formation and less still, is it the object of concrete and

THE SECOND PILLAR of the Franciscan itinerary is **the undoubtedly central place of the Word of God and of the Eucharist**, heard and celebrated with the true Church spirit.

THE THIRD AND FOURTH PILLARS are the **preference for the poor** and the **priority given to the brethren**.

The proposal for a Franciscan formation must favour **frequent and prolonged periods of time to be with the Lord**, to see, contemplate and learn with him **to burn in the fire of love, which is the foundation of fraternity and the source to be able to live as servants and minors, subject to all**. *

THE PREVAILING SITUATION OF FORMATION IN OUR OFS FRATERNITIES TODAY

After having met with many local fraternities in various parts of the world in the last forty five years, I feel I can draw the following conclusions:

1. Formation is always done at the level of the local Fraternities and, necessarily, with whatever means are available on the spot. Most of the time these means are insufficient and often they are inadequate. Much too rarely, formation is done according to precise projects, structured on the points we have described above, and taking into account the real characteristics of the candidates.
2. In the course of my Franciscan life, I have never found true and proper PROJECTS for a **systematic** formation at **regional/national** level 'TO FORM FORMATORS'. Normally, generic formation meetings are organised a couple of times a year but rarely can they be considered true 'schools of formation for formators' with **precise programmes** for a **systematic** development to be implemented over a **sufficiently prolonged period of time** (at least 3-4 years) with **reasonably frequent meetings** and **verification of the**

* cf Francis & Clare: the complete works, *Second Letter to the Faithful*, 47

capable of detaching themselves completely from traditional teachings. They love him but, even if they have left everything behind, they do not yet live in a true intimate loving relationship, sharing with him. The disciples need a complete upsetting of their lives, the death and resurrection of Jesus, the loss of every point of reference in order to interiorise* and bring to fruition what they have learned.

Now, the candidates who want to join the Order and start formation are already Christians. They have received a basic instruction. We can compare them to the disciples before the death of Jesus. They, also, have heard many things but perhaps they have not really understood! For this reason, a formation worthy of this name must, first of all, help the candidates to enter into a true living and intimate relationship with Jesus. This is the very first goal. Once this goal has been reached, everything they will learn will have its natural centre in Jesus Christ.

FRANCISCAN FORMATION

FRANCISCAN FORMATION is to give the form of Christ, according to the vocation which God has called us, where **Francis is the model** of how we should follow Jesus.

Francis of Assisi, due to his total conformation to Christ, **is a PRIVILEGED ICON OF FORMATION** for all, but **above all** and in a **paradigmatic way for all Franciscans**.

The first element in the vocational process of St Francis, which is absolutely relevant in considering him as an Icon of Formation, is the **PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS CHRIST**, a **relationship** which is characterised by **radicality, totality, permanence**.

The most concrete thing that happened in the life of Francis was that the Lord **granted him** to start a life of penance and **led him**

* Lk 6.20, 'Blessed are you, who are poor'; Matt 5.3, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit'. We must strip ourselves of everything we have and are in order to be able to open up the entire truth and have a vital relationship with Jesus Christ!

among the lepers. We must be deeply aware of this reality, which surpasses us in every way: **the Lord is always the first who acts.** It is he who grants, who takes the initiative and who leads. *1 He guides us to **familiarise ourselves with the Spirit of the Lord and his holy activity**, which we must desire above all else.
*2



THE ART OF FORMATION, or better said, OF FORMATORS, is to lead, by accompanying them, the brothers and sisters to the encounter where he who takes the initiative and brings the work to completion is the Spirit of the Lord.

It is necessary to help those who are being formed to **withdraw from their selves** to familiarise with the Spirit of the Lord and his holy activity and let him reshape, remould them.

THE FRANCISCAN FORMATION JOURNEY begins from the CONTEMPLATION OF THE MYSTERY OF THE HOLY TRINITY, which is a reality of communion and total gift of self, and from the CONTEMPLATION OF THE HUMILITY OF THE INCARNATION OF THE SON OF GOD who did not withhold anything for himself, but instead offered himself totally for the sake of love. The contemplation of this mystery must lead us to a journey of progressive **disappropriation** of self and to a growing adhesion to Jesus Christ, poor and crucified.

FOR THIS REASON, THE FIRST ‘FORMATION EXERCISES’ MUST LEAD CANDIDATES (formators and those who have to be formed) TO EXPERIENCE THE ‘VIBRANT

*1 Francis & Clare: the complete works, *Testament*, 1-2

*2 Francis & Clare: the complete works, *Later Rule*, 8

EXCITEMENT’ AND THE ‘EMOTION’ TO STAND BEFORE THE MYSTERY OF SUCH A WONDERFUL ‘CONDESCENDENCE’ , TO THE POINT OF GIVING THEMSELVES UP AND TO ADHERE TOTALLY TO THE LORD.

Formation, and above all, the initial formation for its fundamental and paradigmatic character, should attach a very special attention to this point.

The first condition to starting a formation process is to experience the **gratuitousness of the call. To be introduced into God’s Project, we need to be called.**

‘The first work the blessed Francis undertook...was to build a house of God; he did not try to build a new one but he repaired an old one, restored an ancient one. He did not tear out the foundation, but he built upon it...for *no one can lay a foundation other than the one that has been laid, which is Jesus Christ* [I Cor 3.11].*1

Francis did not start a personal project nor did he dedicate himself to realise himself by his own personal initiative and according to his personal criteria: he put himself at the service of God’s own work.

The **grace of obedience** is the first sign to verify the authenticity of the call. **The obedience in letting oneself be lead by the Lord is a sign of vocation, of an authentic call.**

THE CORNERSTONES OF THE FRANCISCAN FORMATION—actually, any Christian formation

THE FIRST PILLAR of the Franciscan formation itinerary is undoubtedly the primacy of the **encounter with Christ**, to the point of *having the mind of Christ* [cf I Cor 2.16; Phil 2.5]. *2

*1 *First Life of St Francis*, Thomas of Celano, VIII, 18

*2 John Paul II, *Novo Millennio ineunte*, n. 39