

THE ROLE OF ACCOMPANIMENT IN SEMINARY FORMATION

Ashley Alphonso (ashley.alphonso@yahoo.co.in)
Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune

Abstract

Forming young hearts and minds in the steps of Jesus the Good Shepherd is both a challenging and a delicate task, because it involves ‘molding’ young persons into likenesses of Jesus the Good Shepherd. Paying attention to vocations to priesthood, Pope Francis says that they are like “diamonds in the rough which need to be worked with care through formation”.¹ The Pope speaks about the preciousness of the vocation of each of the formees/seminarians and the care to be taken to nurture them. The best every formator can do in the formation of the seminarians is to look up to God and His Son Jesus as the model and appropriate God’s style of formation. This paper explores the formative style of God as found in the Bible, elaborates the Church’s attempt to carry forward God’s mission of forming His chosen ones, and deals with the challenges involved in seminary formation. It also proposes four different perspectives for the formators to accompany the seminarians.

Key Words: Accompaniment, Detachment, Formees, Pastoral, Presumptuous, Sacrament

1. Formation in the Bible

God begins His formative process as and when the people respond to His invitation with affirmation. The approach that God adopts to form His people is one of ‘accompaniment’. Accompaniment is like walking together, side by side, in all aspects of a person’s life, such as a person’s joys and sorrows, ups and downs of life. A cursory glance in the Bible reveals that those who are called have difficulties not only in responding to, but also in living their call. God and His Son Jesus never abandon anyone in their struggles to live their call. They accompany them in their formation. God’s accompaniment has a positive effect on the lives of those accompanied. They grow with great maturity and responsibility. We have a number of examples, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, of people who have responded to God’s invitation and experienced His accompaniment.

1.1 Formation in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament though there are many chosen ones, this paper mentions only of Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah and the chosen people of Israel. These are discussed because each of them helps in exploring different styles of God’s accompaniment in the formation of His chosen ones. First, God assures them of His accompanying presence. Those called have their doubts in understanding God’s call. Abraham doubts the promise of a son (Cf. Gen 15:2); Moses, when invited to go to Egypt to deliver the people of Israel from the slavery of the Egyptians, expresses his unworthiness (Cf. Exod 3:11) and inability on account of his speech

¹ Author Unknown, “Pope Francis: The Priestly Vocation is a Treasure,” in *Rome Reports* [article on-line] (accessed 6 February 2015); available from www.romereports.com/pg158576-pope-francis-the-priestly-vocation-is-a...; Internet.

(Cf. Exod 4:10). Jeremiah too in a similar vein expresses his hesitancy to accept God's call, claiming that he was but a mere child (Cf. Jer 1:6). The people of Israel too wonder the presence of God in their afflictions in Egypt. Nonetheless all of them are assured of God's accompanying presence. God accompanies all of them in their struggles and difficulties. Second, God is patient in His accompaniment. God does not force Himself upon them rather prepares them to be receptive (Cf. Exod 19:5).

Each of these above mentioned people have their own weaknesses. Abraham for fear of being killed lies to Pharaoh (Cf. Gen 12:18-19) and Abimelech (Cf. Gen 20:2-3) that Sarah is his sister.² Though his lies do not go well with God, God is patient and forgiving towards Abraham. Jeremiah on account of all the ordeal he goes through in dealing with the kings, princes and spiritual leaders of his time, prays to God for vengeance on his persecutors (Cf. Jer 15:15). God is patient in listening to Jeremiah's grievances, only to mold him later into a patient, forgiving and courageous leader. Imitating God in His patience and understanding is an important element in today's formation.

The fruits of God's accompaniment is that Abraham grows to be a perfect model of faith; Moses grows in patience (Cf. Exod 14-17), docility (Cf. Exod 4:18), discernment (Cf. Exod 18:13-27), humility (Cf. Num 12:3),³ leadership, fortitude, and courage. The people of Israel come to the conclusion that acceptance of, and adherence to, the Decalogue is the path towards their holistic growth. Jeremiah realizes that it is because of the presence and power of God that he is able to accept his sufferings and do his work effectively.⁴ This understanding makes him persevere in his call until the last moment of his life. The God who calls and forms people in the Old Testament continues to do so in the New Testament where Jesus and his disciples who perfect a model for the formators as well as the formees in formation.

1.2 Formation in the New Testament

Jesus the incarnate Word is the formator *par excellence* in the New Testament. This is because from being in the form of God he assumes human nature (Cf. Phil 2:6-10) only to be formed by God. Jesus shows the willingness to be formed through the agency of Mary and Joseph. The formative journey of Jesus invites formees and formators alike, into a deeper union with God, and a growth in the virtues of humility and openness. After having undergone a formative journey accompanied by God and the persons of Mary and Joseph, Jesus accompanies the Apostles on their formation. To Jesus, each of them was unique as each was created in the image and likeness of God. Jesus' formative style invites every formator to approach and form his formees in and through their own individuality. The fruits of Jesus' accompaniment are seen in their lives – they grew unto their Master Jesus Christ. The traits are being present, patient, considerate, and merciful and also accepting them as

² Antony Tharekadavil, "The Call of Abraham and the Formation of the Chosen People," *Bible Bhashyam* 29, no. 2 (June 2003): 137.

³ Nirmala Kannamundayil, *Formative Accompaniment: An Emmaus Experience* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2011), 143.

⁴ Thomas Kayyalaparampil, "Jeremiah's Encounter with God," *Bible Bhashyam* 5, no. 1 (March 1979): 35.

they are and believing in their capacity to grow. In the case of the formees Jesus and his disciples lay the path of humility and openness to be formed under the guidance of their formators.

2. Development of Seminary Formation in the Church

The word 'seminary' is derived from the Latin word *seminarium* which was commonly used to describe a place where young seedlings were prepared for eventual transplantation.⁵ The word *seminarium* in ecclesiastical terminology is understood as a special type of school dedicated to the spiritual, moral and intellectual formation of the clergy. However, in today's usage the term seminary designates a place where formation is directed towards the total or holistic development of the person aspiring to become a priest⁶ which involves integration of various dimensions, such as human, spiritual, intellectual, psychological, and pastoral.

The first picture of seminary formation dates back to the call and formation of the first disciples of Jesus "Come after me, I will make you fishers of people" (Mt 4:19). The Apostles of Jesus in their three years of being with Jesus receive personal, individual and non-formal education into the ministry in which they would be engaged.⁷ As the Apostles advanced in their ministry, gradually they prepared successors who lived according to the teachings of Jesus, first to lighten their burden and be their extended limbs and then to take over from them, when their earthly sojourn would come to an end (Cf. Acts 16:1-5).⁸ The Apostolic Age reminds present day formators and formees that a life based on the teachings of Jesus is a very important criterion for collaboration in the ministry of Jesus.

The Post-Apostolic Period attempts to remain faithful to the teachings it received from the Apostles especially the instructions concerning the appointment of leaders and their successors (Cf. 1 Tim 3:1-13). However, in the Middle Ages, the ministry of preaching and care of the faithful was neglected. There was also inadequate formation of the candidates and as a result, there was an increase in the number of clergy who were either ignorant or incapable of fulfilling their office.⁹ With the need for adequate formation, it is the Council of Trent that realized the birth and realization of the concept of 'seminary' as an ecclesiastical institution.¹⁰ The Second Vatican Council then carries forward the task of formation through its specific document on formation – *Optatam Totius* (Decree on Priestly Training) which

⁵ J. A. O'Donohoe et al., "Seminary Education," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 12, 2nd ed., ed. Berard L. Marthaler (Washington D.C: The Catholic University of America, 2003), 893.

⁶ Mathew M. Vallipalam, *Priestly Formation in the Changing Society of India* (Bombay: St Paul Publications, 1989), 20.

⁷ John Tracy Ellis, *Essays in Seminary Education* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Fides Publishers, 1967), 1.

⁸ Mousinho de Ataide, "Priests and their Formation Upto the Council of Trent," *The Divine Shepherd's Voice* 1, no. 2 (April-June 2010): 127.

⁹ Anthony Lendakadavil, *Candidates for the Priesthood* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute Publications, 1989), 43.

¹⁰ Anthony Lendakadavil, *Candidates for the Priesthood*, 57.

provides the Church a concise, comprehensive, modern and profoundly pastoral law to guide the delicate and arduous task of forming seminarians to priesthood.¹¹

The Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis (PDV)* of Pope John Paul II gives a new dimension to seminary formation. Pope John Paul II at the outset of chapter five, no. 42 of *Pastores Dabo Vobis (PDV)* speaks of Jesus' formative style as that of 'accompaniment', which is a surprisingly new concept in priestly formation.¹² The Pope further goes on to explain that the Church in its pastoral care for vocations has the task of not only discerning but also 'accompanying' priestly vocations. He lists out four main areas in formation where the seminarians need to be accompanied – human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral. The Church in India too, carries forward its formation programme particularly focusing on the above mentioned four areas of formation. In spite of all the efforts of the Church, seminary formation today faces varied challenges.

3. Challenges in Seminary Formation

When one looks at the challenges in seminary formation, it is worth looking at from the four areas of formation – human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral. The issues in each of these areas give a better clarity of the struggles of the seminarians towards genuine formation.

3.1 Issues in Human Formation

In the areas of human formation the seminarians have their intra-personal and inter-personal issues. Some of the most common intra-personal issues are lack of proper motivation, low self-esteem, pornography, and masturbation. The motivation to priesthood generally needs to lead one to spread the Kingdom of God, Jesus' message of love and peace, and be his witness here on earth. However, according to researchers, often the motivation to priesthood is not strongly founded on God experience, but is influenced by social security, careerism, ambition for upward social mobility and so forth.¹³ Low self-esteem is another area that requires attention. Researchers reveal that low self-esteem is a commonly found problem in a number of seminarians.¹⁴ The poor economic background of the families and sometimes the socio-cultural patterns do have an adverse effect in building the seminarians' self-esteem. In recent years, the growing free exposure to pornography, especially through the internet, is a problem in the life of the seminarians. Masturbation is another unhealthy condition which seminarians get caught up with. Researchers reveal that masturbation is quite common among seminarians.¹⁵

In the spectrum of inter-personal issues the challenges which the seminarians face are basically in relation to their formators, fellow seminarians and the complementary sex. In

¹¹ Second Vatican Council, The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents: *Optatam Totius*, no. 4, ed. Austin Flannery (Mumbai: St Pauls, 2010). (Hereafter cited as *OT*).

¹² Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation: *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no. 42 (Bombay: St Paul Publications, 1992). (Hereafter cited as *PDV*)

¹³ Jayaprakash D'Souza, "Challenges to Human Formation of Priests," *Asian Journal of Vocation and Formation* 32, no. 2 (July-December 2007): 82-83.

¹⁴ Jayaprakash D'Souza, "Challenges to Human Formation of Priests," 86.

¹⁵ A. W. Richard Sipe, *Celibacy in Crises* (New York and Hove: Brunner-Routledge, 2003), 57.

their relationships with the formators there has been an experience of seminarians living with masks,¹⁶ insincerity and bitterness. This is on account of the authoritative life-style of the formators who live under the illusion that strict compliance to rules and regulations in formation. In such circumstances seminarians obey rules out of coercion rather than out of conviction. Among the issues concerning their relationship with other seminarians, the dominant ones are jealousy, envy, inferiority, peer pressure and so forth. The issues concerning relationships with the complementary sex, the seminarians struggle in their natural urges of attraction and the fear of being misunderstood or misinterpreted by the formators. The challenge the seminarians face, regarding sexual growth, is learning to love females in a non-genital manner.¹⁷ In all these issues a formator has a critical role to play in guiding the seminarians towards healthy human formation.

3.2 Challenges towards Spiritual Growth

The first basic challenge the seminarians face in their spiritual growth is difficulties in their prayer life. They experience a sense of boredom in the routine prayer time-table. The boredom is seen in their lifeless participation in the religious services. Researchers like Fr. Felix M. Podimattam observing the spiritual life-style of seminarians as well as of priests states that the focus of prayer in the seminaries has shifted from 'experience to performance', from 'being to doing'. The aspect of doing religious duties take away the element of experiencing God in prayer, as the focus is on the number of times the religious act is performed.¹⁸ The second challenge they face is lack of integration of faith. Somehow they find themselves away from realizing the teachings of Jesus in their lives. The challenge remains for the formators to help the seminarians to live their faith not just within the four walls of the seminary, but beyond it.

3.3 Issues Concerning Intellectual Formation

One of the major issues which have been studied concerning the intellectual growth of the seminarians is their capacity to study. Fr. Parathazham's research indicates that because of poor intellectual capacity there is serious erosion of the credibility of the clergy particularly among the educated laity. The research shows that two-third of the seminarians belong to the category of those who have passed the 10th standard or matriculation with a second or the third class.¹⁹ In the light of what has been said, formators have questions to ponder – How to bring out the best in these seminarians? How to improve their intellectual capacity? The background in which the seminarians are brought up, the exposure and the facilities they have received play an important role in their intellectual growth.

¹⁶ Vincent Pereira, "The Human Formation of the Seminarian," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 66, no. 3 (March 2002): 211.

¹⁷ Joseph Jeyaraj, "Stages in Psychosexual Development," in *Psychosexual Integration & Celibate Maturity*, Vol. 1, eds. Jose Parappully & Jose Kuttianimattathil (Bangalore: Salesian Psychological Association, 2012), 170-171.

¹⁸ Felix M. Podimattam, *The Priest: 21st Century Perspectives*, (Delhi: Media House, 2008), 69-70.

¹⁹ Paul V. Parathazham, "Vocation and Formation of Priests and Religious in India: An Empirical Study," in *Shaping Tomorrow's Church*, ed. Kurien Kunnumpuram (Mumbai: St Pauls, 2006), 53-54.

3.4 Issues Concerning Pastoral Formation

The end result of the entire formation process is to imbibe and acquire the values, principles, and teachings of Jesus so that one gets immersed in the ministry one is asked to do. The formation programme needs to orient one to fall deeply in love in the service of Christ's faithful. Sometimes, the seminarians themselves have felt that they are not adequately trained, to shepherd the flock of Christ. Fr. D'Mello sharing the sentiments of the seminarians says "the heavy academic slant makes one feel that we are all being trained to become seminary professors rather than parish priests."²⁰ His research shows that the curriculum of major seminaries stresses the intellectual formation so much that it probably fails to give due importance to pastoral education. According to Fr. Volken if a priest does not find the Lord in the poor and the oppressed, he may not find Him in the Church either.²¹ It is important that priests, like Jesus, get into the lives of their flock, particularly the downtrodden and defenseless to empower them. Therefore, seminary formation needs to include pastoral concern as part of the academic curriculum to enhance such attitude in the lives of the seminarians. The fact is that it is not only the seminarians who have difficulties, but also their formators.

3.5 The Formators' Challenges

Seminary formators basically face challenges from two sources – those from the nature of the work itself and those from the type of seminarians who come to the formation houses. Often the boredom of having to teach the same subjects, correct almost the same mistakes year after year, enforce the same set of rules and guidelines for successive groups could diminish interest and energy of the formators. No less challenging are the demands of the type of seminarians who come into their lives. It can happen, and often does, that certain batches of seminarians are highly creative and responsive, and working with them can be really satisfying. However, there are times when it is difficult and painful to deal with seminarians who are mediocre and not responsive. Writing them off is not the solution either; but helping such individuals to get out of their comfort zone, requires a great deal of creativity and patience.

A few specific challenges which the formators face in their task of formation are to do with making decisions in the formation process. There is a fear in some of the formators of making mistakes while making decisions. Fear in making decisions also could affect the community. Sometimes, the formators are in a spirit of competition to gain the recognition of the seminarians. In such circumstances some bend the rules so low that it affects other formators in the seminary, who try to be true to the task of formation.²² This causes rifts among formators. Often, formators complain that their job in the seminary is a thankless one. At times it is true, but it does not mean that the seminarians are ungrateful even though they are

²⁰ John D'Mello, "What Kind of Culture are Our Seminaries Producing?" in *Shaping Tomorrow's Church*, ed. Kurién Kunnumpuram (Mumbai: St Pauls, 2006), 69.

²¹ H. Volken, "Social Curriculum Development for Priestly Formation and Seminary Training," in *Socio-Pastoral Dimensions of Priestly Formation* (Pune: Ishwani Kendra, 1984), 15.

²² J. Vilamkunnel, "Challenges of Religious Formation in Contemporary India and the Spirituality of the Formators," *In Christo* 41, no. 2 (April 2003): 139-142.

not effusive in expressing their gratitude. One of the biggest challenges for all formators today is being role models to the seminarians.

4. Accompaniment in Seminary Formation

The formation in the seminary is a process and it requires a close accompaniment from the part of the formators.²³ Accompaniment is like walking together, side by side, in all aspects of a person's life. This 'walking together' is not like policing, but it is journeying with them through dialogue and guidance.²⁴ The role of the formator then is to patiently accompany the seminarians enabling them to probe more deeply into the areas of life that they bring up for discussion— skillfully questioning, clarifying, challenging and motivating.²⁵ The formator, thus, creates an atmosphere of trust and confidence for the seminarians to dialogue, to explore and to discover the manner in which they ought to live their day to day life. Corresponding to the challenges involved in formation a formator can accompany his seminarians from the following perspectives.

4.1 Accompaniment from the Spiritual Perspective

To accompany seminarians in their spiritual formation the formator need to be rooted in prayer, be a bearer of light, a spiritual companion, and so on. In simple words, the seminarian experiences in the formator the Lord who has called him. Jesus spent hours all by himself in lonely places, dialoguing and communicating with his Heavenly Father (Cf. Mt 14:23, Mk 1:35, 6:46, Lk 5:16). In order to know God and His will one needs to spend quality time in prayer. The union which a formator shares with God through prayer is reflected in his day to day life. The faith and trust with which the formator lives his life becomes then an inspiration for the seminarians to live their life, trusting in God's providence. Thus a formator becomes a bearer of the light in the journey of faith. The essence of spiritual companionship is offering transformative Gospel responses to situations in the life of the one who is accompanied.²⁶

4.2 Accompaniment from the Psychological Perspective

A formator, besides being a deeply spiritual person, must be psychologically mature. Psychological maturity implies control of the emotions, realistic self-concept, mature self-confidence and an ability to form interpersonal relationships.²⁷ Jesus' personal and person-oriented accompaniment transformed his apostles into wise, integrated and audacious personalities. In the footsteps of Jesus our Master, each formator needs to approach and form

²³ Joe Mathias, "Environment for Integral Formation to Faciliate Self-Transformation," *Asian Journal of Vocation and Formation* 28, no. 1 (January-June 2004): 29.

²⁴ CBCI, *Charter of Priestly Formation for India* (Madras: 1988), 12.

²⁵ Ronald Tellis, "Addiction and Exposure to Pornography: It's Impact and Challenges in Seminary Formation and in Priestly Celibacy," *Asian Journal of Vocation and Formation* 38, no. 1 (January-June 2013): 48.

²⁶ Isaac Padinjarekuttu, "The Priest in the Making: Reflections on Priestly Formation Today," *The Living Word* 112, no. 5 (September-October 2006): 277.

²⁷ Congregation for Catholic Education, *Directives Concerning the Preparation of Seminary Educators* [document on-line] (Origins CNS Documentary Service, 27 January 1994, Vol. 23, no. 32, accessed on 24 January 2015); available from www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/.../preparation.pdf; Internet.

the seminarians with their individuality.²⁸ Today, most youngsters live in fear of being judged. However, in the one-to-one dialogue listening to the seminarians with a non-judgmental attitude is of utmost importance. Slowly, the seminarians begin to open up their feelings and even learn to trust their formators. At times they would require corrections, and the formator must give appropriate corrections. In circumstances like this an accompaniment of caring confrontation becomes the need of the hour.

4.3 Accompaniment in Intellectual Formation

In seminary formation, the need is not just to have mere degrees and diplomas for name sake, to get through the courses of Philosophy and Theology. Intellectual formation, on the contrary, has to enable one to grow in spiritual knowledge so that one can be a guide to others on their spiritual path.²⁹ Intellectual maturity can happen through proper accompaniment, where the seminarian is motivated to study with a goal oriented mind. Seminarians need to study not merely for marks but rather to equip themselves in an all-round manner to deal with people in future ministry. Such kind of a motivation is provided through the formator's accompaniment. Another element which is important for intellectual maturity is the habit of reading quality books/magazines. To instill the habit of reading in the seminarians the formators themselves could be the best examples for the seminarians to follow. All accompaniment in seminary formation need to be a step closer towards the pastoral care of Christ's faithful.

4.4 Accompaniment in Pastoral Formation

All the areas of formation discussed until now take on a special meaning when they are related or oriented towards the pastoral mission of Jesus Christ. The first step in pastoral accompaniment could be to nurture the young seminarians with love for the apostolic mission. The apostolic mission is to make Christ known to the ends of the earth. The best way for a formator to accompany his seminarians in the formation of an apostolic heart is through his apostolic zeal. A formator with apostolic zeal makes Christ present in and through his life. This very Christ-like behavior can create awareness of Christ's mission in the seminarians. Consequently this awareness instills in them the desire to become more and more of the image and likeness of God.

The second step of accompaniment could be leading the seminarians to prepare themselves to live a detached life. One of the best ways the formators can accompany young seminarians on the path of detachment is that they themselves live a detached life. Their life of detachment acts as a strong and right motivation for the seminarians to live by the Gospel values. The seminarians gradually learn always to orient their studies, prayer life, and human formation, in view of Christ's mission. Accompaniment through a detached life becomes one of the best ways through which the formators can contribute to the growth of the seminarians who are

²⁸ Mathew Vallipalam, "Training for Celibacy in the Seminary," *Indian Theological Studies* 41, nos. 3-4 (September-December 2004): 306-307.

²⁹ Marcial Maciel, *Integral Formation of Catholic Priests* (New York: Alba House, 1920), 125.

under their care. Nevertheless, the final decision to mold oneself unto Jesus the Good Shepherd lies with the seminarians themselves.

5. A Seminarian – The Principal Agent of Formation

Pastores Dabo Vobis while speaking about the seminarians in formation says “we must not forget that the candidate himself is a necessary and irreplaceable agent of his own formation”.³⁰ In simple words the document asserts that a seminarian is responsible for his own formation. His self-formation in a way leads him to responsibly place himself in the hands of those whom God, through the Church, has appointed to assist and guide him in his preparation to the Sacrament of Sacred Orders.³¹ The formators are there as guides and facilitators to accompany the seminarian on his path of formation. If the seminarian does not work personally for his own formation, moved by deep convictions and with a clear attitude of sincerity, then there is no formation.³²

Therefore, first of all, the seminarian needs to grow in the conviction that God has called him. One has to become aware of the manifold experiences of his life where he felt the love of God very strongly. It is also good for him to see all the subtle ways through which God operates in his life. This realization of God’s love in the life of a seminarian is a means to strengthen the conviction of his call. Growth in conviction of one’s call leads one to be responsible for one’s vocation. The second thing a seminarian needs to do is to be responsible for his call or vocation. Here one does his best to grow in the vocation which God has bestowed on him, and does not wait for someone to tell him to do this and that. He does everything for the love of God who constantly and invisibly journeys with him.

6. Conclusion

The formation of the seminarians always remains as a challenge. One needs to find out the best approaches and methods of formation suited to the times. It is wise and prudent to take a cue from Jesus’ way of forming disciples. Based on the Biblical perspective, this paper has proposed four ways of accompaniment – spiritual, psychological, intellectual, and pastoral. They not only contribute to the effectiveness of the formators in their accompaniment, but also provide the momentum for the seminarians to realize that the formators are there not as threats but as co-travelers on their journey in formation. This realization helps the seminarians to take responsibility for their formation to priesthood. Needless to say that God is the formator of all His chosen ones. As formators, with all our human efforts, we need to surrender our formees in His hands. This also invites formators to understand and acknowledge the importance of their role and contribution.

³⁰ *PDV* no. 69.

³¹ Marcial Maciel, *Integral Formation of Catholic Priests*, 31.

³² Marcial Maciel, *Integral Formation of Catholic Priests*, 27.

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