

LEARNING TO LEARN

TO LOVE AND SERVE IN ALL THINGS TO CONTEMPLATE LOVE

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Permanent formation (PF) is at the heart of the Society of Jesus' charism, even if we do not always understand what it really is or end up in reductionist or unclear conceptions. PF is at the core of our spirituality as an attitude of *learning to learn*. It is in line with imploring the grace of "contemplation to attain love, or contemplation to give ourselves, to submit ourselves, to communicate ourselves with the loved being through works, true Christians- like truth- 'make themselves' in practice, where faith is verified, where faith and love become truth, where faith becomes love"¹. Even if there are those who consider PF as the prolongation of the formation for priesthood after holy orders or after perpetual religious profession, for the Society of Jesus "*permanent formation and apostolic discernment become the pillar of spiritual and apostolic renewal*",² thus identifying ourselves with the person of the poor and humiliated Christ, as presented in the Spiritual Exercises". Father Pedro Arrupe was convinced that this is not just an issue of updating intellectual matters but "*something deeper and vast, because continued formation is rooted deep in the spirit that wishes to adapt itself as much as possible to the present circumstances and to anticipate the*

*same future*³. In continuation with the teachings of Vatican II, General Congregations XXXI and XXXII of the Society of Jesus gave new orientations in this sense. Decree 6 of General Congregation XXXII establishes that “We should conceive and plan for the total formation of our men as a process of progressive integration of the spiritual life, of the apostolate, and of studies in such a way that the richness of the spiritual life should be the source of the apostolate, and the apostolate, in turn, the motive for study and for a more profound spiritual life.”⁴. And adds that “Continuing formation is achieved especially through a constant evaluation of and reflection on one’s apostolate, in the light of faith and with the help on one’s apostolic community....”⁵.

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The Jesuit is invited to maintain an open attitude towards ongoing formation as a means to respond properly to the apostolic mission, to be in constant communitarian discernment and to discover anything that interferes with God’s Project. This is an intrinsic dimension of our way of proceeding, which demands the constant deepening of our spirituality through our lives as religious at the service of Church. As part of our vocation to a universal service, always for the greater glory of God, the Jesuit has to conserve this attitude in order to maintain availability to be sent to any mission. Besides, this has to do with the freedom and fidelity inherent to the charism that seriously pursues availability “making ourselves indifferent to all created things..., only wishing and choosing those things that lead us to the goal for which we were created”⁶.

This is the only way of being always open to creative proposals that allow us to update our received mission and to respond adequately to challenges that very often the church and society present to us. Ongoing formation expresses in an appropriate way the meaning of the Ignatian magis, that of maintaining the tension towards a creative fidelity to our identity, continually moving and adapting itself to the signs of the times because, “on this depends the quality of our apostolic service”⁷. General Congregation XXXV indicates that one of the duties of the President of Provincial Conferences “is the responsibility of permanent formation and health care of Jesuits assigned to common houses and works”⁸.

The concept of permanent formation

This term is not exclusively ours. Its use in the scientific world goes back to the first half of twentieth century. Originally it was meant for adults with the idea of completing the first cycle of education received at school. In the late sixties, UNESCO tried to specify more clearly its contents, although it was evident that the overwhelming number of proposals for formation came from western, particularly European, countries, in spite of their important differences.⁹ Poor countries didn't feel this urgent need because the fundamental issue was that of finding sufficient resources to accomplish basic alphabetization.

"*Lifelong learning*"¹⁰, tried to express the need and the right of all to study throughout their whole life, and the growing necessity of progress and self-realization. It was urgent to rethink the distribution of knowledge and continual formation, with the conviction that *learning to learn* for personal growth in life is the central key.¹¹

Contemporary society proved to be more demanding. Initial basic formation was insufficient to face the challenges in all fields of knowledge. Accumulated knowledge was not sufficient to answer the demands of a world in continuous change. From the seventies, scholars began to develop

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the concept of *continual formation* that ranges from childhood to old age. Terms like pedagogy and andragogy came to be familiar.¹² The basic idea was that life is a very effective school - and sometimes the only one - that teaches to grow in the capacity of dialogue, analysing, organising, planning and deciding¹³. Even

if the validity of school formation was never denied, it was emphasised that in professional practice, the necessary elements for assuming the urgency of permanent formation were most evident. It is only when all kinds of activities are undertaken responsibly that questions will arise: why learn? Which fields of knowledge deserve more attention? Which areas of my education are the weakest? This triggers the need of an updated formation.

The pedagogical movement towards continuous formation was assumed without reserves in the Church, recognized as a need to form with a new attitude. This was expressed clearly by experts of the Holy See who emphatically affirmed that: "you can't hesitate in inquiring into the causes

of the general situation of the world, which overcome the particular problem of the church. Without acquiring the need to search for an explanation, there is the risk of confining yourself inside a closed circle, where it is impossible to discover the true solutions without previously assessing the causes.”¹⁴. In Vatican II, especially in the Decrees *Presbyterorum ordinis* and *Optatam totius* and in the Constitutions *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*, the church expressed its understanding for the need to help priests understand that an option for ongoing formation was a duty in order to achieve a renewed engagement with evangelization in the modern world, and of course, to be prepared to offer an authentic testimony of life. Thus also was recognized by the Congregation for the Clergy in the *Directory for the Ministry and life of Priests*.¹⁵.

According to UNESCO, “permanent education is understood as an order of ideas, experiences, and accurate accomplishments, that is, education defined in its whole aspects and dimensions, in the incessant continuity of its development since the first until the last moments of existence and in a deep and organic articulation of its different moments and successive stages”. This applies to all phases of life, from its beginning to the maturity of the old person, because “there is no age for education”. In consequence, all people, men and women, young and old, children and adults, should have equal opportunities for getting an optimal and convenient formation throughout life. The concept of “permanent education” or its correlative “permanent learning”, have become the guiding principle of a new educational mentality. The distinction is made between “*permanent education*” and “*education for adults*”. In fact, although the words *education* and *formation* are frequently used as synonyms, because both tend to the acquisition or dominion of knowledge on being and doing, nevertheless they do not point to the same reality. The word “Formation” refers to an activity that complements anything that initially was without form and incomplete. To form means to give the best form. Even more, “self formation” does not necessarily involve the presence of a guide. When we talk of “Education” we allude to the promotion of the person and their maturing process through the transmission of values, principles and orientations. It involves the permanent presence of a mediator for the transmission of values, unlike modern pedagogy that considers the subject as the first protagonist of his/her formation; this explains the frequent use of the word “self formation” to describe the ideal of formation today.

Diocesan priests and religious are not exempt of this permanent formation. In our time we are invited to promote all kinds of means and instruments for our growth. We cannot fully live our mission without a personal project that moderates our being and doing in the Church. We need to grow as servants of mission in each stage of life, in each experience that we live. GCXXXV, D1 affirms that, "From the beginning of our formation and throughout our lives we must be and remain men familiar with the things of God...as we know, 'mediocrity has no place in Ignatius' world view'. It is therefore essential to give young Jesuits as deep, strong and vibrant as possible a human, spiritual, intellectual and ecclesial formation, so as to allow each of them to achieve our mission in the world with 'a proper attitude of service in the Church". The Spiritual Exercises, foundational basis of our spirituality, demand of us a process of continuous conversion to be faithful to our vocation and to make our mission truly effective. This is not something which is merely added on or superfluous, but rather intrinsic to the following of the experience of continuous conversion in Ignatius of Loyola. We Jesuits, "are aware of the importance of the intellectual apostolate for the life and mission of the church today". This does not mean that we have to search for new apprenticeship, skills and competences as if we live our vocation in the way of a civil profession. It rather deals with "study, reflection, research on the word of hope proclaimed in the Scriptures and on this basis, in the whole of theology... Reflection and study as a means to help us regain confidence in the human

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capacity to together reach the truth; and to overcome both relativism that doubts of attaining the truth, and fundamentalism that pretends to possess it completely... Studying, reflecting, searching is an Eucharistic Action". We are conscious that the risk of falling into intellectualism or ambition for power and prestige through the acquisition of academic titles is always present. This urges us to interior renewal, accompanying the poor and humiliated Christ of the SpEx. Only with this attitude we can make real progress in the configuration of, "being and doing; contemplation and action; prayer and prophetic living; being completely united with Christ and completely inserted into the world with him as an apostolic body: all of these polarities mark deeply the life a Jesuit and express both its essence

and its possibilities.” GC XXXV, D2, according to the criteria of ‘The Two Standards’, ‘The Three Classes of Persons’ and ‘The three degrees of humility’.

‘docibilitas’ as availability for learning to learn

Permanent formation is *that constant availability to learn from life, from each situation and human relationship* (= *docibilitas*¹⁶). It is expressed through ordinary and extraordinary activities, the examen and discernment, asceticism and prayer, study and apostolate, personal and common evaluation..., that help mature the believing identity and creative fidelity to one’s own vocation in different circumstances and stages of life...every day until the end. Permanent Formation is intelligent and bold freedom, that of allowing oneself to be formed throughout life and for life”. This entails a slow and gradual process in which the Holy Spirit has precedence and plays a central role in forming us, according to the heart of Christ. It is an attitude that touches us completely and makes us responsible for conforming our service in and through charity, with the Eucharist at the core of our being and doing, and with mission as the horizon. This is not merely a prolongation of a formation project that concerns the younger generation of priests and religious, but by its own nature it is an indispensable way for everyone.

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‘Learning to learn’ invites us to favor freedom and to transform ourselves into persons capable of committing our religious and sacerdotal life, in a way that we become protagonists of our history. It deals with a freedom that liberates us, even from own ideologies, allowing us to relate to God and to others in a fertile, active and passive way. It helps us recognise our disordered affections that avoid discovering His Will. It is the attitude that helps us allow the ‘*subiecto*’ described by Saint Ignatius to grow, when regarding the necessary qualities in a person able to assume serious, free and a responsible commitment. For Ignatius, having “*subiecto*”, enables one to make Spiritual Exercises or to be admitted in the Society of Jesus. It deals with the integral human person and assumes that each one of us is unique and non repetitive. For this reason all the person’s capabilities have

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to be considered when taking personal options. Thanks to this disposition we will be able to understand that “the other things on the face of the earth are created for human beings, to help them in the pursuit of the end for which they are created” SpEx 23. A lot depends on the attitude that each of us assumes in order to grow in ‘*docibilitas*’, following the way of Ignacio and the first companions. They integrated their formation with their previous life experience and that, once prayed and discerned, was crystallised in mission and written in the Constitutions of the Order.

A solid initial formation will form ‘*docibilis*’ persons, Jesuits who have learnt to learn in any mission and with all kind of relationships. Its objective will be to help each member integrate himself in the apostolic body of the Society of Jesus, and to be able to “respond adequately to the present challenges of mission. These two parameters measure the progress of the candidate to the Society in a gradual way regarding motivations, needs, habits and practices, until the definitive incorporation with the last votes,”¹⁷. A Jesuit formed in this way, will understand that formation Constit. 307 is like “a building” that is built in a process, where alongside contents it is essential to grow in personal discernment. An adequate personal accompaniment contributes to this growth process never finishing. If this is attained, the Jesuit will become himself responsible for growing and learning, even amidst experiences of failures, mid-life crises or old age. A deep positive attitude is built that brings reconciliation with one’s own history, and this with gratitude. It will also foster the capacity to relate to ‘otherness’ with a disposition to communicate with other objective realities with respect and admiration. Finally, SpEx1 it will dispose to use “any means of preparing and disposing our soul to rid itself of its disordered affections and then, after removal, of seeking and finding God’s will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of our soul”. This is to learn to be freed from one’s own fears, pretexts, perceptive distortions or unrealistic expectations, all of which impede letting oneself be formed and educated by life itself, along its entire journey.

The attitude of learning to learn in the Teaching of the Church

The need of continuing formation was recognised by Vatican II, and important documents affirm that priesthood grows and sanctifies itself exercising its ministry. It emphasises that “formation for the priesthood,

principally in the conditions of modern society, must be continued and complemented even after studies at the seminary have been finished....”¹⁸. “The young clergy has to introduce itself gradually in the sacerdotal and apostolic life under the spiritual, intellectual and pastoral aspect, renewing and fostering them more and more”³⁴. In the Apostolic Exhortation ‘*Pastores dabo Vobis*’, (24) John Paul II expressed that “Sanctity itself of the priest contributes mostly to the fruitful exercise of ministry itself”. He must remember constantly that he is a minister of Christ. It is from this very conviction that the need arises of ongoing formation. The pope defines *the essence of formation as that of reviving the gift of vocation and caring of his charisma*.

We are invited to grow in holiness along the road to configure ourselves with Christ. “Despite the differences, that which unites us as Jesuits is Christ and the desire to serve him: not to be deaf to the call of the Lord, but prompt and ready to do his most holy will...He is the single image that unites us. Jesuits know who they are looking at him” PDV 70.

To be contemplative apostles in action requires a free and conscious response so as “to love and serve in all things”, with a style of life which is always renewed, through different itineraries that have to be discerned. “It is therefore necessary that this be thought of and developed in such a way that all priests may receive it *always*, keeping in mind the characteristics and possibilities that vary with age, condition of life, and assignments”¹⁹. This originates in the wish of forming oneself as response to the gratuity of the call, “a new way to maintain alive in us the mystery of our vocation; a gift that exceeds infinitely our understanding and a mystery of divine election”. (Directory for the ministry and life of Priests, 73).

‘To form’ means to create favorable conditions of time and place and to offer the indispensable contents so that each person helped by external factors, is able to reach a level of human and spiritual maturity and a cultural training according to the tasks destined to be developed”. It involves two global and complementary objectives: a continuous commitment of conversion and an effort to make this real amidst adverse circumstances. The formative process is based on the deepening of initial formation assumed integrally in all its dimensions: human, spiritual and communitarian, which involve the renewal of the intellectual and pastoral dimensions. Interdisciplinary reflection demands the search for unity between the psyche, spiritual life and knowledge. In this sense, an interaction between all the formative dimensions will be indispensable. The place of

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continuing formation is no other than that of mission entrusted by superiors, in daily life. This takes place in the measure that we decide to love and to serve in everything, amidst the signs of the times, and in our relationships with others, especially the poor. Ongoing formation occurs as a natural continuation of the process of the structuring of the priest's personality, closely related with the formative project. The path toward maturity does not simply demand that the priest deepen the different aspects of his formation. "It also demands above all that he be able to combine ever more harmoniously all these aspects, gradually achieving their inner unity. This will be made possible by pastoral charity... Only ongoing formation enables the priest to safeguard with vigilant love the "mystery" which he bears within his heart for the good of the Church and of mankind PDV 71,1.

A privileged method to develop the inner attitude of 'learning to learn' is, the "Personal Life Project". It helps identify the fruits of personal discernment lived during the spiritual exercises and the daily examen, and facilitates the definition of objectives to be pursued together with the suitable means to obtain them. The careful writing of the 'personal life project' and its periodic assessment offer a feasible and credible contribution to the elaboration of a communitarian project that invites to fraternal dialogue and common discernment.

Some reasons for learning to learn

The first motivation which comes to mind is the great challenge of our time and the right of the people of God to expect servants who have assumed 'docibilitas'. According to John Paul II, "*Ongoing formation keeps up one's 'youthfulness of spirit, which is something that cannot be imposed from without. Each priest must continually find it within himself'*" PDV 71,4.

Certainly there are also purely human reasons which call for the priest to engage in ongoing formation. This formation is demanded by one's own continuing personal growth. Every life is a constant path toward maturity, a maturity which cannot be attained except by constant formation

Good spiritual accompaniment and when necessary psychological support allow us to aspire to this maturity and to live our mission without fear and ambiguities. ‘*Docibilitas*’ furthermore disposes us to the gift of fidelity.

Other reasons may be of a strategic nature and could help to clarify the confusion that exists concerning priestly and religious identity. For many young persons this state of life is not attractive because we give an image of lack of ‘*docibilitas*’. We are perceived as the “eternal teens”. Sometimes they see us as

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persons with an inferiority complex with respect to other professionals perceived as “successful”. Manifestations of ‘superiority’ made evident by authoritarian or clerical conduct with those who work with us, especially if they are simple people, result counterproductive. Sometimes we give the image of sad and tired people, and on occasions, even bitter or in crisis, without any desire to overcome the situation. With this perspective, many young people who wish to offer their life to the service of others opt for a temporary voluntary service and reject any invitation coming from the consecrated life or an ordered ministry. The future of religious life and even the priesthood itself, will hinge on our capacity to present ourselves as true witnesses and prophets of love and charity toward the people of God.

¹ MAGAÑA M. JOSÉ. (1985). *Jesús Liberador*. México: Librería Parroquial, 368.

² CURIA GENERAL DE LA COMPAÑÍA DE JESÚS. (2003). *La formación del jesuita*. Roma: Giovanni Olivieri di E. Montefoschi, 149.

³ ARRUEPE, Pedro. (19 de agosto de 1977). *Charla a la Conferencia de Religiosos de Colombia*. In: “La Iglesia de hoy y del futuro”, Bilbao-Santander: Mensajero y Sal Terrae, 695-696. Quoted in: CURIA GENERAL DE LA COMPAÑÍA DE JESÚS. (2003). *La formación del jesuita...*, Opus cit. 149.

⁴ COMPAÑÍA DE JESÚS. (1975). *Congregación General XXXII*. Madrid: Razón y Fe, 119.

⁵ COMPAÑÍA DE JESÚS. (1975). *Congregación General XXXII*. Madrid: Razón y Fe, 122.

⁶ LOYOLA, Ignacio de. (1946). *Los Ejercicios Espirituales*. Anotados por el M.R.P. Juan Roothaan, S. I. Bilbao: Eléxpuru Hermanos, 93-95.

⁷ KOLVENBACH, Peter Hans. (8 diciembre 2000). “Loyola 2000”. Carta a la Compañía. En: *AR XXII*, 704.

⁸ COMPANHIA DE JESÚS. (2008). *Congregación General XXXV*. Decreto 5, 21c, Bilbao-Santander: Mensajero-Sal Terrae, 191.

⁹ GAHUNGU, Méthode. (15 de Octubre 2010). *La Formazione Iniziale e la Formazione Permanente*. Lectures to students at CIFS Pontificia Universidad Gregoriana.

¹⁰ FEDERIGHI, P. (1996). *Strategie per la gestione dei processi educativi nel contesto europeo. Dal lifelong learning a una società a iniziativa diffusa*, Napoli: Liguori Editore, 51-64.

¹¹ PASTIAUX, G. et J. (2006). *La pédagogie*, 3^{ème} Édition revue, Paris : Nathan, 121.

¹² GOGUELIN, P. (1975 2^e ed.). *La formation continue des adultes*, Paris: PUF, 26-37 y 42-46.

¹³ GRIÉGER, P. (1985). *La formazione permanente*. Vol. 1: *Formazione e promozione della persona*, Milano: Ancora, 19-21.

¹⁴ GARRONE, G.M. (1979). *La formazione permanente del sacerdote*. Leumann (To): Elle Di Ci, 7-8.

¹⁵ CONGREGACIÓN PARA EL CLERO. (31 Enero 1994). *Directorio para el Ministerio y la Vida de los Presbíteros*. N° 71

¹⁶ Here it is more than being able to learn. It refers to being “active” and “daring”.

¹⁷ SARIEGO, Jesús Manuel. (2007). *Formación*. En: *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Ignaciana*. Bilbao-Santander: Mensajero-Sal Terrae, 888.

¹⁸ Vat. II. *Presbyterarum ordinis*, 12

¹⁹ GC XXXV, D2.