



THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF THE FORMATOR IN THE INITIAL FORMATION TO BE A FRIAR MINOR

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ABSTRACT: In this article, the writer argues that to form the candidates or the young Friars to be a mature Friar Minor, it needs to have a good and qualified formator. He has to be trained in this field. Good character or has a special degree in other fields will not be enough to be a good formator. In order to carry out his ministry, he has to understand a suitable pedagogy and Christian anthropology of the human person. Moreover, in his training, he needs to understand the world of subconscious or unconscious which often blocks the process of self-transcendence in the candidates or the young Friars. Through his own formation to be a formator, he himself can know and embrace his own strengths and his vulnerability or limitation. This insight and experience enable him to form the candidates or the young Friars according to the spirit of the Order of Friars Minor.

Keywords: formation, formator, Friars Minor, self-transcending.

INTRODUCTION

The Order of Friars Minor was founded by St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226). It is a religious Order in the Catholic Church. The characteristic of this Order is a fraternity. It is about the quality of relationship among the Friars. In the spirit of fraternity, the Friars “follow Jesus Christ more closely under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; through profession they dedicate themselves totally to God whom they love above all, living the Gospel in the Church according to the form observed and proposed by St. Francis” (*General Constitution*, 2010:59).

The Order of Friars Minor has been working in 116 countries to bring the Good News of love, forgiveness, and peace to the world. Based on the statistic per 31 December 2019, the total number of the Friars Minor, including Novices are 12,660 Friars (“Statistica OFM, 2020: 183). In their ministry, the Friars Minor share the Franciscans Spirituality “according to the form observed and proposed by St. Francis.”

The good fruits of their ministry are determined by a good formation, both initial (postulancy, novitiate, and the time of temporary profession) and ongoing formation (solemnly professed Friars). That is why the topic of formation is very important in religious life. According to *Ratio Formationis Franciscanae: the Order of Friars Minor 2003* [RFF]), “Franciscan formation is based upon a personal encounter with the Lord and begins with the call of God and the individual’s decision to walk with Saint Francis in the footsteps of the poor and

crucified Christ as His disciple under the action of the Holy Spirit” (RFF, 2003:13).

In the formation process, the role of the formator is very important. A formator is a person who forms the candidates or the young Friars according to the spirit of the Order in the Catholic Church. For this reason, I would like to focus this article on the important role of the formator in the initial formation. I will start with the importance of an integrated pedagogy in the formation, then I will explain what is Franciscan formation and the role of the formator in the process of formation, and I will end this article with the conclusion.

A. AN INTEGRATED PEDAGOGY

Formation needs a proper pedagogy. According to Carballo (2003:63-64), there are three types of pedagogy in the educational-formative field, namely the objective, the subjective, and the provocative-interpretative pedagogy. I argue that the objective and subjective pedagogy are not suitable for formation in the religious life, even though there are some positive aspects in these pedagogies. We need the provocative-interpretative pedagogy.

1. Unsuitable Pedagogy

• The Objective Pedagogy

The objective pedagogy refers to the ‘normative’ and ‘objectives’ in religious life. It is about rules, obedience, the ‘tyranny of the shoulds’, and uniformity. By neglecting the person’s freedom, this pedagogy is not enough to form a mature person for religious life.

The candidates or the young Friars can respond to this pedagogy by compliance and identification. Compliance means ‘a person who behaves in a particular manner in order to acquire benefits or to avoid punishments’ (Arbuckle,1987:214). Identification means ‘a person acts in a certain way in imitation of the person who is influencing him’ (Arbuckle,1987:214). For example, someone wants to be like his formator by imitating him. His motivation is to ‘satisfy and increase his self-esteem and the image he has of himself’ (Rulla et al., 1989:67). These responses are without internalization of the values.

In this pedagogy, the task of the formator focuses on the benefit of the institution and not on the benefit of the development of the individual. In this formation, there is no dialogue and mutual trust. Uniformity is the main concern to be achieved.

The relation between the formator and the candidates or the young Friars is tense. The formator himself tries hard to be perfect. He is driven to be a good example for the candidate or young Friars. He also consciously or unconsciously forces the candidates or the young Friars to be perfect. The candidates or the young Friars accept this ‘driveness’ without a critical judgment. This kind of formation does not help the candidates or young Friars to ‘embrace’ their limitations, vulnerabilities, and brokenness. They tend to deny human weakness. So, they cannot be authentic to themselves. They live to fulfil others’ expectation and to please others.

In formation process we need to embrace what Ernest Kurtz & Katherine Ketcham (1992) call the spirituality of imperfection. This spirituality reminds us that trying to be perfect without acknowledging our vulnerability is very dangerous and unrealistic. To explain this idea, Kurtz et al. (1992:2) write “[t]he spirituality of imperfection speaks to those who seek meaning in the absurd, peace within chaos, light within darkness, joy within the suffering – without denying the reality and even the necessity of absurdity, chaos, darkness, and suffering.”

• **The Subjective Pedagogy**

In the subjective pedagogy, the person in formation is at the center, the primary agent of his own formation. In this pedagogy, the formator and the candidates or the young Friars are more like friends. Freedom, dialogue, participation, and interpersonal relationships are very important in this pedagogy. The candidates and the young Friars love this pedagogy. They want to exercise their freedom and autonomy. However, the great disadvantage is ‘leaving the person in formation as he is’ and

‘provoking a great dissatisfaction on the part of both the person in formation and the formator’ (Carballo, 2003:63-64). This pedagogy assumes that the candidates or the young Friars know themselves very well. In fact, many areas in human’s life need to be discovered, especially the world of the unconscious. The formator needs to address this area to help the candidates or the young Friars to grow and to be authentic to their lives and vocation.

2. Integrated Pedagogy: The Provocative-interpretative Pedagogy

This pedagogy focuses on the person. It starts from the concrete situation of where the person is. It starts from the actual self. This pedagogy helps the person growing towards his full human and Christian maturity. The provocative-interpretative pedagogy wants to create a formative atmosphere characterized by “dialogue, participation, trust, confrontation, and provocation. It tries to reach a synthesis between the human maturity and personal autonomy, obedience to the will of God and identification with the social group to which he belongs” (Carballo, 2003:64). This pedagogy has an integrated understanding of the human person that draws from the Franciscan Spirituality especially the calling to conversion. Franciscan anthropology believes that human person is created in the image and the likeness of God. However, the human person is affected by sin. Even though he/she is a sinner, God continues to invite him/her to grow in His image and likeness.

B. FRANCISCAN FORMATION AND THE FORMATOR

Franciscan spirituality has much to offer in the context of formation. The characteristic of the Franciscans formation is ‘a continuous process of growth and conversion involving the whole of a person’s life, called to develop his own particular human, Christian, and Franciscan dimension, radically living the Holy Gospel, in the spirit of prayer and devotion, in fraternity and minority’ (RFF, 2003:13).

These characteristics tell us that Franciscan formation is an invitation to transcend himself as a response to God’s abundant love. We believe that each friar, by the inspiration of the Spirit of the Lord as ‘the true formator’ (RFF, 2003:13) has the capacity for self-transcendence (Lonergan, 2003:104). In that understanding, then the task of formator according to *General Statutes* article 87 (2010:283) is

to accompany the candidates and Friars still placed in initial formation and to work with

them to discern the will of God in their lives, to examine more deeply the reasons for their decision to embrace the Franciscan life, to evaluate their experience of Fraternal life and minority and to seek out the programme of Franciscan life that is most suitable for each one.

The formator has a very important task in helping the candidates and the young Friars to discern their vocation. However, many formators do not have special training. Carballo (2003:64) pointed out that many formators were often appointed because they are good friars and had a degree. They accepted this appointment because they felt obliged by obedience. Furthermore, at the same time, they were given many other responsibilities like a parish priest, lecturer, etc. The formation is seen as a part-time job. All these factors do not allow the purpose of formation to work well.

The Franciscan Order has realized the importance of training formators. In the *Ratio Studiorum* (2001), there is a special concern for training formators. This concern tells us that the formator is very important for the life of the Order. They need special training to help them to ‘know the reality of youth’ and ‘prepares them to carry out the task that awaits them in a fitting manner’ (*Ratio Studiorum*, 2001:42). Moreover, in the *RFF* (2003:39-49), there is a new chapter about ‘Accompanying a Vocation’ where the formator is a companion for the young Friars in their journey. In order to accompany the candidates or the young Friars, ‘[t]he Ministers, guardians, formators and spiritual directors should be trained to exercise their service as companions in a suitable manner’ (*RFF*, 2003:39). A formator without special training can do a lot of damage to the young friars and themselves. Therefore, we need to seriously pay attention to this very important ministry to the Order and the Church.

Speaking of the importance of formator’s training to work in formation, Rulla et al (1986:400) write:

But it is not an easy task which one can approach without proper training, nor just by reading a few books. Such training should include the acquisition of a vision of the basic anthropological realities of the person who is called to respond to the Christian vocation, a vision as clear and comprehensive as possible. But that by itself is not enough; the training should be accompanied by a sufficient personal experience of the process of internalization and

of the difficulties and limitations which are encountered in this journey, especially of those linked to the area of the unconscious and of effective freedom. Such personal experience should begin with oneself, and then be extended to acquiring the capacity of helping others, a capacity which can only be acquired through a suitable process of supervised learning guided by experts. After all, such formation is not something extraordinary; it meets the demands of a realistic anthropology. Further, if several years can be spent in preparing professors and administrators, there is no reason why such time cannot be given to preparing people to form others in the Christian vocation. Jesus Christ, with his apostles, did not just provide a program of catechesis, but also a personal pedagogy.

Rulla’s concern is very true in our formation situation. Most of the formators did not have special training. They may read books, have a degree in Franciscan spirituality, have a good understanding of Franciscan anthropology, but they do not have personal experience of intensive supervision for themselves. This fact makes it difficult for them to help the candidates or young Friars in their vocation.

The formator needs to help the candidates or young Friars to discern their motivation to be a Franciscan during formation years. Our candidates or the young Friars come from different backgrounds and experiences. Some still carry with them psychological wounds from the past and have been not yet healed. These wounds can disturb the process of growth to be a mature person (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2008).

According to Rulla et al (1986:374), ‘60%-80% of the persons who choose a vocation have a genuine motivation which coexists with another motivation, the latter being in part a desire of the merely apparent good’. Anthony Malaviaratchi gives us the reason how vocational discernment before final vows and ordination is not easy. He points out the reason, because ‘those seeking religious formation from mixed motives know how to play the game, what to say and do and whom they need to impress, bishops, provincials, councilors, formators, and so forth’ (Malaviaratchi, 2006:24). I think the problem is not in the person in formation but how the Order trains their formator in order to deal with these issues. This reality supports Rulla’s concern (1990:8) about training formators especially in the issue of subconscious or unconscious. He writes,

It has been one of the most striking experiences for me to see the pervasiveness and the relevance for vocation of the world of subconscious motivation. There is a world unknown to the great majority of superiors and subjects in vocation, which significantly influences the lives of individuals and of communities.

However, Thomas Keating reminds us to be wise in dealing with the issue of the unconscious. He writes, ‘A generation ago ... people opened themselves to the unconscious before they had the humility or the devotion to God to be able to handle it. The unconscious needs to be respected and approached with prudence’ (Keating, 1999:19). Keating’s concern is true because it is not easy to accept our limitations or our vulnerability. We tend to hide them. However, to grow as a mature person, we need to embrace our own vulnerability, even though it is very painful.

Formation needs to address the ‘Vulnerable Spots’¹ in a person. The importance of this has been shown in the research of Rulla and his associates, at the Pontifical Gregorian University’s Institute of Psychology. The result of the research shows that no significant change was found after four years of religious formation and training. In that result, 86% of the men and 87% of the women were unaware or ignorant, totally or in part, of their vulnerable spot and after four years of formation 83% of the men and 82% of the women were still unaware of their vulnerable spot (Rulla et al, 1986:208).

The impact of vulnerable spots in person can affect his life and ministry later on. In my opinion, this issue needs to be addressed during initial formation. The candidates or the young Friars need to be encouraged to talk about it. This is part of the discernment process. To do this we need a formator who really understands and has special training in dealing with this sensitive issue.

There are two categories of educators² (formators) according to Rulla. He also mentions four vocational problems, namely ‘spiritual problems, developmental difficulties, vocational subconscious (and latent, i.e., individuals appear to be ‘normal’) inconsistencies, and more and less

manifest non-vocational psychopathology’ (Rulla, 1990:216). The first category of educators or formators is they have to know how to handle and deal with the first two types of problems. They need to have the capacity to recognise the presence of the last two types of problems and they themselves have solved the third or fourth type of problems in their own life (Rulla, 1990:216-217). For the first category of educator or formator ‘does not have to be a professional training in depth psychology’ (Rulla, 1990:219). I think someone who has special training in spiritual direction and other formation training and has experienced supervision can do the ministry. He can listen to and pay attention to the candidates’ or the young Friars’ life story, their idealism, fears, anxiety, dreams, and even sleep problems. I believe listening without judging is very important. In the process of accompaniment, this enables the formator to walk with the candidates or the young Friar, as Jesus and the two disciples shared their experience on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). Franciscan formation is a journey together where each friar shares their joys and struggles, fears and hope. This kind of sharing enables them to support and learn from each other on the journey. The second category of educators or formators is those who have specialisation in depth psychology. The first category educator can ask for their help in dealing with the issue beyond their capacity.

To carry out this special ministry, we need personal accompaniment. It is the best formative means. In this personal accompaniment, the formator needs to respect the freedom of the person and the action of grace in the process of transformation (*RFF*, 41). Personal accompaniment is a holy place to know and to understand the candidates’ or the young Friars’ life and their struggles. In this holy place, we help them and form them according to the spirit of the Order.

CONCLUSION

The Friars Minor are called to follow our Lord Jesus Christ according to the form observed and proposed by St. Francis of Assisi. This goal can be achieved by a good formation especially during initial formation. A good formation process can only be carried out by a good and qualified formator.

Throughout this article, I have shown that special training for a formator is very important, in order, to help him in his ministry as a formator. We have realized how this responsibility is not easy. To form a mature Friar Minor, we need a formator who is a mature person psychologically and spiritually.

¹ The place in each of us is vulnerable to be attacked by the bad spirit and stops us from responding to God’s invitation for self-transcendence in love.

² Educate (Latin: educere) means: “drawing out – the riches and resources that lie within”. See Herbert Alphonso, *The Personal Vocation: Transformation in Depth Through the Spiritual Exercise* (Rome: Secretariat for Ignatian Spirituality, 1997), p. 65.

He is a person who loves his own vocation, loves those who have been entrusted to him, loves his own Order and the Catholic Church.

In the situation where there is no religious who has specialisation in depth psychology, we need to collaborate with other experts. Hopefully, by working together we can help to form the candidates or the young Friars to bring the Good News of love, forgiveness, and peace to the world.

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