

FORMATION IN THE SOCIETY OF THE HOLY CHILD JESUS

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Introduction

The Society of the Holy Child Jesus was begun by a woman whose life story is not only awe inspiring and poignant; it raises disturbing questions. If God asked so much of Cornelia Connelly, what might he ask of someone drawn to her Society? If Cornelia's remarkable joyfulness came from saying 'yes' to unheard of and impossible invitations, what is the price of her sisters' joy? A willingness to live with such questions unanswered is as good a beginning in the Society as Cornelia's.

Cornelia's experience of the cross led her back unexpectedly to Bethlehem. In the 'icon' of Mary holding the Child in her lap Cornelia found her life's focus. If there was loss and sorrow to be accepted, this Child was pure gain. In him she knew the power of resurrection. The Society caught the élan, the spontaneous gaiety which arose from her worst moments. There is layer upon layer of mystery here - a mystery the Society continues to ponder as its own and which has everything to do with formation.

There is a risk to calculate. Anyone asking to live in Cornelia's Society without at least wanting what God moved Cornelia to want could in time become diminished and turned in on herself. If beginning in the Society presumes a generous spirit and an overriding desire for God and the coming of his kingdom, continuing to live in the Society presumes no less.

'All ought to form themselves according to their vocation...'

The child is the pattern	The individual claims much attention in the Society's approach to formation. This is not surprising in a congregation which takes its inspiration from the Incarnation. The Child, as newcomer to the human scene was of supreme importance. We are told that he grew -- his hidden self grew strong in wisdom and in grace. He learned; he was formed by interaction with ordinary people, with his family members and with his Father. His knowledge of himself became more sharply defined. He asked questions; he took in the particulars of his environment, and when he reached maturity he began to minister and to teach. His death proclaims for all time the supreme importance of every single person.
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What is formation in the Society? Formation is best described in contrast to what it is not. It is not putting on something from the outside -- a lifestyle, a set of practices, a habit of mind, a way of doing ministry, a method of prayer -- as if it were a coat and hat. It is helping to free all that is good within to develop along its own lines. Nor is formation a rehearsal for a skilful, life-long impersonation of someone else, even of Cornelia, even of Jesus Christ. Individuals come to the Society as they are; they are welcomed in their own name, they are challenged to grow. Formation does not aim to change a person's character or personality. It is God's pleasure to make each person differently. Formation in the Society respects and cultivates that God-given difference, exposing its rough edges to the critique of the Gospel. The aim is metanoia, not metamorphosis.

Self transcendence The Society's reverence for God's particular way with each person is often rewarded by a paradoxical result. The more someone becomes her true self, the more she is enabled to transcend herself in a ministry of service. A transformation has been brought about which is the goal of the formative project. Through another person in another time and place Christ is present and at work. The freedom of God is enshrined in the freedom of the person. John Paul II has said it: "The path to God leads through the human."

The journey in faith To be formed is to be provided with space, time and means to grow from within into the definitive person God has set on the path of becoming. If time makes it clear that a person's path leads elsewhere than into the Society, something has been gained, not lost. Each one's first commitment is to God's truth made manifest within the truth of her own being. The Society is not an end in itself. For those who are called to it, it is the way to the end. Their path leads to God and his people through incorporation into the Society.

'...and thence to the spirit of the Society.'

Conformation to the Society Formation in the Society involves conformation to the Society. Quite opposite to a blind conformity to the group, conformation means taking on as one's own the history and memory of the group and participating with others in shaping its preferred future. The person who asks to become part of a group enters an already established network of formal and informal relationships. There are structures and procedures to learn and to use to good effect. However much the Society is a communion of individuals, it is also an institution with a constitution and stated expectations which it places on itself and those who would join it. In this sense, formation is also inculturation. In time every member has access to the means of influencing and modifying the institution, even changing the Constitutions. All the changes in the Society that have come about in recent years are the result of decisions taken by the membership in Chapter and in response to the Church's mandate to renew and adapt religious life.

A new stage of being It would be false to overdramatize religious formation as something new and strange. It is another stage of development in a person's life in continuity with what has gone before; and it is open-ended. The word 'stage' suggests the picture of someone standing always on the platform of her conscious and unconscious past but leaning into the future. Although there are many agents in the process of formation, the Holy Spirit is the one who works with the person from within bringing about coherence and integration, calling out of the storehouse of the person's own being new things and old. It is the Spirit who helps the person interpret and cooperate with God's leading and so come to fulness of life.

The Spirit at work The Holy Spirit has also been active in the formation of the Society from its founding days; and before that, even, the same Spirit led Cornelia through ways which were far from usual to become its foundress. Because the one Spirit is at work in the Society, in its foundress and in the person who is drawn to the Society (the Spirit is present in the 'drawing') there will be common traits in all three. A woman who asks for admission to the Society will have seen in it something of herself reflected back. Cornelia and her response to God will have power to arouse similar aspirations in her because she is already responding to God in some of the ways Cornelia did. The Society, on its side, will recognize in the person applying, hints of a family resemblance. The genealogical chart of a family traces lines of descent based on permutations and combinations of many of the same genes. It is said that blood is thicker than water. Yet there is something thicker even than blood and that is identity in God. Those who bear a family resemblance in God and are called together into a religious family are bonded indeed. They are born together "not of water, nor of blood, nor of human will, but of God."

Affinities Part of the task of early formation is to help the individual discover if her sense of identity in God is at home with the identity of the corporate body. Though a community would be hard pressed to commit its identity to words -- being is best expressed in action -- it knows itself through knowing who it is not. It also has an instinct by which it knows if someone is not being led by God in its own way.

Charism Just as each person who asks to join the Society is unique and original, so is the Society unique and original. It is not so much the characteristics one can list as belonging to the Society that make it different from every other congregation; many congregations share the same characteristics. It is the way the Society combines these characteristics and traits and the relative values it places on them that makes it different. Nor is the difference inconsequential. It is a creation of the Holy Spirit in time and place and it is the basis of charism, spirit and spirituality. Every other congregation can say the same of itself.

Congruence Both the Society and the individual who comes to it will want to explore the possibility of growing together. Is there enough congruence? Is the affinity a gift of God, a bonding by the Holy Spirit, or is it a superficial attraction? Is membership in the Society going to enhance the person's freedom, or will it stunt her? This question is of the utmost importance because the Society is a voluntary association of free persons growing toward greater freedom together for a greater service.

Separation Formation in the Society, then, is based on the continuity and coherence of the person who is always in the condition of becoming, and it establishes and validates whether belonging to the Society is integral to that becoming. At the same time formation, whether initial or on-going, is always introducing discontinuity into a person's life. In every new phase of development, something is sloughed off and left behind. If there is drama, it is here, because separation is not accomplished without struggle and loss. Anyone who comes freely into the Society exposes herself to a revolution -- a turning and turning again from the false self, false values in the culture, all that beclouds truth, all that insults the dignity and freedom of her own being or of anyone else's being.

Evangelical Henceforth the gospel will be the basic criterion of counsels living. For the sake of the gospel a person conditions her independence, re-evaluates things as means, not ends in themselves, and reorientates her social/relational life so that other persons become ends, not means. The deepest struggles of the formative process will be in these three areas which are the province of her vows. At various times over a lifetime one or another area will become problematic. The will to come to grips again and again brings a person to a new degree of transparency before God and to a greater clarity and power in witnessing to the gospel. In freeing herself, the person frees others from being instrumentalized and things from being exploited for selfish ends.

'Space enough Formation is on-going, but the person's path as she and time' moves through life will have loops and bends and roundabouts. If road-blocks and detours are not anticipated as normal, disillusionment on the one side and disapproval on the other can embitter the sweetness of belonging. The beginning of the road is not the end although the individual and others might wish it so. Fortunately God has provided a lifetime for the life cycle to complete itself. The person in formation turns slowly 'into the image that she reflects.' The point of it all is that she keep tending toward the face of God in which she reads her own deepest meaning, brushing aside 'the sin that clings.' The Society, too, is in formation. The one who is 'perfect' will find in it much to lament. The one on the way will have a corporate companion in her manifest weakness.

Owning one's reality The primary responsibility for formation in the Society rests with the person being formed. She is the subject, not the object, of formation. In the measure that her choice of religious life is a free one, her active participation in the project of formation will be engaged, and she will use creatively the ordinary service of accompaniment the Society provides -- in the programs put at her disposal and in the persons of novice director, community members, superiors, counsellors and spiritual directors. No one comes to religious life or lives it free of hang-ups, psychological and emotional wounds, a propensity to selfishness, unfinished business from childhood and a history of infidelity to the true self-in-God. The stuff of reality is the eloquent signpost to self-transcendence.

'The ways of God are many ...'

Ministry from meaning There are some very great challenges inherent in formation to apostolic religious life as the Society lives it. As agents of the Gospel, individuals are being prepared to relate responsibly, that is both positively and critically, to a modern culture whose values are often ambiguous and which is in ever more rapid, more irreversible evolution. The meaning that integrates and interprets one's own person is perhaps the only meaning that many modern women and men will have access to. It is the same meaning which undergirds history, but it cannot be appropriated apart from a personally held faith. Always implied in the specific ministry for which a person is preparing herself is the all-encompassing global ministry of leading people to discover coherence and meaning in life, in history, in the world as it is. To discover meaning -- that there is meaning and that it is situated in a God who is passionately attentive to our process of becoming, personal and historical -- is to build the bridge between our life ad intra and ad extra. What God means toward each person he means toward every person and all people together through time. That which a person finds unfolding in herself she can point to and proclaim at the core of reality. The ground of her being becomes the ground of hope for each and every other.

Prayer Traditionally, the Society has a deep commitment to prayer and to the life of prayer. There is an inner face to the Society's existence that corresponds to its reverence and support for the inner action of God in each member. It is in no way opposed to mission, which is an outward expansive impulse. The work of formation lays bare the connections between interiority and exteriority, between the inner forum to which all that is happening in the outer reality is brought for interpretation, and the outer forum to which all that is seen within finds its external counterpart. If a person can develop the clairvoyance to contemplate God's active meaning within her interactions and give it a name, it is because she is monitoring, with an inner eye, a love that embraces the arc of her becoming. Ministry is the school of prayer where the newcomer learns to contemplate in motion. It lends to contemplation in solitude an experiential knowledge of the apostolic dynamism that is situated at the still point.

Rhythm of life Every temperament and personality has its own rhythm of becoming and proportional balance between activity and rest. Furthermore, rhythms and proportions shift -- and they are expected to shift -- at each stage of a person's life. Inflexibility and adherence to one pattern when another is indicated stunts growth and deforms rather than forms a person. The setting within which both pace and pattern are discerned is ministry. The primary responsibility for discernment in these matters rests with the person using all the means available to her. If she is formed to a discerning life, she will know which means to use and when.

Discernment Because a woman who joins the Society will be in constant dialogue with the world as it is, a vital part of her formation will have to do with developing the criteria and skills by which to critique and make an evangelical response to the immediate and wider reality. What trends in the culture -- local, national and international -- are positive and need to be consciously nurtured as constitutive of the kingdom? How to identify the bad seed, the tares among the wheat, and what to do about it? Laying the groundwork for moral/ethical judgment and the formation of conscience in an increasingly complex technologically determined society is a formation priority. A person's dignity and freedom today require a formation which gives her a way of standing out against the slogans, propaganda, manipulated responses and subtle determinants present in our cultures. The Society forms a person to be present in the world, not as a submarine in the sea, iron-clad and pressurized against it, but as a sponge. The sponge keeps its shape and resiliency by absorbing water and structuring it according to its own consistency.

Community The most formative single experience in religious life is community. Notwithstanding an emphasis in the Society on each one's personal itinerary and a care to affirm and support it, each one voluntarily accompanies the others on the journey and makes with them a faith environment. If she is open to it, community reveals a person to herself even more quickly than introspection and provides her with partners in dialogue with whom to reflect on and respond to reality. Growth is always a collaborative venture. Community brings people into immediate, day to day proximity, but that is not enough to incarnate the covenant. Tendencies to individualism need to be offset by interlocking commitments which free persons undertake towards each other.

Faith rooted in the human It is in community that maturing faith and developing human maturity intersect and interact to create a setting where each one can go on being formed. Because the bond in community is rooted primarily in faith, it is vulnerable to all the vagaries which individuals experience in their own faith life. The way a person responds to community situations reveals to her the state of her own faith and the level of human maturity she has reached. Her reflection on experience in community will give to her current goals in formation a practical specificity. Community becomes for her a valuable test of her own reality.

False expectations Each person's formation in the Society is launched in community. To begin with, a woman's expectations of community can be extremely high. As she moves from place to place she is apt to become disillusioned. The reality is not the dream. Only when a person decides to meet reality on its own ground, not attempting to refashion it according to her own idea, is she free and does she leave others free to grow and to act in the best interests of the group. In fact, reality grounds hope. Where there is denial of reality, people are building in the air. No formation is possible.

Community and culture It is not easy for isolated individuals to maintain a gospel perspective within our culture. Community can help by providing an evangelical sub-culture which is open and welcoming. In community people are engaged in creating together the 'civilization of love' which is the kingdom. Where there is commitment in community to the growth of persons in a faith life that is at home in the human, God's dream for his people has already materialized in place and time.

Physical embodiment Besides the body of the Society, formation takes into account two other bodies within which a Society member lives, and it helps her to inhabit them more comfortably -- her own psycho/physical body and the mystical body which is the Church. Affectivity and human sexuality are at the root of being a body-person. A formation which enables the person to embrace and integrate her affectivity and her sexuality honors the Incarnation and prepares her for positive human relationships within a celibate lifestyle.

Ecclesial embodiment As an entity, the Society is part of the corporate embodiment of Christ which is the Church. Apart from the Church which ratifies the Society's mandate and guarantees its authenticity, the Society has no viability. Yet the Church, too, is in a time-bound process of becoming until the parousia. It encompasses many traditions and cultures, many human points of view, even conflicting interpretations of the one Magisterium. A Society member becomes more closely identified with the Church. Her best model for living constructively within the ecclesial reality is Cornelia. A careful study of Cornelia's way of perceiving the Church, of living as Church, and of coping with some distressing by-products of the Church's humanness will serve to moderate two extreme reactions often witnessed today -- aggressive liberalism and defensive fundamentalism.

Personal faith A formation which educates affectivity and promotes mature loyalties is not enough. The person needs a solid intellectual base for both. A formation which develops the intellect and provides a culture is not enough. The person needs to be seized by God. This fundamental faith engagement between God and the person is the only basis upon which a life in the Society can be lived.

'...He knows how to lead to the same end by diverse means.' C.C.

Openings The Society of the Holy Child Jesus is an international congregation. More and more, its internationality on the world is a resource for living and ministering in a world linked in all its parts for good and ill. The Society's internationality is no automatic guarantee that its members will think or feel beyond their immediate surroundings. Nor is knowing about sisters in other countries and cultures any longer sufficient if a person is to have an existential link with others at a distance. New members of the Society must be able to meet, exchange ideas and experiences and sometimes share life with sisters of other nationalities and cultures. If all differences are suppressed, there is nothing left to share or to learn. A person whose spirit is educated to openness toward realities other than her own will have a particular commitment to ecumenism. Her desires will tend toward a shared faith with those who share a common redeemed humanity.

Transforma- Formation has to do with transformation, with incarnation tions and with inculturation. In the measure that a person is on the way to transformation she becomes more whole, more consistent with herself in her body-person. The Society where she lives out the project of becoming is also formed and transformed by her presence. As a witness to the body of the Church, the Society is situated in the real world and, through its members, remains in constant creative dialogue with it. It is inculturated wherever it is situated. Through the Society's implantation in a local culture, another kind of transformation is also in preparation. In modest, imperceptible ways, new seeds are being sown, the geography is changing, the ecology of the kingdom is evolving.

Visions Back to the person. What will be asked of her in the Society? Precisely what was asked of Cornelia, of Jesus Christ -- to be faithful to a divine call. To be a follower of Jesus is to be ruled by a logic which comes from above and is planted in the world like the tiniest seed. God becomes human -- the smallest possible human person. Loss is gain; folly is wisdom; enemies are loved friends; the last are first. In the Christianity Jesus founded this turning of the tables appears in the world like institutional madness. The one called to religious life and to this Society is a witness to such madness and highlights it. If she compromises too much with the 'sane,' with the logic that comes from below, she loses her credentials. There is a point of crucial tension between what comes from above and what comes from below. Formation enables a person to identify that point, to see all of reality from its perspective and to remain poised there, interpreted, redeemed and transformed by the power that comes from on high.