

1. INITIAL FORMATION: CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES

With a view to implementing what we asserted in the document of the XX General Chapter on formation processes, which *must be tailor-made for each individual, fostering comprehensive maturity, enabling us to live a meaningful consecrated life with a solid and dynamic charismatic identity*¹, Sister María Asunción Riopedre, Vicar General in charge of formation, addressed the issue of initial formation on the basis of the reflections which emerged in the previous Plenary Council. She especially focused on the reorganization of the fifth year of Juniorate and/or Josefinato and the urgent need to provide for the formation of formation mistresses.

We first shared some of our impressions of the meeting for formation mistresses which was held in Rome in April, following the International Congress for Formators, and as part of the initiatives for the year on consecrated life. After that, we were invited to reflect on the **main concerns and challenges** facing us in the Congregation in the area of initial formation.

It is important for us to be aware of such concerns so that we can all get involved in addressing them, since the formation of an institute is a responsibility of all its members, and the renewal of the consecrated life depends primarily on formation². Along the same lines, the Chapter Document recognizes the centrality of formation in the process of renewal of our fundamental option for Jesus Christ in hospitaller consecrated life³.

Initially, I would like to present you with a synthesis of this reflection, following which I will report on the concrete conclusions reached in relation to the reorganization of the fifth year of Juniorate and/or Josefinato and other matters.

a) Formation of Formators

It was observed that there are few formation mistresses and that because of their many occupations, not always do they give the appropriate priority to their ministry. Some sisters are not sufficiently prepared for this specific function, and shortcomings are perceived especially in the area of the charism. There are difficulties in personal accompaniment and in giving priority to the personal interview as an essential means for a sound formative process.

In view of all this, there is an **urgent need to prepare sisters for formation** and update the skills of those already involved in this ministry. Priority must be given to their role as formation mistresses, avoiding the accumulation of tasks that may be incompatible with the mission entrusted to them. It is necessary to support them, respect their orientations and foster a greater communication and coordination among formation mistresses, the superiors of communities where there are sisters in formation and major superiors.

Faced with so many pressing needs, we recognize how difficult it is to release sisters to enable them to prepare to become formators. However, we agree that this is to be one of our main **priorities** and every canonical structure of the Congregation must commit to carry out concrete actions in this respect.

When appointing sisters to take on this role or when considering sisters who might carry out this service, we are to consider the criteria set forth in number 78 of our Constitutions, paying special attention to their human maturity, personal balance and coherence of life. Also, they should identify with the vocation and charism of the Congregation, should be adequately trained to serve the poor, should have the experience of being accompanied themselves, and should be able to fulfil their charge with responsibility.

b) Formation Teams and Sisters who Work in Formation

We recognize that it is not always easy to find sisters who will be part of the formation teams and contribute to imparting theoretical and practical formation to hospitaller life and to the discernment of formation processes. At times, these sisters do not have a clear understanding of their role, and do not feel sufficiently integrated into the formation team. Another issue is that sometimes, though respectful of confidentiality, they are not sufficiently informed about the process which the sisters in formation are going through.

It is necessary to establish and/or review formation teams, **clearly define the formative role of the communities** and follow common criteria when it comes to formation. The sisters making up the formation teams should be humane and spiritually well integrated; they should identify with the vocation and charism of the Institute and have the ability to integrate differences. Care should be taken to make sure that the teams serving interprovincial formation structures are made up of sisters from different cultures.

The need is recognized to be able to rely on the **specific collaboration** of sisters who have deepened our charism and spirituality, and to work on the intercultural dimension in the teams and communities where there are sisters in formation.

c) Formation Processes

In the Chapter Document, we state that, *“formation pathways, particularly in the initial phases of the Hospitaller life, must be tailor-made for each individual, fostering comprehensive maturity, enabling us to live a meaningful consecrated life with a solid and dynamic charismatic identity; formation looks to our origins and promotes inculturation”⁴.*

Looking at our reality, we recognize that not always are formation processes generating **transformative thrusts** which touch the life and reach the deepest essence of the human person. We should ask ourselves some questions when confronted with the vocational inconsistency of some sisters, who leave the Congregation in the Juniorate, in the first years of perpetual vows or at other times. We should ask ourselves whether we are really forming persons who are mature from a human and vocational point of view, with a strong identity as believers and a charismatic dimension, whether we are creating enabling conditions for their vocational discernment, with a special emphasis on the spiritual and formative accompaniment of junior sisters, in a fraternal environment which can foster openness, trust and freedom.

We should implement formation pathways, as suggested in the General Plan of Formation. Such pathways should start with the reality of the person and ought to consider **all of their dimensions**; they should help sisters in formation to grow as women with a passion for Jesus Christ, as sisters who generate communion and as Hospitallers showing compassion to humanity⁵, with a strong sense of belonging to the Congregation.

We must especially ensure that the formator is able to guarantee a formative **accompaniment**, although psychological and/or spiritual accompaniment, according to need, are not to be ruled out. In this regard, it is very important to establish and foster an atmosphere of trust and confidentiality, for this facilitates transparency and accompaniment.

It is equally crucially important to **evaluate the formation process**. This is to be considered as an exercise of responsible discernment, in which the sister in formation, the formation mistress, the team, the sisters in the community and the major superiors, give their assessment of the progress achieved by the sister, on the basis of a realistic vision and an awareness of the process. Reports and self-evaluation exercises must be adequately performed, and the positive and negative aspects which characterize all human and spiritual growth processes should be clearly expressed.

There are formation processes which after a process of discernment, on the part of the Congregation and/or the sister in formation, end with the sister's departure from the Institute. These are difficult moments which we must face with a spirit of charity and that we are to accompany according to the hospitaller spirit. As Pope Francis reminded formators, "as one accompanies the entry, accompany the exit too, so that he or she may find the path in life, with the necessary help. Not with that defence that is bread for today and hunger for tomorrow"⁶.

In this area, and with a view to ensuring the **continuity** of formation processes, it is necessary to review at different levels the means and modes of communication and coordination between formators at the different stages and major superiors.

d) Selection and Discernment Criteria

Although we did not reflect specifically on selection criteria, we did observe the need to have as a point of reference the guidance provided in our Constitutions, Directory and General Plan of Formation⁷.

It is crucial to **know the young candidates well**: who they are, where they come from (their family and social context) and how they live. Based on this reality, it is important to involve them in a process during which they are accompanied. The **stage before postulancy** (aspirancy) should be given ample time, so as to foster mutual understanding, human development and growth in the faith, and in order for the candidate to confirm her love for Jesus Christ and begin her service to the sick.

We are asked to be particularly attentive to the young candidates who come to us after having had **experiences in other Congregations**. **We are to request the relevant** information, as an additional element that can help us in our discernment.

We also discussed the **maximum age for admission in the postulancy** and agreed that we should not admit anyone beyond the range of **35 to 40 years**; ideally, we should aim for the younger lower end of the spectrum. As regards this specific criterion, due consideration should be given to the cultural context in which the young women who wish to join the Congregation live.

e) Centers and Formation Structures

The Chapter Document asks us to *“reorganize the initial formation structures, being sure that this is done in a place which offers the best possible quality guarantees, and is able to hand on meaningful experiences of fraternal life and apostolic mission”*⁸.

We discussed this issue, and observed that it requires a more in-depth analysis, although the need is felt to move towards interprovincial formation centers or structures. In this respect, the challenge emerges to work on the intercultural dimension and the learning of foreign languages. We reiterated the need to see to it that the community environments and the experiences of apostolic service facilitate the formation process and initiation to/consolidation of hospitaller religious life.

As regards the stages of ***aspirancy and postulancy***, the tendency is towards organizing them in one’s own country, providing for sufficient time to achieve the goals set for this stage. The last months of postulancy should take place in the country where the candidates will be entering the novitiate, as this will make it easier for them to progressively adapt and learn the local language.

f) 5th Year of Juniorate and/or “Josefinato”

This issue had been dealt with at the XXII Plenary Council. This time, however, on the basis of a more comprehensive reflection, we reached a consensus on the way to reorganize this stage of the formation process.

It was decided that the ***fifth year of Juniorate would become the year of preparation and “decision-making” leading up to the final choice***. In practical terms, this would mean the following:

- On the fifth year of Juniorate, all the sisters will go to Ciempozuelos where they will devote their time to preparation, to discern their decision before making perpetual vows;
- During the same period of time and according to their disposition and to the progress achieved, candidates will make a request to be admitted to perpetual profession;
- Both those who will be admitted to perpetual profession as well as those who will be granted an extension will continue the formation process they have undertaken until the end. Once the process is over, they will return to their province, where some will make their perpetual profession, according to the date and place determined with their major superior. The others will continue their formation process, according to a previously established plan. When they are ready, they will ask to be admitted to perpetual profession.

The urgent need is reiterated to learn the Spanish language and come to Spain beforehand to practice it, so as to make the best possible use of this time of formation.

g) Other Aspects

It was generally recognized that there is the need to have an understanding of, deepen, digest and implement the ***General Plan of Formation***, considering the guidelines set forth therein when developing the formation programs for the different stages. We are to pay special attention to the issues and thrusts specific to our hospitaller identity, and work towards an adequate inculturation of our charism.

It is also necessary to structure the stage of the **first years of perpetual vows** and accompany the sisters, helping them in any way to progressively identify with the values connected with the following of Jesus in hospitalier consecrated life.

It is also requested that special care be devoted to the translation of the Congregation's texts into other languages, so as to facilitate access to them on the part of all sisters.

Perhaps I have been rather lengthy in sharing with you the concerns and challenges emerging in the area of formation, but we are interested in addressing all aspects of formation, and want all sisters to have this same concern at heart, so that we are prompted to find the necessary and most adequate answers.

¹ HOSPITALIER SISTERS, *Recreate Hospitality. Paths of Revitalization*, Rome, 2012, 5.

² JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, Rome 1996, 68.

³ HOSPITALIER SISTERS, *Recreate Hospitality. Paths of Revitalization*, 4, 5 and 6; Lines of Action 1.3., 1.4., 1.5.

⁴ HOSPITALIER SISTERS, *Recreate Hospitality. Paths of Revitalization*, 5.

⁵ Cf. HOSPITALIER SISTERS, *Recreate Hospitality. Paths of Revitalization*, 4.

⁶ POPE FRANCIS, *Address to participants of a meeting for Formators of Consecrated Men and Women*, Rome 11 April 2015.

⁷ Cf. HOSPITALIER SISTERS, *Constitutions and Directory*, 70; *General Plan of Formation*, 204.

⁸ HOSPITALIER SISTERS, *Recreate Hospitality. Paths of Revitalization*, Line of Action 1.3.