

# **The Formation of Affectivity**

A Christian Approach

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To all those who,  
by sharing with me their eagerness to improve,  
have shown me  
the greatness of the human heart



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	11
1. Teacher, What Should I Do to Achieve Eternal Life?.....	11
2. The Formation of Affectivity .....	12
3. Psychology and Formation .....	13
4. About This Book.....	15
I. PERSONALITY AND AFFECTIVITY .....	17
WHAT IS PERSONALITY?.....	19
1. The Concept of Personality .....	19
2. Temperament, Character and Personality .....	21
3. Personality Traits.....	22
4. OCEAN: The Big Five of Personality.....	23
a) Openness.....	24
b) Conscientiousness.....	25
c) Extraversion .....	25
d) Agreeableness .....	26
e) Neuroticism.....	26
5. The Locus of Control.....	27
6. The Defense Mechanisms of the Ego .....	28
6. Implications for One’s Personal Life and for the Task of Formation.....	29
7. Conditioned but Not Determined.....	30
HOW CAN WE ASSESS MATURITY?.....	33
1. When Will You Grow Up? .....	33
2. Criterion Zero: Identity.....	34
3. First Criterion: Extension of the Sense of Self.....	35
4. Second Criterion: Warm Relating of Self to Others .....	37
5. Third Criterion: Emotional Security (Self-acceptance).....	39

6. Fourth Criterion: Realistic Perception, Skills and Assignments .....	40
7. Fifth Criterion: Insight and Humor .....	41
8. Sixth Criterion: The Unifying Philosophy of Life .....	42
9. From Maturity to the Identification with Christ .....	44
LOVING ONESELF TO BE ABLE TO LOVE .....	47
1. God, Myself and Others? .....	47
2. The Origin of Self-love .....	48
3. Seeing Oneself in the Light of God .....	51
4. Humility and Truth .....	53
5. God, the Others and Myself .....	54
WHAT DO WE MEAN BY AFFECTIVITY? .....	55
1. A Teenager's Text Messages .....	55
2. A Potential Definition .....	56
3. The Shortcomings of Affectivity .....	57
4. Original Sin and Its Consequences .....	58
5. Restoring the Image of God .....	59
THE DEVELOPMENT OF AFFECTIVITY BASED ON THE THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES .....	63
1. One of Many Approaches .....	63
2. Faith .....	63
3. Hope .....	67
4. Charity .....	69
a) If I Have No Love, It's No Use to Me .....	69
b) Loving and Feeling Loved .....	70
c) Learning to Love .....	71
5. A Fertile Ground .....	73
II. INNER GROWTH THROUGHOUT THE LIFE CYCLE .....	75
THE LIFE CYCLE .....	77
1. What is the Life Cycle .....	77

2. The Psychosocial Stages .....	80
3. The Theory of Attachment .....	81
CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE.....	85
1. The Child .....	85
a) The Developmental Stages of Childhood.....	85
b) Guidance for Formators.....	87
2. The Adolescent .....	90
a) The Ever-Present Generational Gap.....	90
b) Setting the Boundaries .....	91
c) Building Identity .....	93
ADULTHOOD .....	99
1. The Young Adult.....	99
a) Setting the Boundaries.....	99
b) Entering the Work Force.....	100
c) Setting Up a New Home .....	101
d) The crisis of the 30's .....	102
2. The Fullness of Life .....	103
a) Setting the Boundaries.....	103
b) The 40's: Stability vs. Search for Novelty .....	105
c) The 50's: Stability Without Rigidity.....	108
d) The Empty Nest Syndrome.....	110
IMPROVING CHARACTER IN ADULTHOOD: TAKING CARE OF RELATIONSHIPS....	113
1. The Family .....	113
2. The Workplace .....	115
3. Friends.....	115
4. No Confusion and Having a Clear Hierarchy.....	119
OLD AGE.....	121
1. Who Says When Old Age Begins? .....	121
2. Setting the Boundaries .....	122

3. The Signs of Ageing .....	123
a) The Need to Anticipate .....	123
b) Physical and Cognitive Changes .....	123
c) Social Changes .....	125
4. Excursus: When There is No Retirement .....	127
5. Getting Ready for Old Age .....	128
6. A Stage to Continue Growing.....	129
7. Getting Ready to Leap Across to the Eternal Home.....	133
WHEN THE END IS NIGH .....	135
1. On Death and Dying .....	135
2. First Stage: Denial.....	135
3. The Second Stage: Anger .....	137
4. Third Stage: Bargaining .....	139
5. Fourth Stage: Depression.....	139
6. Fifth Stage: Acceptance .....	141
7. Keeping Company for a Christian Death.....	142
III. THE CHRISTIAN VIRTUE OF CHASTITY .....	147
WHY CHASTITY? .....	149
1. Why Can't I Enjoy My Body Anyway I Want to? .....	149
2. Entering a New Life .....	150
3. A Temple of the Holy Spirit.....	151
4. Sex Is a Good Thing... When It Is Lived in An Orderly Fashion .....	152
5. The Disorder of Concupiscence.....	154
6. The Virtue of Chastity.....	156
7. The Traditional Means.....	158
8. Affectivity and Chastity.....	162
THE ADDICTION OF THE 21 <sup>ST</sup> CENTURY .....	165
1. The Virtual World .....	165
2. Is it a Vice or an Addiction? .....	165
3. Addiction and the Internet.....	166



4. A Medical Issue.....	168
5. A Social Problem .....	170
6. The more Vulnerable Individuals .....	174
 HELPING OTHERS TO LIVE CHASTITY.....	 179
1. New Problems, New Strategies .....	179
2. Using the Internet Wisely .....	180
3. Finding a Personal Solution for Each Individual.....	184
4. Catechesis, Spiritual Accompaniment and Confession.....	185
5. Professional Help.....	188
6. Moral Responsibility .....	193
 CHRISTIAN CELIBACY .....	 197
1. Gift and Mystery.....	197
2. Affectivity and Celibacy .....	200
3. The Affectivity of Jesus Christ .....	203
4. A Psychologically Healthy Celibacy.....	204
5. Some Situations that Require Special Discernment.....	208
 IV. WHEN AFFECTIVITY IS DISTURBED.....	 215
 AFFECTIVE DISORDERS .....	 217
1. Mental Illness .....	217
2. Anxiety .....	218
3. Sadness and Depression .....	219
4. Burnout Syndrome .....	220
5. Preventing Affective Pathology .....	222
a) A Healthy Lifestyle .....	223
b) Taking Care of Rest.....	224
c) Amending Cognitive Distortions.....	226
d) Optimizing Working Time .....	227
e) A Stress-Proof Life of Piety .....	231
6. When Illness Comes .....	234

PERSONALITY DISORDERS .....	237
1. Personality and its Disorders.....	237
2. How to Help from a Formation Perspective.....	239
3. Classification of Personality Disorders .....	242
Cluster A: The Eccentrics .....	243
Cluster B: The Extrovert or Self-Centered .....	244
Cluster C: The Introvert or Anxious .....	246
3. The Avoidant-Dependent Personality.....	247
4. The Obsessive-Perfectionist Personality .....	250
EPILOGUE.....	255
A HEALTHY FORMATIVE STYLE .....	257
1. Two Ways of Forming People .....	257
2. Parenting Styles .....	258
3. The Personality of the Formator .....	262
a) Mature Personality and Life of Virtue .....	262
b) Showing Oneself to Be Vulnerable.....	264
c) The Formation of the Formator .....	264
d) Concern for the Whole Person.....	265
e) Respect for the Individual and Their Timing.....	267
f) Overcoming One's Own Demons .....	268
4. It is Worth It .....	271
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	273
1. General Bibliography .....	273
2. Personality and Affectivity .....	273
3. Inner Growth Throughout the Life Cycle .....	274
4. The Christian Virtue of Chastity .....	275
5. When Affectivity is Disturbed.....	276
6. A Healthy Formative Style.....	277

# A HEALTHY FORMATIVE STYLE

Francisco Insa\*

## 1. *Two Ways of Forming People*

As we come to the end of the book I would like to make some observations about what it means to be a formator. So far we have talked about how to help people looking for guidance in their lives. Now is the time to look at ourselves and ask: can this important task be carried out by anyone, or only by a few special people? What specific skills should be acquired or improved in order to carry out this task? What aspects of one's own personality should be tempered so that they are not a negative influence? How does one combine affection and high demands, or high goals with the directee's potential?

First of all we should point out that there are two ways of forming, which depend on where one's emphasis is placed. Both can lead to the same external results – people acting righteously – but the learner's interiority will be very different depending on the case.

A *healthy formation style* produces free people. They understand what is good for them, make it their own and try to put it into practice in the various circumstances of their lives. This model is based on explaining the “whys” and “how comes” from the point of view of the person concerned, i.e. not by listing externally imposed rules or criteria, but by showing that the content of these rules has deep roots and that it is in their best interest to internalize them, that they will help them become better people. As a direct consequence, the person concerned will know how to apply general criteria to specific situations with initiative, creativity, flexibility and epikeia.<sup>1</sup> Let us go deeper into the concept of epikeia.

Epikēia<sup>2</sup> is a virtue that perfects moral judgment by enabling it to reach the right decision even in exceptional circumstances, or circumstances not foreseen by the rule. It is not a simple

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<sup>1</sup> “Epikēia: A liberal interpretation of law in instances not provided by the letter of the law. It presupposes sincerity in wanting to observe the law, and interprets the mind of the lawgiver in supplying his presumed intent to include a situation that is not covered by the law. It favors the liberty of the interpreter without contradicting the express will of the lawgiver,” J. HARDON, *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, Eternal Life, Bardstown 2000 (<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/dictionary/index.cfm?id=33347> (accessed: September 19, 2021)).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 120, art. 1; A. RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, A. RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, *Scelti in Cristo per essere santi. Elementi di teologia morale fondamentale*, Edusc, Roma 2003, pp. 296-301 (English edition: *Chosen in Christ to Be Saints: Fundamental Moral Theology*, Createspace Independent Pub, 2014).

exception to a rule, or of applying a rule in a flexible or progressive manner, but of doing so by this criterion: whoever understands the meaning of a rule knows that in a specific case it should not be followed, because the same person who established it would not have considered it appropriate in the particular circumstance. For example, a teacher may say, “you have to be on time for class.” But if on my way to class I come across someone in serious need, my obligation would be to attend to that person, even if makes me late and it breaks the rule. It is not really an exception (otherwise we would have to add a long list of exceptions to every rule) but rather an understanding that the complete sense of the rule would be: “we must be on time for class unless a serious need requires our attention.” What exactly is serious enough to warrant tardiness, the measure of charity towards the needy and charity towards one’s classmates, etc., is something that a virtuous person is capable of discerning as a matter of course. There are different ways to err in this virtue. One type of person abuses *epikeia*—sometimes under the mask of freedom of spirit—as a way to lower his standards when he finds something difficult or unpleasant. On the other end of the spectrum, rigid types cling to the letter of the law and so pass over the need of their neighbor, like the priest and the Levite did in the parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. *Lk* 10:30-37).<sup>3</sup> This example can be applied to many situations in life where conflicting interests and obligations are impossible to reconcile.

There is also an *unhealthy formative style* that constricts people because it does not encourage or respect their personal freedom. It insists on the subject improving in certain areas but forgets about the person as a whole. It is satisfied if they fulfil their obligations regardless of whether they understand the reasons, and sometimes it overloads them with rules, fosters mistrust, and can lead to excessive control or even coercion.

We will now look at some features of both styles by drawing from educational sciences.

## 2. Parenting Styles

When we talk about formation, the “main analogue” is the work that parents do with their children. This has been studied from several points of view and can shed light on our reflections. Many authors have tried to categorize the various styles of parenting. Here I will

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<sup>3</sup> There is a famous social experiment that illustrates the above. It was conducted in 1973 at the American University of Princeton. In brief, some students at Princeton Theological Seminary were asked to give a lecture on the Good Samaritan. On the day of the conference, an urgency factor was put in place: some were told that people were waiting for them for a few minutes; others were told that the participants were ready; and finally, a third group was told that the conference would begin a few minutes earlier than scheduled. In other words, high, intermediate, and low hurry conditions were created. Everyone had to cross the campus to get to the lecture hall, and on the way they “accidentally” found a man with clear signs of suffering a severe respiratory crisis. Well, only 10% of those in a high state of urgency hurry, 45% of those in an intermediate state, and 63% of those in a low state stopped to attend to this man. The researchers reported that “on several occasions, a seminary student going to give his talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan literally stepped over the victim as he hurried on his way!” (cf. J.M., Darley, C.D. Batson, ““From Jerusalem to Jericho”: A study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 27 (1973) 100-108).

use a model with two intersecting parameters: demands and affection (Figure 6).<sup>4</sup> The dashed lines emphasize that the quadrants are not watertight compartments. Usually there are no pure styles, but rather a mixture of all of them with a greater or lesser proportion of each of the ingredients.

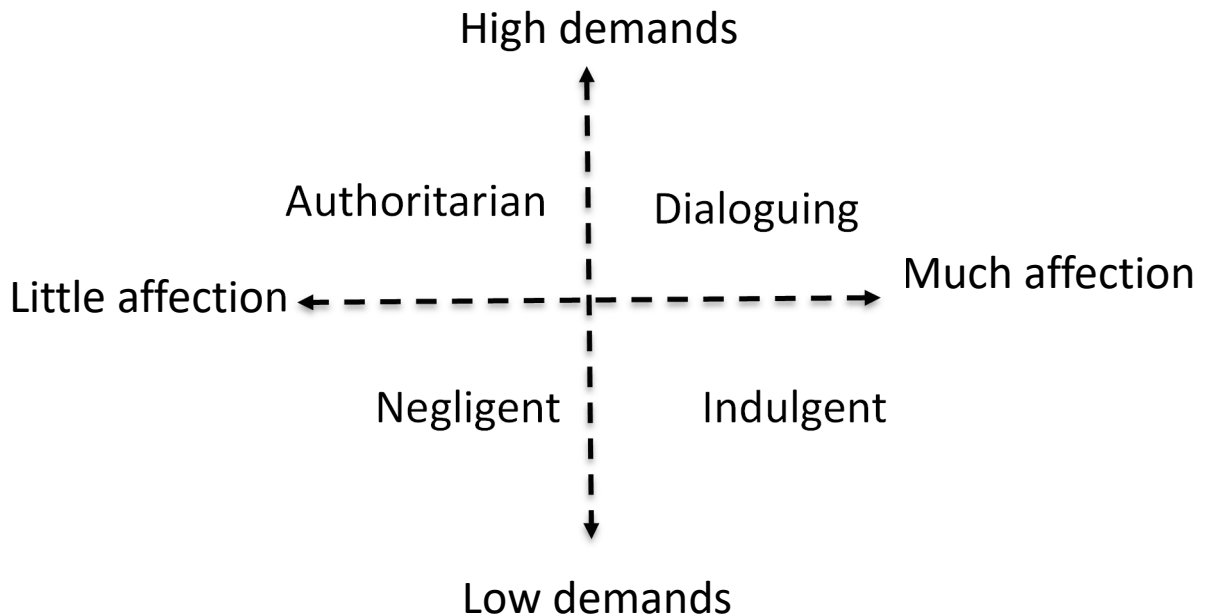


Figure 6. The parenting styles.

The combination of the two parameters determines four styles: dialoguing, authoritarian, negligent and indulgent. Table 23 shows the main features of each of them, both from the point of view of the educator's behavior and the consequences they have on the child.

	Parental behavioral traits	Educational impact on children
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<sup>4</sup> Cf. S. TORÍO LÓPEZ, J.V. PEÑA CALVO, M.C. RODRÍGUEZ MENÉNDEZ, "Estilos educativos parentales. Revisión bibliográfica y reformulación teórica," *Teoría de la Educación* 20 (2008) 151-178; C. CHICLANA ACTIS, "Formación y evaluación psicológica del candidato al sacerdocio," *Scripta Theologica* 51 (2019) 467-504.

Dialoguing	<p>Overt affection.</p> <p>Sensitivity to the child's needs: responsibility.</p> <p>Explanations.</p> <p>Promoting desirable behaviour.</p> <p>Inductive discipline or reasoned punitive technique (deprivation, reprimands).</p> <p>Promoting exchange and open communication.</p> <p>Home with affectionate warmth and a democratic environment.</p>	<p>Social competence.</p> <p>Self-control.</p> <p>Motivation.</p> <p>Initiative.</p> <p>Autonomous morality.</p> <p>High self-esteem.</p> <p>Cheerfulness and spontaneity.</p> <p>Realistic self-conception.</p> <p>Responsibility and faithfulness to personal commitments.</p> <p>Prosociality inside and outside the home (altruism, solidarity).</p> <p>High motivation for achievement.</p> <p>Parent-child conflicts decrease in frequency and intensity.</p>
Authoritarian	<p>Detailed and rigid rules.</p> <p>Frequent punishments and infrequent praise.</p> <p>No parental responsibility</p> <p>Closed or one-way communication (no dialogue).</p> <p>Assertion of power</p> <p>Home marked by an autocratic climate.</p>	<p>Low autonomy and self-confidence.</p> <p>Low personal autonomy and creativity.</p> <p>Low social competence.</p> <p>Aggressiveness and impulsiveness.</p> <p>Heteronomous morality (avoidance of punishment).</p> <p>Less cheerfulness and spontaneity.</p>

Negligent	<p>Indifference to the children's attitudes and behaviors, both positive and negative.</p> <p>Responsiveness and attention to children's needs.</p> <p>Permissiveness.</p> <p>Passivity.</p> <p>Low assertion of authority and imposition of restrictions.</p> <p>Infrequent use of punishment, toleration of all children's impulses.</p> <p>Particular flexibility in setting rules.</p> <p>Easy accommodation of children's wishes.</p>	<p>Low social competence.</p> <p>Poor self-control and heterocontrol.</p> <p>Low motivation.</p> <p>Little respect for rules and people.</p> <p>Low self-esteem, insecurity.</p> <p>Emotional instability.</p> <p>Weak self-identity.</p> <p>Negative self-conception.</p> <p>Severe lack of self-confidence and self-responsibility.</p> <p>Poor school performance.</p>
Indulgent	<p>No emotional involvement in the children's affairs.</p> <p>Disengagement in the educational task, they invest as little time as possible in their children.</p> <p>Low motivation and capacity for effort.</p> <p>Immaturity.</p> <p>Cheerfulness and vitality.</p>	<p>Poor social competence.</p> <p>Poor control of impulses and aggressiveness.</p> <p>Low motivation and capacity for effort.</p> <p>Immaturity.</p> <p>Cheerfulness and vitality.</p>

Table 23. Family education styles and child behaviour<sup>5</sup>.

Obviously, the dialoguing style is the best option. Demands are properly balanced with affection and dialogue.

The personality of children will be strongly conditioned by these patterns. For example, the authoritarian style fosters a rigid, perfectionistic and anxious mindset. Alternatively it may result in rebellion against authority and rules. The negligent style, on the other hand, generates affective shortcomings that the subject will attempt to fill with relationships that are not always healthy, like what we saw in the previous chapter.

The relationship established with one's parents in childhood tends to be replicated in adult life with other educators or authority figures: teachers, formators, bosses, superiors, etc. The subject will usually be equally submissive, compliant, tense, rebellious, dependent, etc. And when they take on a formation role, they may act in either of two ways. The usual approach is to repeat the pattern of behaviour with which they were raised, which reproduces the mistakes they made and perpetuates them. On the other hand, their desire to avoid these

<sup>5</sup> Cf. TORÍO LÓPEZ, PEÑA CALVO, RODRÍGUEZ MENÉNDEZ, "Estilos educativos parentales," pp. 164-165.

mistakes, leads them to fall into the opposite extreme, i.e. the person who was brought up in an authoritarian or negligent manner becomes excessively overprotective.

Finally, we point out that parenting styles influence the image of God that the student will internalize.<sup>6</sup> In the dialoguing model, God will be seen as someone close, who takes care of the person's needs; in the authoritarian model, as someone who demands and punishes; in the negligent model, as a distant being who ignores us; finally, in the indulgent model, God is seen as someone who is permissive and inconsistent.

It is therefore wise for the formator to know the family of his charge in order to correct any shortcomings he may have had and not perpetuate them by his own attitudes. But we have already talked about this in previous chapters. The aim of this chapter is rather to point out that the formator must be aware of the way he himself was brought up and how it impacts his own formative style. The formator should ask himself what parenting style he experienced, to try and correct its limitations as far as possible. This brings us to the last section of the book.

### ***3. The Personality of the Formator***

What are the skills required of a good formator? The present chapter began with several questions around this topic. The first question was a bit extreme: can anyone perform this task, or is it only for a few people? In my opinion, anyone who has a healthy mind can do it. In fact, being a father or a mother is the most natural thing in the world and no special qualifications are required to perform this task reasonably well. However, I doubt that anyone is satisfied with being a "reasonably good" parent, teacher or spiritual director. Fortunately, we all aspire to do better than that.

In this section I will go over some skills that will help us carry out our educational tasks in a healthier and more effective way, from which everyone, educator and educated, will emerge humanly and spiritually solid, more serene, confident, joyful, and self-assured, people who can face life's ups and downs successfully.

#### ***a) Mature Personality and Life of Virtue***

"Apostolic soul: first of all, yourself,"<sup>7</sup> St. Josemaría recommends. What we have set out in this book has to be lived first of all by the formator, who needs to have a solid piety if he is to transmit a living faith and not merely abstract concepts. He must also have self-confidence, self-esteem, self-critical capacity, a consistent life, emotional stability, mastery over his moods and impulses, empathy, sensitivity to the psychological needs of others, social skills, listening skills, joy, stable human and supernatural virtues, etc.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. CHICLANA ACTIS, "Formación y evaluación psicológica del candidato al sacerdocio," pp. 467-504.

<sup>7</sup> ST. JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ, *The Way*, Scepter, New York-London, 1979<sup>9</sup>, n. 930.



It is important that his emotional needs are covered, otherwise he will easily seek inadvertently to compensate for them in the formative relationship, when what is expected of him is to give selflessly without seeking anything in return (although obviously a formator finds many affective gratifications in his task).

It is definitely not a matter of being perfect, and later we will look at ways to compensate for one's limitations. It is simply a matter of reflecting on one's own person with regard to what is being taught, not because it is lived perfectly well in the formator, but because one tries to live it. In the words of St. Paul VI, "modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."<sup>8</sup> The one who tries to acquire the skills we have mentioned makes himself attractive to the learner and will then be able to refer him humbly to his own model: Jesus Christ. It is from dealing with him in prayer and in the sacraments that a Christian formator will ultimately draw the strength to be available and smiling always, in spite of the difficulties. This is why Pope Francis said, "Teach prayer by praying, announce the faith by believing; offer witness by living!"<sup>9</sup>

A particularly important attribute for those involved in formation is frustration tolerance. We have already mentioned that burnout is particularly prevalent among educators. People do not always move at the pace we would like, nor do they keep up with our efforts. That is why those who are engaged in these tasks must have a clear objective from the outset: to do good regardless of the results. This requires an inner balance which has been discussed repeatedly in previous chapters.

Together with psychological competence, a Christian formator must have the optimism that comes from trusting in the power of grace and in the ability of the person who resolves to respond to it. That is why he is ambitious in setting goals for improvement and nurtures with prayer what he has sown with words. St. John Paul II affirmed that

it would be a grave error to conclude [...] that the norm taught by the Church is in itself an "ideal" which must then be adapted, proportioned, graded to the—it is said—concrete possibilities of man: according to a "balance of the various goods in question." But what are the "concrete possibilities of man," and what man are we talking about? The man dominated by concupiscence, or the man redeemed by Christ? For this is what it is all about: the reality of Christ's redemption: Christ has redeemed us! This means that he has given us the chance to bring about the whole truth of our being; he has freed our freedom from the dominion of concupiscence. [...] The commandment of God is certainly proportioned to the possibilities of man: but to the possibilities of the man has been given the Holy Spirit; of the man who, though fallen in sin, can always obtain forgiveness and enjoy the presence of the Spirit."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> ST. PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 41.

<sup>9</sup> FRANCIS, *Holy Mass and blessing of the Sacred Pallium for the new Metropolitan Archbishops on the solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, apostles*, June 29, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> ST. JOHN PAUL II, *Address to the participants of a course on responsible procreation*, March 1, 1984.

### ***b) Showing Oneself to Be Vulnerable***

We earlier said that we don't need to be perfect. Not only because it is impossible, but also because it is not what the pupils expects. What they need is for their formator to be human, which means that he should be pleasant and empathetic, even if he has faults. Moral authority is not lost by having them, however obvious they may be, they are lost when one tries to hide or deny them.

Therefore, it is necessary to apologize when we have not done the right thing, and not excuse ourselves: "I was late for our appointment," "I was too insistent on what was only advice," "I was wrong to recommend you that you act in that way" ... I will try to illustrate the point with the apology for being late. It is usually an excuse: "I've had a busy day," "the previous meeting ran long," etc., which may be true. It is probably not meant, but the implicit message – whether the person concerned interprets it that way or not – could be: "I had more important things than you on my plate" or "I have so many things to do and you are taking up my time." Conversely, a sentence such as "I'm sorry, I misjudged the time," or "I'm sorry, I stayed too long at the last meeting" (not "it took too long"), etc., puts the responsibility on oneself (internal locus of control, even when we act in the wrong way) and facilitates the other person's response: "don't worry, it's OK."

In other words, showing oneself to be vulnerable is another way of being a witness. The directees will not see their formator as a superior being or an unattainable model, but precisely as they are and want to be: someone who has limitations and tries to improve himself day by day.

Accepting one's own limitations and acknowledging them to others will allow formators to do something that is more important and more difficult: to show self-forgiveness. This will prevent many frustrations and discouragements.

### ***c) The Formation of the Formator***

Another way to make up for one's limitations is to take care of one's own formation. St. John of the Cross was a great master in the formation of formators, and in one of his works he states that the three conditions for directing souls well are knowledge, prudence and experience.<sup>11</sup>

A good *knowledge* of what to transmit is necessary: scientific, spiritual, and theological contents, among others. But it is also necessary to present them in a manner appropriate to each type of audience and according to the internal dynamics of the recipients. This book is an attempt to shed light on this last point. I think that in Catholic circles the content to be conveyed is often vastly superior to the way it is conveyed, which ultimately makes formation less effective. Ongoing formation takes time and is a sign that the formator has a professional approach.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS, *The Living Flame of Love*, III, 30.

Throughout the book we have spoken implicitly about *prudence*, which we will return to it in the remaining sections. I will mention just one aspect of this virtue. Sometimes it is necessary to question one's own competence and ask for advice. In a way, this gesture is related to knowledge: knowing enough to recognize that one's own knowledge is not enough and that it is better to turn to someone else who is better formed. As a comedian once said, "the important thing is not to know, but to have the phone number of someone who knows." Particularly when one first starts giving formation it is very useful to have a reference who can be consulted for more complex cases, obviously with professional discretion and without giving details about the identity of the person concerned.

We come to the third element, which for the great mystic and doctor of the Church is the most important: *experience*. It is not an absolute prerequisite, otherwise no one would be able to begin giving formation. It is a matter of going about it progressively, starting with people who do not have great difficulties or complex problems. Those who have more sensitive problems can be referred to a person with more experience. Sometimes this is not easy or possible, or the person concerned insists that we give them our advice. I do not think that accepting such request is necessarily a problem as long as we tell the person that we have little experience in the matter but that we will do our best to look after the individual in a competent manner. In these cases one should be cautious. Because of their lack of experience, young formators will probably not be able to give more comprehensive advice or have ready solutions for a wide variety of problems.

Inexperience can be made up for by the prerequisites we have seen so far: a stable life of piety, the commitment to practicing the virtues, a solid intellectual preparation and the advice of more experienced people. In this way youth does not become an impediment to being a good formator, as we read in the Bible: "I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts" (Ps 119:100).

#### ***d) Concern for the Whole Person***

The point of going to a formator is to gain specific skills: improving one's character, raising one's academic or professional performance, gaining social skills, growing in the spiritual life, etc. It is something of a "professional relationship," where a person turns to another requesting a particular service. In some cases it may be a paid job (many forms of coaching, mentoring and tutoring, family counselling and teacher-student relationships), while in many others the service is free of charge by its very nature (e.g. spiritual direction).

A good formator will focus on the questions relevant to his competency. But he will not limit himself to giving cold advice from a technical point of view. On the contrary, he will take the person in all his fullness into account. That means that he will not seek to make a better student, professional, husband, etc., but a better person, which in a way encompasses all of the above. In this way he will avoid shaping deformed beings who, for example, have a brilliant career but compromised family lives.

The best way to achieve this is to be concerned with the person, and not just as one's relative, student, religious brother, spiritual director, etc., but in their totality. This will help

us set comprehensive goals without going beyond one's own competence or beyond the content for which the formative relationship has been established.

This will keep us from slipping into "behavioral training," an approach based on things to do or avoid but neglecting the real desires and difficulties of the person concerned. Often people need to talk more about what they feel than what they do, although they may not even realize it. As a case in point, I remember once giving spiritual direction to a young man who seemed a little on the formalistic side. I decided to start the conversation with a very open question: "Are you well, happy...?" He was a bit taken aback and answered evasively: "I don't know but maybe you do, that's why I tell you what I'm up to." It was a wonderful opportunity to help him to get to know himself, to delve into his inner dispositions, state of mind, motivations, etc. without limiting the conversations to the practices of piety he had carried out and the details of service he had done for others. In this way, many issues emerged that were connected to his spiritual life or things that simply helped (or hindered him) from living it out serenely and joyfully.

Obviously, this must be done in an affectionate way, so that *people feel loved and understood*. One way of doing this is to identify their concerns and take an interest in them: an anniversary, a health problem, the illness of a relative, pressure at work, financial difficulties, etc., even when we may be tempted to consider them insignificant or disproportionate ("My cat has fallen ill"). Objectively a given concern may be over the top, but subjectively it burdens the individual and we should show sympathy.

For this reason it is a good idea to practice *empathic listening*,<sup>12</sup> paying attention to what the directee says, what he wants to say and how he says it. There are many telling signs and gestures that help us get to know him more than many words could: moments of silence, blank stares, looking down or to the clock, blushes when raising particular topics, yawns, arms tightly crossed in a closed attitude, relaxed attitude with eyes that look out with expectation and interest, etc.

The formator himself can also convey these unspoken messages and so he must be careful not to give his listener a false idea (or a real idea that would have been better to hide). The best thing to do in tricky cases is to talk: simply say that we are tired, that we are in a hurry, etc. Being interested does not mean listening to everything someone wants to say without any time limits. It may be advisable, perhaps after one or two introductory conversations, to define the duration of the meetings, the topics to be discussed, etc. Sometimes it will be necessary to redirect the conversation in a gentle way: "I think we are getting off topic," "we are focusing on this issue but I think we should also deal with others," "we are running out of time and we haven't talked about this other topic yet," etc. Empathic listening is crowned with a final question that, in one way or another, should not be lacking in any conversation: "Do you have anything else to say?"

An honest attitude of affection and a professional approach are a great way to help others be open and sincere. It is often said that "trust is not imposed, it is inspired," it is earned

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. C.J. VAN-DER HOFSTADT ROMÁN, *El libro de las habilidades de la comunicación*, Díaz de Santos, Madrid 2005<sup>2</sup>; S.R. COVEY, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Simon & Schuster, New York (NY) 1989, pp. 235-260.

by the testimony of one's own way of life and by the interest and attention with which one listens to what the other person wants to say.

This opens the door to the gentle demands that are part and parcel of any formative relationship. Sometimes it is necessary to "press on" and set higher goals or point out behaviors and attitudes that are not compatible with the lifestyle that the directee claims he wants to follow. When a solid relationship has been established, when the directee feels understood and loved, then he is in a position to accept reprimands that perhaps at first he did not understand or was reluctant towards.

But there may be occasions where there is a discrepancy between what the directee thinks is best and what he is willing to accept, which brings us to the next section.

### *e) Respect for the Individual and Their Timing*

People have their own value systems, hierarchies and priorities, which may not entirely match those of the formator. It is necessary to draw a distinction between the core and the periphery. For example, in a teacher-student relationship, the aim is to improve academic performance, and in spiritual direction to progress in the Christian life. If in the first case the student did not want to study, or in the second case the individual rejected some basic points of doctrine or morality, it would be a matter of considering whether it is worthwhile to focus on other aspects or whether it is better to end the formative relationship.

However, there can be legitimate disagreement on many secondary issues, for example in relation to the time that should be devoted to various activities, the pace that the person concerned feels that he is able to follow, the relationships that help or hinder his progress, etc. How do we reconcile high goals with the actual dispositions of the directee? How do we discern between a task that is truly impossible—even if it is for subjective reasons—and excuses motivated by comfort-seeking or faint-heartedness? There are no straightforward answers, so I put forward some ideas that may open up new questions.

The task of formation requires a measure of mistrust in one's own judgment. Everyone has a richness and complexity that is impossible to grasp fully and it would be naïve for the formator to assume that he has understood his directee entirely. It would be even more pretentious for the formator to believe that he knows the specific will of God for that person. We must not forget that the true formator is the Holy Spirit and the main character is the person concerned: it is he who must want to improve and it is up to him to do so in an agile, magnanimous and ambitious way. The task of the formator is to make him aware of his possibilities and obligations, to form his conscience, to help him reach a more sincere examination of his actions and his motives, to make him see his talents, to suggest how to develop them and to open up horizons for improvement. St. Josemaría summed up these objectives with the concise expression "to help the soul [the person's inner self] to want to accomplish God's will."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> ST. JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ, *Letter, 8 August 1956*, n. 38.

It is true that sometimes the individual receiving formation could go faster, but all the resistances that are encountered are precisely part of what needs to be educated. It is not simply a matter of pointing out the path to follow, but also of removing internal obstacles, explaining the reasons in a meaningful and encouraging way, stimulating and strengthening their will, proposing alternative strategies, etc. The shortest way between two points is not always a straight line, and before tackling a goal it may be necessary to resolve other, more basic aspects of their life that are the real obstacle to progress.

It is wise to proceed slowly with those who are just starting out—regardless of their age—, and lead them gradually as if they were going up an inclined plane. If all the effects of the kind of life they want to take on are presented to them all at once, they may end up becoming discouraged when they compare the demand with their current strength, seeing those effects as a beautiful but unattainable ideal. This is why Pope Francis recalled that

St. John Paul II proposed the so-called “law of gradualness” in the knowledge that the human being “knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by different stages of growth” (*Familiaris consortio*, n. 34). This is not a “gradualness of law” but rather a gradualness in the prudential exercise of free acts on the part of subjects who are not in a position to understand, appreciate, or fully carry out the objective demands of the law. For the law is itself a gift of God which points out the way, a gift for everyone without exception; it can be followed with the help of grace, even though each human being “advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God and the demands of God’s definitive and absolute love in his or her entire personal and social life” (*Familiaris consortio*, n. 9).<sup>14</sup>

Finally, sincere affection for the learner will lead him to understand that he knows himself best, and that includes his talents and strengths. It is up to him to make decisions to improve his life freely. Only in this way will his actions result in virtues and make him better in the very core of his being.

### *f) Overcoming One’s Own Demons*

I remember speaking with a young man who told me how worried he was about his sister. She was deeply involved in the crisis of adolescence. There were many small problems, but fortunately none of them was serious. We took the time to talk about his family. His parents had a rather weak character and for many years this individual had assumed the role of “head of the family” for his siblings and sometimes also for his parents. Naturally, he had far too much responsibility. But he also had what we have called an obsessive-perfectionist personality, and the way he tried to manage his family’s difficulties was by control. His sister’s rebelliousness had plunged this fellow into a deep crisis. She was a bit “out of control.” We looked further and deeper, and came to his core fear: that his sister would make the wrong decisions and that there would be irreversible consequences. His way of preventing this was that his need to approve of the teenager’s decisions, something she had peacefully lived by until a few months prior to the conversation. Now she refused.

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<sup>14</sup> FRANCIS, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, March 19, 2016, n. 295.

It is useful to pray for the people you are trying to help, and sometimes you even obtain enlightenment that you recognize is not your own. It occurred to me to ask him if he had considered God's attitude towards us. He watches over us providentially, but he created us free, and took the risk that we might do wrong and put our eternal salvation in danger. This fellow's answer surprised me: "Yes, I have thought about it many times and I have come to the conclusion that I would not have created man in this way. I would be very sorry if he were condemned." The conclusion we drew was that either he was mistaken in the way he dealt with his sister... or God had made a mistake in creating us free.

We all have our fears and insecurities, often stemming from a sincere affection for the people entrusted to our care. But sometimes this fear interferes with the help we want to give and causes us, with the best of intentions, to fall into an unhealthy educational style. That is why it is necessary for the formator to know himself well. Some of those "demons" that can interfere with the work of training will be outlined below.

The above case can be summarized as insecurity-control. Any task of formation is a big responsibility resting on the shoulders of the formator. He may be overwhelmed by the trust placed in him by the possibility that the learner may not reach as high as he could or may even fail. One way to manage this fear is to anticipate and avoid all possible pitfalls even when the learner does not recognize them as such, or to urge him to consult all his plans with the formator so he can prevent those that fall outside a tight and safe routine.

These attitudes stifle the directee, prevent him from acting autonomously and bettering his judgment, hinder the development of virtues and threaten to infect him with the formator's obsessive-perfectionist traits, so that in time he will become in turn another insecure and controlling formator.

It is not just a matter of faith. It is a psychological condition that hinders genuine formation work. Those who direct apostolates and institutions will have to be on their guard against such potential formators, because, with the best of intentions, they can do harm to those who seek them out.

It is worth remembering that trial and error is one of the most effective ways for human beings to learn. Think of the way we learned to ride a bicycle. First we started with training wheels, then with our father gripping the handle until he finally risked letting go, perhaps holding his breath as we zigzagged along. How many leg bruises are a token of affection from parents who knew how to trust their children despite their poor ability and went through the heartache of seeing them fall. As Guardini says, "everyone has to do his own stupid things himself in order to learn not to do them anymore."<sup>15</sup> This is not to deny that it is very good to learn from the mistakes of others.

Pope Francis affirms that whoever is entrusted with the task of counselling others must be

a witness: a very close witness, who does not speak but listens and then gives guidance. He does not solve [the problem] but he tells you: look at this, look at this, look at this, look at this,

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<sup>15</sup> R. GUARDINI, *Die Lebensalter. Ihre ethische und pädagogische Bedeutung*, Matthias-Grünwald, Mainz 1986, p. 37.

look at this..., this does not seem a good inspiration for this reason, this one does... But you go ahead and decide!<sup>16</sup>

Another difficulty arises from the *fear of upsetting* when we correct or demand, which is different from respecting the times and rhythms of the person. A good formator must also go through a bit of a hard time when he makes the directee face up to his responsibilities. Otherwise he would be betraying his own role and the trust that the person concerned placed in his hands by seeking him out.

The task of formation is a selfless giving of oneself. It has many rewards, but the good of the other must always be above the reward that he can give us in the form of affection, recognition, etc. It would be a disorder to try to solve one's own affective needs in the relationship of formation. I am not referring to formators who have great deficiencies but to normal people who feel loved by their directees or who see their desire for *generativity* fulfilled in them. This is all legitimate and in fact occurs naturally in any formational work, which makes it very satisfying. But if the good of the pupil requires correction – which must always be carried out sensitively and with charity – it would not be mature for the formator to sacrifice the good of the pupil for the sake of maintaining a peaceful and serene relationship. It would be to seek oneself above the good of the other, which would plant a seed of insincerity at the very core of the formative relationship.

The formator must also be wary of attempts at encroachment on the part of the directee, in the event that he tries to find in the relationship what he should be looking for elsewhere: family, friends, etc. The formative relationship has its own objectives, it must take place in a climate of care and trust, but its aim is not simply that someone with whom one feels good listens and offers encouragement, but that offers help towards improvement. In this context, if we apply what we discussed in the chapter on relationships in adulthood, it is more akin to a parent-child relationship than to a friendship between equals. Just as the father has to act as a father, not as a friend, so too the formator must play his role, even if outside of the formative conversations there are ties of family, vocation or even friendship. Usually this distinction is reached intuitively, but sometimes – especially with young people or with immature or sick personalities – it may need to be made explicit.

Finally, the formator must know how to distance himself from the problems of others. He is not called to be an Atlas carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. When we have real affection for the people we are helping, it is hard when they do not appear to be advancing at the pace they should or even are moving away from what is objectively best for them. But we cannot fall into pessimism, frustration or the loss of our own inner peace. There is something wrong with the professor who comes home depressed after an unsatisfactory series of exam or the priest who after an evening in the confessional feels dejected by the weakness of human nature.

True affection for those who depend on us will lead us to respect their freedom by always being ready to give a hand, perhaps like fishermen who know how to release the reel

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<sup>16</sup> FRANCIS, *Address in the Encounter with Students of the Pontifical Colleges and Ecclesiastical Boarding Schools in Rome*, March 16, 2018.



so that the fish trying to escape does not end up breaking the line. And above all it will lead us to pray more insistently for them and to exercise our faith in the goodness of God and in the power of prayer, which he uses to move hearts.

#### ***4. It is Worth It***

It is worth it to be involved in tasks of formation, despite the hard work. It requires not only time but more importantly mind and heart. But when the years go by, we can feel the legitimate inner satisfaction of a father who sees that his children have gone far, even further than he has. “One of the greatest joys that any educator can have is to see a student turn into a strong, well-integrated person, a leader, someone prepared to give”<sup>17</sup>. Then he feels his longing for generativity fulfilled, leading him to proclaim his thanksgiving with St. Paul: “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name” (Eph 3:14-15).

Some may not have gone as far as we would have liked, or perhaps they took a different path or reached a different place where they are happy. In any case, they followed their path and reached their goal. “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. [...] For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building” (1 Cor 3:6-9).

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<sup>17</sup> IDEM, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus vivit*, March 25, 2019, n. 221.