CONSECRATED LIFE AND FORMATION

IN TODAY’S SECULAR WORLD

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Introduction

It is not surprising that in the congregation today, hardly anyone among the confreres would volunteer to be assigned as formator. When a superior consults with a confrere and brings up the possibility that he be assigned as formator, the first impulse is to refuse the assignment. In a number of instances, it is only because of the vow of obedience that the formerly reluctant confrere would eventually accept this assignment. In many local units today across the different Regions, there has been a crying need for more formators as the available number of those who are trained, have the needed orientation and are willing to take on this assignment for the moment is rather slim.

Why is this so? There are a number of reasons behind this but one commonly known factor is that being a formator to the present generation of formands is not an easy task and can involved a lot of tensions and stress. This is especially in consideration of the specific characteristics of the young men who consider becoming Redemptorists who as a group is labeled as millennials (although there could be some who may be a bit older if they are “late vocation”) . Those of the older generations recognize a world of difference between them and the millennials in terms of their world view, life’s perspectives, lifestyle, attachment to technological gadgets, sense of entitlement, social inter-actions and various behavioral patterns. Oftentimes, the tendency on the part of the older generations is to pass judgment on the millennials that can be unfairly critical and patronizing.

The Secular World

But of course, the youth of today would be quite different from their elders. After all, they were born into a world that has entered into the so-called post-modern age.[[1]](#endnote-1) It is a known fact that human beings who are born during this era, enter a secular world, which is so unlike the one that their ancestors inhabited.

To be secular means to be non-religious. Secularism the [Merriam-Webster](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merriam-Webster) dictionary,  is "indifference to, or rejection or exclusion of, religion and religious considerations". A secular world is therefore constituted by a growing number of people who, in the words of Zucherman would rather “maintain a naturalistic worldview in which belief in anything is always proportioned to the evidence available” and are engaged “in a variety of activities that are understood as this-worldly, and to identify with, or be a member of, non-religious groupings or associations.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

It does not follow that they lack belief because secular people believe in many things like the value of education, love of family, the need to care for the earth in view of ecological devastations and the like. They may even engage in “spiritual” activities e.g. *zen* or meditation but nothing that would be considered religious. They just don’t believe in supernatural realms and deities. They even join religious festivities and rituals but not because of spiritual convictions but to enjoy the company, the music and food. These persons are known for various labels some of which are quite derogatory: atheist, agnostic, humanist, freethinker, apostate, heretic and infidel.

There is, however, another way to understand secular which Wax refers to as mainly the reality of Western nations today where “the conditions of belief” has shifted to a movement from “a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

Thus to believe is no longer the only option but it is now one of many options. No longer is there a split between the sacred and the secular as before. With this change of mindset, human beings live their lives no longer in reference to something higher or more transcendent than their own human flourishing.

How did secularism as a theory, belief, ideology, or political modality arise and has been cemented in this post-modern age. One needs to go back to various historical epochs – from the Italian Renaissance to the Reformation and the Enlightenment periods - to determine the narratives that marked humanity’s significant changes. These included “(a)n increasing confidence in human capabilities, reason, and progress... together with an increasing distrust in organized and state supported religion”; (this was) “responsible for the ushering of modernity… which brought all facets of human life including religion under the purview of reason and thus became responsible for the freeing of education, society, and state from the domination of religion; in other words, the development of modern secularism.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

Secularization is also linked to pluralization and privatization. In a pluralistic society there is a competing number of worldviews and not one is dominant. According to Zacarias: a pluralistic society is where “(t)he only thing we could be sure of was that all moral choices were relative and there was no point of reference to right and wrong;” which could ultimately result “in the death of reason.” Thus, “pluralism can lead to the absolutization of relativism,”[[5]](#endnote-5) To be able to accommodate the religiously-minded, there arises a privatization of religious practice. It is okay for people to be spiritually minded so long as they keep their practice private and not bring this into the public sphere. For some believers, this means the loss of meaning in terms of their religious practice.

Secularism’s Impact on Religion

At the moment, secularism is much more prevalent in the highly developed, capitalist First World countries. This is not surprising as secularization and industrialization are inter-connected. In these societies, according to Bullard, “(t)he religiously unaffiliated, called ‘nones,’ are growing significantly… today, ’’they’re [the second largest religious group](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/06/22/what-is-each-countrys-second-largest-religious-group/) in North America and most of Europe.”[[6]](#endnote-6) When there arose disturbing signs of the impact of secularism on religion, it was predicted that as the rest of the world moves towards modernization, religion would lose its relevancy. Statistics today show that this remains a trend still among industrialized nations, including China. According to Merlini: “The traditional European churches, both Catholic and Protestant, appear to be approaching their twilight hour, despite the spiritual richness of certain circles. There are, to be sure, occasional high-profile and successful media events, but ordinary worship services are increasingly deserted and pollsters who ask about faith are receiving fewer and fewer positive answers.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

There are, however, regions in the world where this is not yet taking place, including the sub-Saharan Africa, parts of Latin America and Asia. The rise of fundamentalism among various faith traditions – Islam, Hinduism and even Christianity, especially evangelical Protestantism – have fueled the passionate embrace of their ancestors’ belief systems. But in the urban centers of all nations in the world, it cannot be denied that among the middle class and elite households, religious practice has dwindled.

A growing percentage among the ‘nones’ are several years younger than the population average. After all, many of them being born during the post-modern era have been raised in families where parents no longer practice any religious belief. As the millennials who are mostly seculars today grow up and have children of their own, their own children most probably will follow the same path. Financial security and academic achievement are oftentimes the main reasons for people’s shift to being ‘nones.’ But apart from age, gender and race are also factors in the demographics of the unbelievers. Mostly white male constitute the highest percentage. Even in the West, women, the blacks and the poor are the ones least drawn to atheism or agnosticism.

But what about those who commit to continuing their religious beliefs and convictions including the Catholics among them? For Merlini, “(t)he very fact that our culture has built its empire on the idea that we can live life without a commitment to some vision of ultimate reality creates a tension within us. The idea that there might be some other true answer out there can, and does, cause many who grow up in the church to leave the faith.”[[8]](#endnote-8) Many young people who struggle through the tensions of maintaining their faith practice go through such experiences as the social and moral conditions that helped to nurture belief have slowly eroded. This trend has evolved because the elite who controls the academic, media, cultural and legal institutions have created a new way for people to live their lives. The concepts of what is good, just, true and beautiful no longer interface with religious ideas and spiritual values. Everything is open to contestation; one can believe even as one doubts.

As inter-acting in cyberspace becomes a highly dominant element in their everyday lives, the young are desensitized and they tend towards individualism, consumerism and apathy to their surroundings. Such kind of existence can easily result in a sense of isolation, loneliness and boredom which consequently drive them to an unhealthy lifestyle. But even as there are skeptics who predict that the search for God and meaning is over, there are still a segment of the population – including among the youth – who long for a sense of the mysterious and mystical. God’s presence in the world continues to haunt those who intuit that there are things much deeper than what is constituted by the material and secular world as they come to realize that a life of seeking pleasures could turn out to be empty and hollow. What follows is the desire to dig deeper for answers to some basic questions, e.g. Is there anyone out there who can hear my pain and emptiness and can actually do something to help me escape the ennui?

Has the Church responded to this kind of challenge? Unless there has been a comprehensive study based on solid data indicating trends across the world, it would be difficult to come up with a categorical answer to such a question. But a theory could be advanced, namely, that by and large the Church has had difficulties coming up with creative and innovative approaches to arrest the increasing numbers of non-believers. This is certainly true in North America and Western Europe, as well as in Australia and New Zealand and in many urbanized centers of even the Third World countries. Otherwise the statistics involving the ‘nones’ would decrease through time.

The fact is that, according to Stetzer, “as Christians and non-Christians become more distinct in their beliefs and practices, new opportunities exist for genuine expressions of the Christian faith” as “the polarization, and even the marginalization, can remind Christians of our mission: not to moralize the unconverted, but to reach the broken and hurting with a gospel message of hope that changes everything.”[[9]](#endnote-9) The challenge is therefore to embrace the crisis for the opportunity it provides the Church in terms of her mission. This has implications for religious congregations as they seek to recruit and form the new generation of missionaries.

Pope Francis and Secularism

How has our Holy Father discoursed on secularism? Words uttered by Pope Francis during a meeting with a delegation of European rabbis manifests what he thinks about the secular world; he posits: “Today, in Europe, it is more important than ever to emphasize the spiritual and religious dimension of human life. In a society increasingly marked by secularism and threatened by atheism, we run the risk of living as if God did not exist. People are often tempted to take the place of God, to consider themselves the criterion of all things, to control them, to use everything according to their own will.”[[10]](#endnote-10)

In his message for the 2019 World Mission Day, Pope Francis wrote: “Rampant secularism, when it becomes an aggressive cultural rejection of God’s active fatherhood in our history, is an obstacle to authentic human fraternity, which finds expression in reciprocal respect for the life of each person” and that “without the God of Jesus Christ, every difference is reduced to a baneful threat, making impossible any real fraternal acceptance and fruitful unity within the human race”.[[11]](#endnote-11)

And how to deal with secularism? In the words of Allen, “clearly, Francis has shifted the focus away from the wars of culture in the West and open confrontation with secularism, towards a more pastoral and social action-oriented approach” where his aim “isn’t giving in to secularization – (but rather) it’s staging the battle on a different field, away from abstract debates towards hands-on pastoral proximity - what Francis likes to call vicinanza, “closeness” - especially to people in greatest difficulty.”[[12]](#endnote-12) For the Holy Father, in order to resist secularism we do not engage in intellectual arguments but “to out-love” the opponents of the faith and thereby draw people to the Church.

This is why he wants missionaries to be close to the people. He wants parish priests to maintain close relations with their parishioners, suggesting that parishes be genuinely open and are critical of practices that make it difficult or expensive for them to have access to the sacraments. To confront “today’s illiteracy,” he proposes an approach using “three languages – the language of the mind, the heart and the hands, all three together harmonically.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

Clearly, a new breed of missionaries need to be formed to serve people living in a secular world. Even as there are still parts of the world where secularism has not become dominant and that in some mission areas, the local inhabitants are still living in what could still be a pre-modern landscape, it is still to be assumed that the situation could radically shift as more people leave the rural villages to flock to urban centers. Thus within the lifetime of those who plan to join the religious life today, they will encounter mostly mission areas characterized by pluralism and secularism. Thus they are to be formed in view of this eventual reality.

In 1996, St. John Paul II issued the Apostolic Exhortation on Consecrated Life, which followed the Synod of Bishops on this theme in October 1994. Among other things, this magisterial document, entitled *Vita Consecrata*, provided some guidelines on the kind of formation that religious congregations should take to heart. The document states that:

The *primary objective*of the formation process is to prepare people for the total consecration of themselves to God in the following of Christ, at the service of the Church's mission… Since the very purpose of consecrated life is conformity to the Lord Jesus in his *total self-giving*, this must also be the principal objective of formation... If this is the purpose of the consecrated life, the manner of preparing for it should include and express *the character of wholeness*. Formation should involve the whole person, in every aspect of the personality, in behaviour and intentions… Indeed, at every stage of life, consecrated persons must be offered opportunities to grow in their commitment to the charism and mission of their Institute. For formation to be complete, it must include every aspect of Christian life…(including) a human, cultural, spiritual and pastoral preparation.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Other elements that need to be considered include: that formation takes place in community through an enhanced fraternal life and engagement in the apostolate that promotes openness to the challenge by the revealed word and the signs of the times. Such an apostolate is contextualized within the new evangelization demanded by the contemporary times and could be as varied as taking a preferential option for the poor through works of justice and peace, inter-religious dialogue, inculturation, ecological advocacy and the like. This formation program should also help the candidates to “gradually to develop a critical judgment, based on the Gospel, regarding the positive and negative values of their own culture and of the culture in which they will eventually work” even as they “must be trained in the difficult art of interior harmony, of the interaction between love of God and love of one's brothers and sisters; they must likewise learn that prayer is the soul of the apostolate, but also that the apostolate animates and inspires prayer.”[[15]](#endnote-15)

Initial formation is crucial as it can either further promote or hinder the growth of the candidate’s vocation. Some of the important elements in initial formation should include: a community life that discloses “the essential missionary dimension of consecration. Thus, during the period of initial formation, Institutes of Consecrated Life do well to provide practical experiences which are prudently followed by the one responsible for formation, enabling candidates to test, in the context of the local culture, their skills for the apostolate, their ability to adapt and their spirit of initiative.”[[16]](#endnote-16) As initial formation is to provide a formand with a process of development involving various stages of personal maturity involving the psychological, emotional, spiritual, theological, pastoral-missiological elements, there is therefore a need to make sure that the time allotment of this formation is sufficient but suited to the reality of each candidate.

This kind of a holistic initial formation has become more demanding than the previous models, especially those in place before Vatican II. Consequently, a new breed of formators are required who can best contextualize themselves within the new challenges brought about by shifts in people’s attitudes, values and behavior. *Vita Consecrata* spells out the kind of formators required today:

Those in charge of formation must …be very familiar with the path of seeking God, so as to be able to accompany others on this journey… But above all they will disclose the beauty of following Christ and the value of the charism by which this is accomplished. They will combine the illumination of spiritual wisdom with the light shed by human means, which can be a help both in discerning the call and in forming the new man or woman, until they are genuinely free. The chief instrument of formation is personal dialogue, a practice of irreplaceable and commendable effectiveness which should take place regularly and with a certain frequency.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Personal dialogue between formator and formand is absolutely necessary, for what most candidates need is for someone just to be there with them “to recognize the pain of life and existence itself, that getting up each day and putting on clothes can be a desperate act of faith in such a world as ours.”[[18]](#endnote-18) Formators need to be available to provide the candidate with a safe place where the latter can “question things, look and dig for answers” in a way that the formator is able to “give plausibility to the faith once for all delivered to the saints by having sacrificial lives of love and forgiveness.”[[19]](#endnote-19)

As millennials today are far more exposed to data and information and are more inquisitive about various aspects of the faith, chances are a candidate of this generation would ask all kinds of questions. He has to be assured that having questions is okay. But this means that the formator must be on one hand, knowledgeable enough to provide some answers, but on the other hand, to be also humble to admit limitations of his knowledge.

Along the way there will be questions regarding the resurrection of Jesus, the reliability of Scripture, the problem of evil, the goodness of God and his character, the relationship of science to faith, the belief in saints, the practice of devotions, etc. In such occasions, all parties involved must invoke the grace with each other and journey through the doubts and tentative answers, hoping that they can all commit to the belief that God’s grace is greater than all their failures, doubt, and shame. Because of these, the formator needs a deep sensitivity and compassion. While he may have the innate gift to be such a person, nonetheless, he should be prepared to take on this task through suitable and adequate training

A major question that the candidate will grapple with is why he should pursue his search for meaning through exploring making a commitment to consecrated life within the chosen religious congregation. He is constantly haunted by the question: what is the significance of his vocation for the contemporary world? The formator will need to be able to respond to his need for an answer in the context of “the world, where it often seems that the signs of God’s presence have been lost from sight,” and that what is necessary to combat this is “a convincing prophetic witness on the part of consecrated persons.”[[20]](#endnote-20)

For the formator to accomplish this difficult task would “entail *the affirmation of the primacy of God and of eternal life*, as evidenced in the following and imitation of the chaste, poor and obedient Christ, who was completely consecrated to the glory of God and to the love of his brethren.”[[21]](#endnote-21) These three major challenges in terms of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience are what provides the prophetic task of the consecrated life which are perhaps more radically demanded by contemporary society. The initial formation program then should be able to provide an explanation to the vows that neophyte candidates can easily digest and take to heart. This initial inspiration can then be deepen later in the novitiate.

Some Concrete Proposals

What are possible concrete approaches, programs and activities that can be pursued in our congregation’s initial formation program:

1. How the whole process of initial formation begins is most crucial. If possible, the formator should not burden the candidates immediately with set objectives and goals, highly structured schedules and heavy inputs. As millennials have a deep sense of entitlement, they would appreciate very much being involved in decision-making processes. Since there just might be a small number of candidates, there is time and space for formator and formands to get to know each other. The first few days should be spent – in the most relaxed manner – getting to know each other: where each one is coming from, each person’s identity (ethnicity, nationality, cultural tradition), description of family life, academic and work background and what brought him to the circle of the Redemptorists.
2. After having gotten to know each other better, the next step is for everyone to express what are his expectations of this initial formation. They could be asked the question: what might help them to clarify their search for meaning by entering a religious community? And how can this formation nurture their desire for this kind of vocation? The objectives and goals of the formation program can then take into consideration the candidates’ comments.
3. The timeframe of their everyday activities could also be discussed based on suggestions of the candidates. Schedule should not be too highly structured as candidates are just starting to adjust to a new kind of lifestyle. A major consideration is to maximize moments of being together so that a fraternal life lived in community begins to take shape for the candidates. All meals, prayer schedules (especially the daily Eucharist), doing house work and forms of recreation are to be done in community.
4. Their prayer life and moments of mediation could be made more varied, creative and free flowing, not too highly structured and formulaic. If candidates have had meaningful types and forms of a prayer life these could be encouraged and tapped.
5. Their pastoral immersion should take into consideration the following: academic and work background, their past involvements and advocacies, areas they want to explore, available engagements within the locality where formation program takes place. Perhaps it would be better to choose only a few rather than have too many exposures considering the length of the formation program. This makes it possible for them to have a more in-depth immersion.
6. For every major activity, there be a debriefing and processing. Questions to be asked and reflected on: How did the experience affect me as a person? What were my dominant feelings as I had this experience? In what way, did this experience help me discern my vocation better? What message is God sending to me through this experience?
7. If the candidates’ sense of maturity is to be deepened at this stage of formation, they need to assisted in being able to more in touch with themselves. Depending on the candidates’ exposure to psychological tests, the kind of psychological tests they should undergo should fit their needs. In a Third World setting, the formator should not totally rely on Western-oriented tools but instead, look for tests that are more culture-contexted. While these tests are helpful, the formator should also find other tools that can help him and his team assess the psychological maturity of each individual candidate.
8. No longer can we set up a program, “the size of which fits all” no matter how varied the backgrounds and realities of each candidate. The program will need to take each candidate’s pace and growth individually. There maybe those who only need one year for this initial formation, but others may need more time. So the end of the initial formation should not be prescribed for all, but to adjust according to the needs of each candidate.
9. Final decision as to the suitability of the candidate to have satisfactorily completed the initial formation should also be decided on with everyone involved: the formator and his team, the candidate and his fellow formands. While there could be a general guide that lists down the criteria for making such a decision, this should again take into consideration the specificities of each candidate. The process by which each candidate ends his initial formation should also be done in such a way as to make it a ritual of affirmation. For those asked not to consider the next stage of formation – efforts should be made to avoid feelings of rejection by assisting the candidates search for other meaningful options for his life.

FURTHER READINGS:

1. Wolharf Pannenber. *Christianity in a Secularized World* (Paperback, 2012).
2. James K. A. Smith. [How Not to Be Secular](http://amzn.to/2e8mqws)(Eerdmans: May 2014)
3. St. John Paul II. Post-Synodal Exhortation – Vita Consecrata. On the Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World.

1. **END NOTES:**

   This article does not aim to give a detailed explanation as to the meaning of the post-modern age, its origin and who theorize this concept. Ward provides a way to understand this term in relation to postmodernism which to him is a philosophical discourse to denote a critical stance to modernism (as he refers to Jean-Francois Lyotard assertion that is an incredulity towards grand-narratives of the 18th and 19th centuries, such as the dialectics of the Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth). As for the post-modern age, it refers to the sociological notion post-modernity which is a description of certain cultural conditions pertaining to developed countries in the 1970s and 1980s. See Graham Ward, “Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace”, *In The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward, Blackwell Publishers,1997), p. xxiv. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. [Phil Zuckerman Ph.D.](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/experts/phil-zuckerman-phd) “[The Secular Life](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-secular-life).” See: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-secular-life/201407/what-does-secular-mean>. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Trevin Wax, 2014, “3 Definitions of ‘Secular’ and Why They Matter for Our Mission.” See

   <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/3-definitions-of-secular-and-why-they-matter-for-our-mission/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Secularism. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secularism#cite_note-13> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ravi Zacharias. Intervew by Richard L. Schoonover. Enrichment Journal. See

   <https://www.rzim.org/read/just-thinking-magazine/defending-christianity-in-a-secular-culture> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Gabe Bullard. “The World's Newest Major Religion: No Religion.” See

   <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2016/04/160422-atheism-agnostic-secular-nones-rising-religion/> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Cesare Merlini. 2011. A Post-Secular World? See: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-post-secular-world/> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ed Stetzer, 2015. “Nominal Christians are becoming more secular, and that’s creating a startling change for the U.S.” See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/11/04/nominal-christians-becoming-more-secular-and-thats-creating-a-startling-change-for-the-u-s/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. As reported by the National Catholic Reporter. See <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/francis-chronicles/pope-s-quotes-marked-secularism>. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. SIR News Agency. See <https://www.agensir.it/quotidiano/2019/6/10/pope-francis-message-for-world-mission-day-rampant-secularism-is-an-obstacle-to-fraternity-no-culture-should-remain-closed-in-on-itself/> [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. John L. Allen Jr. 2016. “Pope Francis suggests the way to beat secularism is by ‘out-loving’ it”. See <https://cruxnow.com/analysis/2016/08/pope-believes-secularism-will-bested-loving/> [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. ## Pope John II, Vita Consecrata. Apostolic Exhortation. **25 March 1996. No. 65.**

    [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid, No. 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid, 66. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Massaro, Growing up Christian in Secular America. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Vita Consecrata, No. 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)