**SECULARISM AND THE NECESSITY OF SPIRITUALITY IN OUR INITIAL FORMATION AS REDEMPTORISTS**

 **Secularism is a process where religion in general has lost its influence over many facets of life such as our political, economic, social and moral principles which causes an immense difficulty in forming an integrated spirituality and above all a personal experience of God’s intimate love so essential in our initial formation system in search of seeking to assume a religious consecration vocation.**

 **According to Max Weber the term “secularization” refers to the gradual process of “the abandoning of cultural precepts that used to be based on religion”. In secularism, questions and explications are now based only on reason and materialism that eliminates all possibility of Christian faith as an influence in our discernments.**

 **I feel that it would be a serious error if our formators thought that our candidates to the religious and priestly life as Redemptorists were not touched and influenced in one way or another by the principles of secularism. Our candidates in general were bombarded with the propaganda about the values of secularism and the rejection of religious principles. Perhaps this reality is the greatest challenge in our initial formation system. Formators need to present (if not sell) to our formation men Christian and basic moral principles in order to “form” them in Gospel norms that are in total contradiction to what they possibly learned if not practiced in our secularized world. We are speaking here of a personalized and community formation about the spiritual life in preparation to honestly assume a vocation to the religious and priestly vocation.**

 **Some principles of secularism that need to be confronted with our candidates about secularism are the following**

**1 – Reason as the only and supreme norm of life. To question a philosophical theory that gives maxim priority to reason in prejudice to faith and that eliminates all concepts of a *personal God.***

**2 – Relativism that teaches that nothing is absolute like religious and moral principles. The individual, without any recourse or responsibility to faith issues, now determines all.**

**3 – Narcissism that is a psychoanalytical concept, which defines the individual and promotes the individual in an exaggerated life style and promotes an excessive love for oneself. Compromise with others just does not fit in here.**

**4 – Hedonism** - **consists in a moral doctrine in which the need and seeking of pleasure is the only authentic norm of life and as such seeks to justify all that fulfills one’s pleasure.**

5 – **And finally there is Materialism. Materialism is an attitude that only understands life as seeking exclusively the possession of material goods. Material things now are always in the first place in one`s life. It is perhaps in first principle in this secularized world.**

These five signs of secularism are motivated and communicated by all the modern sources of communication that effect especially our young people and our future candidates to the religious life. Religion simply bothers our youth and makes impossible their seeking and living of religious principles because religion clearly interferes in their “human liberty”. With these five orientations, it would be impossible to live freely and happily a religious consecration, a community life, and a self-giving Redemptorist apostolate.

Unfortunately, some of these principles of secularism influenced our candidates in different ways and the formators need to touch on these principles of secularism both in the initial and extended formation before and even after religious profession. It is a question of entering in an effective way of conversion according to clarified evangelical principles that touch on our spiritual and community life (Chapter 2) and on our apostolic life (Chapter 1) of our Redemptorist Constitutions and Statues. This necessitates confrontation – necessitates conversion – necessitates questioning influences of secularism according to the evangelical and orientation principles of our Constitutions. In a few words, we need a system of planed formation according to the present conditions of each individual candidate and their condition to assume a religious life.

Here I would like to share some personal orientations about our formation system. I have been a formator for 32 years in all the levels of initial and permanent formation in the Congregation. These are personal commentaries and I hope that I may animate our formators to exercise this most important apostolate in our Congregation.

1 – It is impossible to sustain a Christian life and more so a religious vocation without practicing some type of spirituality. *The purpose of all spirituality is to facilitate some experience of God and of His love in the concrete life of our candidates.* Spirituality is an amorous encounter between “oneself” and “God”. Spirituality is the process of one discovering a God who descends to love me, to call me to a specific vocation and the candidate responding to His love by loving Him in obedience to His will. It is an alliance that terminates in consecrating one’s whole life to Him for love. Spirituality speaks of a process of mutual love. Spirituality is the way to affirm and grow in this love alliance in the life of the candidates as future Redemptorists. ***The practice of spirituality is a priority in all stages of formation.*** This seems so obvious, but there is serious lack of this at times in our formation system. We have “religious” acts but not necessarily a love alliance.

Spirituality is a process of growing in intimacy with God, but that necessarily needs to end up in loving also our neighbor in community or in apostolic service. Authentic prayer always terminates in love of our neighbor. Authentic prayer always ends up in some practice of charity simply because in intimacy we discover that God first loved and continues loving me. His love is without conditions. And He calls those in formation to continue His love through our religious vocation. Without spirituality, this process simply does not happen.

We are talking here about *quality spirituality* and not so much of a series of spiritual exercises. It is not a question of how much I pray, but how I pray and how this prayer leads me to be an expression of whom I experience. And God is love! Prayer that leads one to conversion in the being and actions of God.

All spirituality begins when the candidate experiences that God is a Person that loves him and loves him without conditions that unfortunately secularism preaches that you have to earn love. It is not a gift. Spirituality begins when the candidates begin to experience God`s love in their daily lives. Formators need to help the candidates to discover God`s love. Formators need to purify for the candidates many false images of God which secularism helped to distort. False images that were invented and assumed in the personal history of each candidate. All of us were formed with certain erroneous preconceptions of God and unfortunately, we demanded that God be whom we preconceived. We judged and concluded that God is such a person and then in formation with the help of spirituality, we let God enter into our lives and say, “I am not this Person and you need to change your image of Me”. It is the important moment of conversion. Therefore, begins the whole and continual process of purification in order to welcome the true image of God – a God of love and of mercy, and of Plentiful Redemption. And because of this the candidates do not limit God`s presence only to prayer and are able to experience Him in life and in others. Spirituality begins the process of intimacy with God that opens the door to help the candidates to want to respond to His love through religious consecration. And it is here that the formators are those who must show them the way to make these steps. The need to encourage personal prayer and intimacy with God is the first step. Teach them to become *“madly in love with God”* as Saint Alphonsus did and taught us to do.

2 – A true spirituality and experience of God`s love should lead us to *some type of commitment with humanity.* It begins with learning that God`s love for us is grace and then feel His call to be and act as He does. God reveals to the candidates his desire to save all humanity without exception and as such, He invites future Redemptorists to participate in this same desire. To be a continuation of the Holy Redeemer as consecrated persons in the Church. All genuine spirituality ends with this commitment with humanity to continue this salvific plan of God`s love. Spirituality cannot be only between God and the candidates. It does not treat of personal intimacy with God and only my necessities that secularism would teach and which certain movements in the Church preach. Personal intimacy without commitment is wrong and some candidates come from wrong spiritual formation and the formators need to show them another spiritual way that starts with intimacy with God and ends up with some service of God`s people. Spirituality and mission is the correct way that is in total contrast to what secularism has taught us.

3 - Spirituality needs to descend to serve concrete people and the necessity to go out of ourselves to love these people. This is totally against the influences of secularism that many candidates were formed in. Right from the beginning of our Redemptorist formation system, these “people” have a concrete face – they are the members of our community and the most poor. *“Among groups of people more in need of spiritual help, they will give special attention to the poor, the deprived and the oppressed. The evangelization of these is a sign of messianic activity (cf. Luke 4:18), and Christ, in a certain sense, wished to identify himself with them (cf. Matt. 25:40)* (Constitution 04).Unfortunately, intimistic spirituality does not permit a candidate to encounter the face of Christ in the confreres and in the poor that we called to love and serve.

4 – Spirituality is the search to know and experiment God`s true personality. It is the process of helping the candidates to let God be God in their lives. And God is love. And His love is grace. This was the great conversion in Alphonus’ life when he discovered the word “grace|” helped by the writings of Saint Theresa de Alva and Saint Francis de Sales. One cannot earn grace – it is a free gift of God`s love. This is totally against the teaching of secularism where one must earn God`s love. Grace speaks here of a mutual loving relationship with God that the candidate with the help of his formators begins to search for with spirituality and develops this the rest of his formation and religious years.

5 – A great error in our formation in the past was the orientation to try to limit spiritual life and an experience of God to what we called “spiritual exercises” like common prayer, the Mass and the rosary, etc. However, a spiritual life includes a totality of all that we are and do. We could experience God`s loving presence the whole day which is the aim of all spirituality. *A true spirituality cannot separate the spiritual from the profane.* We can find God in all people and in all things. The spirituality aims at an integration of the both. God is not only in the chapel. The problem begins when the candidates lose their sensibility to capture this living presence of God in everything. God is in the sacred but also in the profane. Spirituality is to awaken our insensibility to capture God in everything the whole day. God is with us always 24 hours a day. And especially in our Redemptorist spirituality this awareness of God`s presence helps us to discover His will which was a principle orientation of Saint Alphonsus. More than ever this needs to be orientated to our young professed confreres after the Novitiate. It seems that this awareness begins to become forgotten and not experienced. Formators on all levels should introduce the candidates to break their insensibility to find God loving presence in all things. *This simply does not happen without a life of personal prayer.* It must be a priority on all levels of formation. Only moments of silence in contemplative prayer will the candidates begin to accept God’s presence even in difficult times. I feel this is the modern problem in formation. With so much time with cellular phones, they simply say, “that they did not have time”. There are too many distractions in our lives to be honest about the search and the experience with God. The formators in personal colloquiums with the candidates must question their time of personal prayer. Secularism does everything possible to distract one from a personal contact with God`s love.

6 – A second concept of spirituality is about our baptismal consecration. Baptismal consecration is a fascination for God`s person and the desire to live an alliance of love we made with God. It brings us to the basis of all spirituality and morality. To live what Christ reduced to two commandments: love God and love our neighbor. And this same baptismal alliance one day will be confirmed through their religious profession. But this love alliance needs to be animated through some spirituality. *Without spirituality, it is impossible to live our religious profession.* This seems to be an obvious fact, but it is exactly this that many in formation do not live and that is so essential especially for those in temporary vows. The first thing that young religious in formation forget is to live personal prayer. They begin to become insensible to their `first love` and their apostolic prophesy also begins to suffer. As Christ said in Apocalypse *“But I have this against you, that you are turned away from your first love”* (Ap. 2,4).

7 – All spirituality is a process of falling in love with God to use the words of the prophets and especially of Saint Alphonsus in his writings that came from his own personal experience. Spirituality is a growing process of intimacy with God and God with us. Intimacy that needs to grow in our candidates for the religious life. It is a process of grace in which God always takes the initiative because He wants to concretely love our candidates. It is not a question of theory, but of a life experience. Formators must show the candidates that God`s love is not theory. It is an everyday experience that needs to grow during all the time of formation. God is faithful in His love even in the midst of our infidelity. And the formators need to help the candidates to respond to God`s love especially wanting to assume religious consecration as an expression of their love. What I have experienced in many spiritual directions is that *religious do not give space for God to love them*. It is an alliance – it speaks of both sides. We loving God, but letting God be God with us and God is love. This orientation is missing too much in our formation system. Live grace – live God`s love – respond to His love.

8 – This orientation is important to eradicate any concept of merit in our spirituality. It eradicates all possibility to manipulate God in order to win His grace and love. Secularism and postmodernity value only what we can earn because in spirituality that means that we are in control. This word “earn” does not exist in Christian spirituality. God`s love is grace! The process of growing in God`s love only happens when we discover in contemplation that God wants to love me with a passion. He begins the process. We greet this love as grace. The danger in philosophy or theology in various levels of formation is to experience God as an idea and not as a loving person. I cannot love an idea but, yes a person. God is the Father – He is Jesus Incarnated – He is the Holy Spirit. And spirituality calls the candidates to have a loving relationship with all three Persons of the Trinity. Only faith can help us to initiate this loving experience with God. I can love our God and He can and wants to love us. This is the great challenge of the formators today in a world that is trying to eliminate God and religion. Saint Alphonsus taught us to seek out a loving dialogue with God every day (Visits to the Blessed Sacrament – Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ). It is interesting to note that Alphonsus wrote the Visits to the Blessed Sacrament for those in formation, especially those already in vows.

9 – The spiritual process of intimacy and dialogue with God does not happen automatically especially by magical formulas where we try to control God according to our whims. *Spirituality needs the element of discipline.* Spirituality needs moments of quality time between two “lovers” who need moments of profound dialogue and intimacy. Moments of mutual sharing and loving acceptance. Moments of profound openness and without shame or fear of showing God who I really am with all my faults and weaknesses. It is a moment without fear of showing God that I am holy and a sinner and experience His total acceptance of my reality. But the only way this can happen is through some discipline of true prayer. Without spirituality, this beautiful meeting of two hearts simply does not happen. It becomes only theory and not experience. Because of this spirituality cannot be reduced only to spiritual exercises or holy places (chapel) or only to community prayers. The candidates need to be taught by the formators that they can come into contact any moment of the day in whatever place or circumstance. God is everywhere and makes His presence felt in nature, in the community, in the apostolate. It is what we call rapid moments of contemplation. It is a short but intense moment of intimacy where there is mutual love.

10 – Before this fact, the formators need to fraternally confront the candidates (especially those in vows) with the possible danger of *“spiritual anemia”* that comes with the effects of secularism. Spiritual anemia indicates a notable distancing of intimacy with God. The candidate begins to forget that he wants to be or already is consecrated to a Person – God and His Church. Candidates are not consecrated to a Congregation, nor to a special type of apostolate or charism but to a Person. In addition, spiritual anemia creates a spiritual deficiency that weakens the growing process of intimacy with this Person. And this anemia begins to have evident deficiencies in all aspects – consecration – community life – apostolic zeal. Part of secularism has been and continues being the necessity to erase the “Sacred” in our lives in order to justify anti-evangelical principles and immorality. Unfortunately, without continued formation our candidates prophetically lose evangelical values because they buy the propaganda of secularism that is all around them in social communications. Without serious orientations of the formators, it is easy for the candidates to fall into *spiritual accommodation*. Without a life of prayer (which is the first thing they abandon) there does not exist a life of transformation in the being and action of Christ the Redeemer. The first thing professed confreres in formation disregard is personal prayer where God is permitted to question their loyalty to their consecration. Once again, to limit prayer to only community prayer does not sustain religious consecration. More and more they will drift away from intimacy with Christ. Thus begins spiritual anemia. There begins a cold relationship with Christ and a separateness from the full living of concretion and prophecy. Christ formed with the twelve apostles a spiritual and apostolic school. Jesus was the Rabi and the twelve were disciples. The purpose of this rabbinical school was not perfection in the observance of the Mosaic law, but Jesus insisted that the new Law consisted primarily in the intense observance of only two commandments which constituted the essence of the alliance of baptism – love of His Father and of our neighbor. The Rabi Jesus first lived intensely these two commandments and invited the twelve to freely “follow me”. A candidate in formation assumes in his consecration to follow the Master Jesus in his way of living His consecration to his Father. To follow Christ is to be a disciple of Christ that needs therefore the constant contemplation of how Crist lived his consecration – Incarnation – Eucharist – Cross (Saint Alphonsus). Once again, to follow Christ calls for intimacy with the Master through contemplation of the Master. Only contemplation will help the disciple to welcome, live and continue prophetically the Master Jesus. It would help the candidate to become a “living memory” of Christ spiritually and apostolically. And here the formators will need to help the candidate to gradually discover the way to live and animate their desire to be a true disciple of the Rabi Jesus.

12 – I feel that the great setback in initial formation is the lack of honestly contemplating the Master Jesus. To follow Christ is to be called by Christ (vocation). It is Christ who chooses and the candidate or professed that welcomes His invitation to follow Him. Christ wants a special intimacy with those chosen to live with him in His school. This demands much humility because it is not a question of meriting this invitation to live more closely with the Master. It is the Master who calls the candidates to follow Him. Jesus has a special love for those he chooses. Christ does not want a superficial relationship with those he chose to follow him and to consecrate their lives to His Kingdom. And part of this invitation is an invitation to intimacy with the Master Jesus. And this simply will not happen without the discipline of daily encounters with the Master and the Master with his future or already consecrated loved ones. Once again I feel that the vigilance against spiritual anemia is one of the most important duties of the formators on all levels of formation. Only through monthly colloquies between formator and candidate could indicate a X-ray of the true living of their spirituality. The formator has the right, even not being their spiritual director, to touch on the subject matter on the progress or lack of progress of their spirituality.

13 – The regression happens when in place of the only Master Jesus the candidates puts other things and distractions in the first place in their lives and soon the fascination for Jesus dramatically diminishes. The candidates simply stop looking to the being and actions of the Master. And soon comes other deviations from the obligations of poverty, chastity and obedience which the Master lived and invited us to continue His prophecy and it is God`s people who eventually suffer with our infidelities. It is no longer intimacy with the Master but the Rabi became an idea, a dry theology but not the person who for love invited one to follow Him. The first love begins to dry up and Jesus is no longer the Master who loved his followers with a passion. Without the prayer of contemplating the Master, it is impossible to know Him – impossible to imitate Him. And the setback in the religious life was exactly this lack of contemplative prayer which calls us to commitment with God`s people. This possiblity must be questioned with our candidates on all levels of formation.

14 – Another sign of regression in formation is when the candidates begin to diminish the force of Jesus’ preaching because of the continual propaganda de secularism in all types of social communications. Jesus never hid from his disciples the need of renunciation in order to follow him. The twelve apostles were even invited to participate in his final destiny, the cross to continue His salvific gesture to save all humanity. Our candidates are invited to continue the same salvific mission of the Rabi who freely gave up his life to save all humanity. *Without renunciation, there is no true following of Christ* and the modern world try to negate any form of renunciation and unfortunately, some of our candidates begin to fall into this error. Some do not let that the Word to shake up their attitudes clearly against Jesus’ teachings. Some fall into a personal interpretation of God’s word justifying their error if not sins. They do not permit that the Word calls us to conversion in the being and actions of Jesus. Formators cannot hide from the candidates the necessity of renunciation in our religious and priestly vocation. The world preaches exactly the opposite and the formator needs by word and example to show them the element of evangelical renunciation to live charity in our community life and in our apostolic services.

15 – Normally we study the contents of our Constitution during our initial formation period, especially in the Novitiate in order to appreciate and begin to assume and practice the rich contents of our Rule. We felt attracted by the Holy Spirit to be a continuation of Jesus Christ whose being and acting is writing between the lines of all our Constitutions according to the vision of Saint Alphonsus. Another challenge of the formators is to constantly renovate this study of the Constitution according to the stages of the candidates in formation. Initial formation at all level needs to periodically pray and deepen the study of these Constitutions. I feel there is possibly a lack of doing this especially on the already professed confreres still in formation. Unfortunately, the Constitutions become more a reference book rather than a guide of discernment in living our charism. Maybe at least once a week the Constitutions could be the topic of our community meditation and a source of conversion. The Constitutions indicate sources of fidelity in our religious consecration and the faithful fulfilling of our Redemptorist charism. The more that this can be done in a community sharing the better the effects in their formation.

Together with this is the prayerful study of documents that come from the General Government and our provincial chapters that should be presented to the candidates so that they can see how the Holy Spirit is directing the Congregation.

16 – Another preoccupation that should call the attention of the formators is the necessity of formation to live in community. No future religious is capable of living faithfully his consecration without the help and good example of his fellow confreres. There is no doubt that community living has recently suffered some setbacks. We live together but not necessarily do we create evangelical fraternity. Unfortunately, the cellular phone merits more attention than our confreres. Exaggerated individualism also had destroyed the meaning of community where only my ego is the only source in community discernment. These are only some of the negative effects of secularism in community life. Assuming the principles of secularism, a very strong egoism is created in our community life and discernments. The norm ever more evident is that “I” is more important than “us” which destroys community life. There is a lack of true and creative friendship amongst us.

Once again, it is the hard work of the formators who need to invest time and patience to form true evangelical communities. There is need to confront the lack of evangelical principles like the lack of acceptance of others, lack of pardon, the need for reconciliation and the healthy dependence on one another to maintain fidelity in their vocation. The second and third Chapters of our Constitutions could help the formators to deepen our mutual community life.

17 – Another item of concern is about the permanent formation of our consecrated life. It is evident how after the Novitiate in our future clerical candidates` lives that they desist in deepening the meaning of their religious life through studies and readings about religious consecration which is our basic vocation. Sadly, the emphasis is only on the priesthood. Our Constitutions dedicate a whole Chapter on the meaning and living of our religious consecration (Chapter III). Formators at the professed level need to study this Chapter and help it to be a source of questioning about fidelity in our consecrated life.

Even though there exists sufficient material to provide sources of reflection in articles and courses about the religious life it seems that after the Novitiate there is no sign of procuring these means. It seems that what they learned in the Novitiate suffices. There is a lack of assuming that religious life needs “food” to nourish this vocation and supply true questioning about the living of this specific vocation in the Church. Without these means, furnished by the formators, there is no continued conversion in this way of life. Therefore, we do not assume that means, ways and age change with times and circumstances in order to live our religious consecration with more fidelity and prophesy. Without this search, there exists the sad result that some stop growing and remain stuck with the minimal and there is no more growing. Therefore, accommodation takes over which kills the meaning and prophesy of our consecrated vocation. This is a danger sign that the formators need to address and heal.

18 – Finally, the formators on all levels should promote that the candidates need a spiritual director. In addition, such direction should be something regular and as a suggested norm once a month. Look for spiritual direction once and awhile simply is not spiritual direction. In a monthly colloquium, the formator should question if the candidate is really looking for this important spiritual source of growth and incentivate fidelity in the search for spiritual direction.

May the Holy Spirit inspire all the formators in our Congregation and comfort them at difficult moments. The Congregation needs you all at all the levels of formation. Thank you for assuming this Redemptorist mission.

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