**VOCATION OF MATURE PERSONS**

Father Rogério Gomes, C.Ss.R.[[1]](#footnote-1)

*The aim of formation for both candidates and members is to lead them to such a degree of human and Christian maturity that, with the help of God’s grace, they will be able to dedicate themselves intelligently, willingly and wholeheartedly to the service of the missionary Church in Redemptorist community life, to preach the Gospel the poor* (Const. 78).

**Introduction**

This article aims to initiate a discussion on a topic already well known to the Church that has recently grown and knocked on our doors: the vocations of mature persons. This reality tends, in the future, to increase more and more due to the context of the society in which we live: low birth rate, aging population, expanded/prolonged adolescence[[2]](#footnote-2), less entry into houses of formation[[3]](#footnote-3), deferment of one's vocation, etc. In the past, the seminaries were crowded with children and adolescents, and the formation was totally internal. Since Vatican II, this reality has changed, and part of the studies have been carried out outside the seminaries in the Universities. With the vocations of mature persons, one faces another reality: from those who have postponed their vocation and do not have an academic formation but have a professional one, to those who have academic qualifications in various areas of knowledge. In our Redemptorist context, it is something relatively recent, and we can have two attitudes before this reality: prejudice, rejection, and non-acceptance or the possibility of building something new in our formation processes and accepting them as a gift from God in today's times. Whether we like it or not, this is a concrete reality, and it will become ever more evident in our formative context. They are vocations and should not be treated as inferior to those of the young persons who come to us.

Thus, the method we will use for this text is to reflect on how we, as a Congregation, can work with these persons who come to us and help them to give a sincere response to themselves, to God and to accompany them on this journey which, in a way, is outside the traditional conception of vocation in the Church or with which we are used to dealing. This is an essay that aims to open up a dialogue on the theme and to offer some guidelines on how to operate in the formative process.

**1. WHAT IS MEANT BY THE VOCATION OF MATURE PERSONS**

Defining the concept of the vocation of persons of mature age is not an easy task and without risks of prejudice or prejudice. There are several related terminologies: "late vocations," "advanced age vocations," etc. The most appropriate term in English is the vocation of mature persons to define a person who has already consolidated his personality and in part experienced different realities of life: social, affective, economic and faith, and in the course of this diversity of experiences, discovers or rediscovers the vocational call to join a formative community to become a brother or priest.

Postponing a vocation is not always a sign of immaturity. Often a young person, from a very early age, cultivates this desire to follow the Lord in his heart in Consecrated Life, however, for different reasons: to help maintain his family or to take care of a family member, lack of support from his own family, late conversion or passage from his religion to Catholicism, illness, work, studies that do not respond to his call on that particular occasion. The motivations are many[[4]](#footnote-4), and this young man has always been 'forgetting himself' in order to respond to other demands that were momentary to him. His vocation goes through a process of numbness, latency. At a certain moment in life, he awakens as a constitutive factor of his existence, as a response to himself as a way of realizing himself in the world and seeking happiness.

There are other situations where the process of maturation of the personality is slower due to the modern social context itself and other factors that touch directly on the formation of the personality of the person, from the family, its capacity to relate to the person, and to the world itself.

**2. SOME ORIENTATIONS OF THE MAGISTERIUM**

The Decree on priestly formation, *Optatum Totius* (1965), n. 3, when speaking about minor seminaries and particular Institutes, alludes to mature vocations when it says: "Promote diligently Institutes and other Centers for those who, at a more advanced age, follow the divine vocation." [[5]](#footnote-5)

In 1976, the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education sent a circular letter to all the presidents of the Episcopal Conferences dealing with the topic.[[6]](#footnote-6) The text is divided into two parts: the situation of mature vocations and seminars, the practice of the Sacred Congregation, and the indications coming from the deliberations of the plenary assembly. The text makes the following observation: "Mature vocations [...] in recent years have been very numerous throughout the Church. They should be considered positively as a sign of a consoling spiritual renewal in the assemblies of mature men and as a remedy to satisfy at least in part the present shortage of priestly vocations".[[7]](#footnote-7)

The document highlights the positivity of mature vocations, which are numerous throughout the Church, are signs of spiritual renewal, and such experiences have been valid. It warns of the need for prudence in their selection and a pedagogy adapted to them; to avoid arbitrary reduction of the course of philosophy and theology without due dispensation and that dioceses that have opted for the classical model, because they have many vocations, must consider the value of mature vocations not only for themselves but also for the universal Church; to avoid their exaltation and the need to treat them with realism and balance, and the need for institutions and structures adapted to favor any type of vocation. The avoidance of many pedagogical formulas of a popular nature is recommended when trying to replace the classic formative model. Finally, the need to consider solid spiritual, theological, and doctrinal formation. "In the formation of mature vocations of any kind and cultural level, a solid spiritual and theological formation should be given fundamental importance."[[8]](#footnote-8)

The Congregation for Catholic Education recommends the need for a major seminary and its importance in forming them. The increase in mature vocations should not be a motivation to eliminate them. Theological and philosophical formation of these vocations should be taken care of in a normal major seminary, making the necessary adaptations in each case. The document notes that the lack of humanistic and philosophical formation is not only a problem of mature vocations but at all levels. The approach taken by the text is positive and aims to guarantee the best way to form and accompany them.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992), n. 64 affirms:

*We should also mention the phenomenon of priestly vocations arising among people of adult age after some years of experience of lay life and professional involvement. This phenomenon, while not new in the Church's history, at present appears with some novel features and with a certain frequency. It is not always possible and often it is not even convenient to invite adults to follow the educative itinerary of the major seminary. Rather, after a careful discernment of the genuineness of such vocations, what needs to be provided is some kind of specific program to accompany them with formation in order to ensure, bearing in mind all the suitable adaptations, that such persons receive the spiritual and intellectual formation they require. A suitable relationship with other candidates to the priesthood and periods spent in the community of the major seminary can be a way of guaranteeing that these vocations are fully inserted in the one presbyterate and are in intimate and heartfelt communion with it.[[9]](#footnote-9)*

The Directory for Bishops, *Apostolorum Successors* (2004), n. 87, states: "Just as the Bishop should take care of the seeds of the vocation of adolescents and young person, so he should also provide for the formation of mature vocations, having for this purpose suitable institutes or a program of formation suited to the age and condition of life of the candidate for the priesthood."[[10]](#footnote-10) The same goes for Major Superiors with the necessary adaptations.

In 2016, the Congregation for the Clergy, in the new *Ratio Fundamentalis Sacerdotalis*, dedicates a topic on this theme and states that the vocations of mature persons arrive in the seminary with a more structured personality and with different experiences; their reception should be preceded by a spiritual journey so that a serious discernment can be made in their vocational motivations; the need to evaluate the time that has elapsed between baptism, Christian conversion and entry into the seminary in order to avoid confusion between following Christ and being called to the priestly ministry. The accompaniment of these candidates, as of other vocations, must be done through a serious and complete process, which foresees, in the area of community life, a solid spiritual and theological formation, through a suitable pedagogical and educational method, which takes into consideration the personal profile of each one.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Faced with this new reality, the *Ratio* recognizes and reaffirms this reality and recommends that pastoral work for vocations accompany them. "In this sense, vocation promotion is aimed at men belonging to various age groups of different ages, although today, given the growing number of mature candidates who have one or more professional experiences behind them, there is a need to pay particular attention to this precise age group."[[12]](#footnote-12)

**3. THE PROCESS OF ACCOMPANIEMENT**

If we start from the principle that vocation is a gift of the Spirit and called to a mission, then a person, regardless of his age, can be called at a certain stage of his life, because the Spirit blows wherever he wants (cf. Jn 3:8). An age group does not determine vocation as grace and mystery; it permeates the whole of human life (fundamental vocation) and manifests itself throughout it in the way that he subject responds to his existential reality (specific vocation). Thus, the fundamental question of the subject is: before my being in the world, how do I respond to this in order to realize myself as a person? Faced with the complexity of the phenomenon of life, of social relationships and of the process of becoming aware, of growth and the humanization of the person, one can respond vocationally at different times in one’s life.

It is important to consider that every human being is contextualized, intuitive, and discerns his vocation within him. The context is not decisive; however, it offers the elements that facilitate or hinder human fulfilment. Before him and his conscience occurs the response that can overcome his contextual conditioning, since the human being is capable of using adversities to his advantage through his creativity and capacity for discernment and conversion. Here the focus and decisive factor must not be age. However, it must be considered from the point of view of the institutional charism, but from a profound discernment, in such a way as to reach the deepest possible concrete motivations of the person, always remembering that the human being is a mystery and can always surprise us.

In general terms, these candidates are taught the same dimensions that the *Ratio Fundamentalis* points out: human, spiritual, community, academic, and pastoral missionary[[13]](#footnote-13) and the same principles of Redemptorist formation: graduality, progressiveness, flexibility, and continuity so that the subject may have an adequate and holistic formation. However, due to the special character of these vocations, without neglecting any other dimension, since they must be worked on together, two dimensions must be stressed: the human and the communitarian dimensions and the principle of flexibility.

**1. The human dimension**

This dimension is important to every human being. Humanization is a daily process that involves resilience, self-knowledge, and self-perception, self-control, self-esteem, being integrated into one's own sexuality, being aware of personal gifts and weaknesses, being open to dialogue and relating to persons, especially those with different world views, developing empathy and solidarity, especially with the poorest and most abandoned, interacting with information and culture, learning to deal with new technologies, cultivating spaces for creative leisure and playfulness in life and the desire to grow humanly.

It is assumed that those who take care of others, animating them, humanly and spiritually, have previously taken part in this journey in order to acquire the keys to approach the other in a serene way. Evangelization is not an external process. It begins internally, from the subject himself, who recognizes himself with limits of virtues and makes himself available to share a personal life journey with other persons and the Christian community.

**2. Community life**

Unlike the "traditional seminar" that welcomes the young person to make his long journey of discernment and formation, mature persons already come to us with a consolidated personality and a history of experiences in various fields. In this sense, it is important to welcome and value them since they can enrich the group itself and work more intensely in the community setting.

One of the foundations of our Consecrated life is community life. It is a great richness on the affective, spiritual, and pastoral levels. Still, it also generates conflicts that range from an individualistic attitude to one of not having the necessary resilience for conflicts and work in common. If a candidate is not able to move freely and creatively through community life, where significant experiences of apostolic life occur, it will be difficult for him or her, as well as for the other members of the community, to have a qualitative community experience. In this sense, it is important to help the subject to discern: Is this the lifestyle he seeks and wants for his life, with its riches and limitations, with its joys and sorrows? Are you willing to assume this lifestyle and to be creative in order to energize community life?

Therefore, it is fundamental in the formative process of mature vocations to intensify two important aspects: a) to work on the individual level, helping him/her to develop the skills for healthy exercise for community life; b) to work in groups: group therapy and networking, group sports, academic, formative, pastoral activities and prayer life. A great resource is to share the experience of life with others: family history, vocation, social vision, the Congregation, the Church, etc. It is not a matter of reducing everything to communitarianism and suffocating the subject, who needs individual spaces, as a response to personal and group demands, but of providing him with possibilities of interaction and also to confirm his vocation and demonstrate that he is capable of embracing this lifestyle in the future.

In this sense, it is worth pointing out that formators have a significant role, that of provoking (calling to) the different activities and helping the group to develop strategies of conflict resolution since this is a very fragile point in the formation to Consecrated and Priestly life.

**3. Academic life**

Many who wish to enter the Consecrated life already have a completed university education, masters, and doctorates. In some situations, much more technical and human preparation than the formators themselves. This can be a zone of conflict, since these subjects tend to ask more acute questions, to be more confrontational. In this sense, the capacity for dialogue of the formators is fundamental. They should seek, to the maximum, to integrate the capacity of studies, research, and knowledge in the formative process. Academic knowledge is not put forward as a status, but as an instrument of the openings of thought and horizons before the world and of humanization. It can be very enriching to make use of the knowledge of the different members of the group and to promote an interdisciplinary formation. This way values not only the subjects but also the group itself by making it possible to reflect on different points of view on certain formative themes.

**4. The principle of flexibility**

The *Ratio Formationis*, n. 44, comprises one of the pillars of Redemptorist formation, flexibility and adaptation. Because of the changing demands of the world and ministry, everyone must have the capacity to change and adapt when necessary. Rigidity should not be confused with the necessary strength of will, just as blind adherence to a single way of doing things should not be confused with loyalty to tradition. On the contrary, loyalty and willpower must be encouraged so that they are open to change based on pastoral urgencies. This includes the willingness to go where necessary (*cf*. Const. 15).

This principle presents itself as the possibility of providing the formandi with the best instruments so that they can adapt to the different contexts and works and have the capacity to exercise their apostolate in a creative way, responding to the current demands. It is worth remembering that in this sense, the principle aims at the subject being free and autonomous, and formation is not a straitjacket, founded on realities that no longer respond to the real challenges of society.

Therefore, in the case of mature vocation formation, the application of this principle is important for the following reasons: 1) they are persons who already have a certain degree of experience and instruction; 2) the needs of formation, the questions are different from those of a group of adolescents and young person; 3) they have work experience, and this must be incorporated in some way into the program of study as a way of valuing skills and so that the formator can apply his learning in some Redemptorist pastoral project. For example, if he is a psychologist, a lawyer, a journalist, he may be inserted into some kind of Redemptorist social work, or into a justice and peace group; 4) the program should focus and be intense in those areas most out of touch with the formandi (catechesis, community life, etc.). In this sense, each group will have different requirements. This does not mean to deform, at any moment, the formative program proposed by the *Ratio* or to make it an exception. It means to make it efficient and applicable to this reality. In the same way as the *Ratio Fundamentalis Sacerdotalis*: "As with the other seminarians, care should be taken that the accompaniment of these candidates is carried out through a serious and complete process which provides, in the area of community life, a solid spiritual and theological formation through an adequate pedagogical and didactic method which takes into account one's own personal profile."[[14]](#footnote-14) Therefore, it is a program that requires greater freedom and, at the same time, autonomy and openness to do so, without improvisation. It is important that each group has its reality verified and the question that the formative instances must answer is: how are we going to apply the contents of the *Ratio* to this group since it has its peculiarities different from the previous one? This requires serious study so that the program responds in the best possible way to the demands of Redemptorist formation and requires revision and adaptation each year, without losing the central axis of the *Ratio.*

Here it is important to consider the team of formators. In turn, they should be flexible, have a holistic vision of Redemptorist formation, openness to the new, and the ability to propose the changes born of the group's demands and accompany it in a responsible way. Fraternal dialogues should be open, marked by attentive listening and positive discernment. A team of formators that make the formation program a straitjacket is not responding to the demands coming from this community.

**4. TO CULTIVATE THE SPIRITUAL LIFE AND THE MYSTIQUE OF DAILY LIFE**

One of the essential apprenticeships in the formation house is to help the formandi to find the path to the cultivation of the spiritual and mystical life. Spiritual and mystical life does not mean filling the program with an endless number of prayers and liturgical practices. A formation house can have an excellent program of spiritual activities and absolutely no cultivation of spirituality and mysticism. Why do many religious, after leaving the formation house, have an aversion to prayer and everything that refers to the spiritual life? Or why the search for other spiritualities and not that proposed by the Congregation? Do formation programs help the young person to find his spiritual grounding so that, independent of structures and schedules, he nourishes his interior life?

Sometimes the formation house has a standard model in which the whole group is submitted to a uniform manner of praying. The formation process has to provide a structure that facilitates prayer and encounter with God. However, it cannot remain at this level alone. It is necessary to work at the individual level of each trainee. What is the reason for this? It is to help each one to discover his own method of prayer. Not everyone, although they do, adapts to the Liturgy of the Hours, the Rosary, the established formulas, etc. Everyone has his own way of experiencing God and must discover it. It is this discovery that will make the individual cultivate his interiority not from an obligation imposed on him by canonical laws, but as a vital necessity.

**Conclusion**

After this reflection on this reality that is beginning to become more prevalent in our Redemptorist formation, it is worth remembering that for the vocations of mature persons, the same principles of the *Ratio Formationis* apply. Some of them, in our opinion, should be more accentuated due to the characteristic of the group itself. It is a phenomenon that challenges us, but it should be read not as a problem but as grace and as a theological category, as Aquilino Bocos reminds us: "the term challenge has a theological character. It is a sign from God asking for our fidelity. In this perspective, we must discover and welcome the presence of the Spirit who, while showing us his gifts, encourages us to continue growing".[[15]](#footnote-15) Certainly, the Spirit shows us this new alternative, through the latest social transformations we are experiencing.

It is fundamental that we begin to prepare ourselves better for this reality. From now on, adolescents and young people will be more and more scarce. The mature group that enters must be given the treatment that is due to them, treating them with maturity and as mature persons. To do this, the formator must not be a superman, must be flexible, human, have the capacity to accompany and dialogue with the trainees and have an overall vision of their own formation, to perceive the group's own formative need, its deficiencies and try to remedy them and make recommendations for the subsequent phases of aspects on which to be worked.

It is true that part of the hesitation to these generations of mature persons that seek us out is because added to their age and the stage of formation that they must receive, chronologically the time of living the Consecrated life or priestly ministry will be shorter. This is a concrete fact. However, it is vital that formation helps this individual so that he or she, in a shorter time of performing his or her apostolic life, has a *kairological* achievement, with intensity, maturity, awareness, and experience of his or her own vocation and dedication to the poorest and most abandoned, according to our Constitutions.

1. <http://lattes.cnpq.br/3342824164751325> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. DOS SANTOS OLIVEIRA, Alessandra. Prolonged adolescence: a look at the new generation. Psicologia.com.pt: the portal of psychologists, August 2006. Available at https://www.psicologia.pt/artigos/textos/A0293.pdf>. Access : 05 nov. 2019; CAMARA, Martial de Magalhães; CRUZ, Amadeu Roselli. Prolonged adolescence: the time that one does not want to let pass. Educar em Revista, Curitiba, n. 15, p. 17-25, dec. 1999. Available at: <https://revistas.ufpr.br/educar/issue/view/238/showToc>or <http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci\_arttext&pid=S0104-40601999000100005&lng=pt&nrm=iso>. Access on: 05 nov. 2019. http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0104-4060.190. According to Câmara e Cruz:

   "The expression 'extended adolescence' was introduced by Bernfeld in 1923 and his object of investigation at the time was the extended male adolescence as a social phenomenon observed in European youth movements after the first war. There was in these groups a predilection for intellectualization and sexual repression, thus delaying the consolidation of adolescent conflict. This term with time began to have a broader connotation being today a descriptive and collective term that comprises conditions of heterogeneous dynamic constellations. The term refers to a perseverance in the adolescent position, which, under normal circumstances, has a limited time and a transitory nature. A phase of maturation, which should be left behind after the completion of its task, becomes a means of life. The adolescent struggles to circumvent the purpose of the choices that are made at the end of adolescence; the process of adolescence is not abandoned but kept open. [...] today a descriptive and collective term that comprises conditions of heterogeneous dynamic constellations (Ibid.). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. PRESS OFFICE HEADQUARTERS OF THE HOLY SEE. Presentation of the Pontifical Yearly Report 2018 and of the "Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae" 2016. Available at: https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/es/bollettino/pubblico/2018/06/13/pres.html. Access on: 26 March 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. DUQUE, Eduardo; PEREIRA, Cicero Roberto. The Priesthood as vocation: reasons for entering the seminary. Theologica. 2nd grade, 50, 1, p. 63-83, 2015. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281108309\_O\_Sacerdocio\_como\_vocacao\_motivos\_de\_entrada\_no\_Seminario. Access on: 26. March 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. VATICAN II. *Optatum totius* (1965), n. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. SACRED CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION. Circular Letter, *Vocationes Adultorum*, to the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences on the Care and Formation of Vocations of Adults (14 July 1976): *Enchiridiom vaticanum* 5 (2000), n. 2097-2108. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. SACRED CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION. Circular Letter, *Vocationes Adultorum*, n. 2098.1 - "Adult vocations [...] in recent years have been very numerous throughout the Church. They are to be considered in a truly positive way as a sign of consoling spiritual renewal in the assemblies of mature men and women and a remedy to alleviate at least in part today's shortage of priestly vocations". [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. SACRED CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION. Circular Letter, *Vocationes Adultorum*, n. 2102.12. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. John Paul II. Post Synod Apostolic *Exhortation, Pastores Dabo Vobis.* AAS 84 (1992), n. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. CONGREGATION FOR BISHOPS. *Apostolorum Successors*: Directory for Pastoral Ministry of Bishops (2004), n. 87. Available at: http://www.vatican.va/roman\_curia/congregations/cbishops/documents/rc\_con\_cbishops\_doc\_20040222\_apostolorum-successores\_po.html. Access on: 26 March 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. "Those who discover the call to the ministerial priesthood at a later age arrive at the Seminary with a more structured personality and after a life journey characterized by diverse experiences. The initial reception of these persons in the Seminary requires a previous spiritual and ecclesial journey, during which a serious discernment of their vocational motivations can be made. It is necessary to evaluate carefully the time that has passed between Baptism, or Christian conversion, and entry into the Seminary, avoiding possible confusion between the following of Christ and the call to the priestly ministry. In the same way as is done with other seminarians, care should be taken to accompany these candidates through a serious and complete process, which provides, in the area of community life, for a solid spiritual and theological formation, by means of an appropriate pedagogical and didactic method, which takes into account one's personal profile. It will be the competence of the Episcopal Conferences to give specific norms in accordance with the situation of the nation, evaluating the convenience of establishing an age limit for the admission of such vocations and considering the possibility of establishing a Seminary for this purpose". CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY: The Gift of the Priestly Vocation. *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*. L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO. VATICAN CITY, DECEMBER 8, 2016. Mature Vocations, n. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY: The Gift of the Priestly Vocation. *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis,*n. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Cf. John Paul II. Post Synod Apostolic Exhoration, *Pastores Dabo* *Vobis*, n. 43-59; CONGREGATION OF THE MOST HOLY REDEEMER, *General Statutes*, no. 055-058. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY: The Gift of the Priestly Vocation. *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis,* Mature Vocations, n. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. BOCOS, Aquilino. Rethinking restructuring. Provincial and community structures. *Redemptorist Spirituality Service. Bogotá*, Colombia, n. 01, p. 4-5, April 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)