

THE PRINCIPAL AGENT OF FORMATION:

Paying Lip-Service to the *Holy Spirit*



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It has taken a very long time. After a period of reckoning Formation as the act of disseminating facts about Francis and how to live a virtuous life; after trying to cram those facts into yearly intervals of “classes”; after associating “Profession” as the moment of “graduating” from Formation “school”, we have been enlightened by the light of the Holy Spirit.

Through the Pauline Rule and subsequent publications concerning Formation, we have come to see the operation of the Spirit in a dynamic way where Formation is concerned. At least on paper, there have been calls for a deeper understanding and respect for the activity of the Holy Spirit in the Formative process and the individual souls engaged in that process.

Process ... process ... process. This is something through which people go at differing paces – as the Spirit prompts and wills. The process of Formation is as much individual as it is communal. It is concerned about spiritual development as much as it is concerned about human development. After all, the soul is not a disembodied entity. Attention to this process – this action of the Holy Spirit in each person in formation – is a tedious job. For that reason, it is not done too well. When this happens, Formation to SFO life suffers. When Formation has suffered, those who make their permanent commitments in the Order soon find themselves bored and asking, “Is this it? Is this all there is?” There soon follows a lack of understanding about Profession and a need for a renewed sense of belonging to the SFO.

The International Presidency of the SFO (CIOFS) had come to this conclusion some time ago. Visitations conducted throughout the SFO world exposed this weakness on a consistent basis. Something was wrong with how Secular Franciscans saw themselves in the Order and in the Church. It seemed as if their Formation was lacking in one way or the other. CIOFS decided to do something about the situation and began to come up with a Syllabus for formation which was introduced at the SFO General Chapter in Hungary.

“In the mid 1970’s, shortly after the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) was first formally introduced, Father Mark Hegener, OFM, then the SFO provincial spiritual assistant and editor of the ‘Franciscan Herald’, suggested to me the close connection between Secular Franciscan initial formation and the RCIA; he encouraged me to put together such a formation program based on the structure of the RCIA.”

This is a quote by Fr. Benet Fonck, OFM in the Preface to his 3rd edition of his initial formation program, Fully Mature With The Fullness of Christ. This was a valiant and, to my mind, a successful attempt to instill a sense of process whereby the Holy Spirit is indeed the Principal Agent of formation. What were some of those elements contained in the RCIA process that are found to coincide with SFO Formation?

In speaking of the process, the Church in her RCIA documents mentions, "... (adults) ... hear the preaching of the mystery of Christ, the Holy Spirit opens their hearts, and they freely and knowingly seek the living God and enter the path of faith and conversion." (Introduction – RCIA) At another point the Church says,

"The rite of initiation is suited to the spiritual journey of adults, which varies according to the many forms of God's grace, the free cooperation of the individuals, the action of the Church, and the circumstances of time and place."

(Structure of the Initiation of Adults, #5)

We are on the threshold of a new era of Formation in our country. As you know, there was a Workshop in May in Illinois on the new Formation Manual concerning the formation of the formators.

It will reflect the wishes of CIOFS as far as content and form. There will be topics which must be included in all initial formation programs which may be new to us.

At this new juncture, we may be tempted to just get the "information" distributed. We may be tempted to "do" what CIOFS has proposed to the SFO world of formation. Let us not forget that in all of this is the working of the Holy Spirit. In addition to the information and facts which will be shared among our local fraternities, we need also to share the idea of process.

Let us remember:

- 1) "the teaching of doctrinal principles ... so as to motivate those in formation & give them effective help;
- 2) to be involved with those in formation, and to pay particular attention to the personality of each individual and their life story; and
- 3) to continually compare what is being learned with the experiences of daily life.

(Elements of Formation, Barbo-Carlson, Lindsborg, KS, 1992; Pg 13)

We need to re-introduce the Holy Spirit into our formation programs. It is hard work but will produce people who understand what they Profess and who they are in the Order, the Church and our world. From that will follow action which will bring about that "more fraternal and evangelical world" for which we so long.

