

Christian Formation: Knowing Christ and Growing in Christ

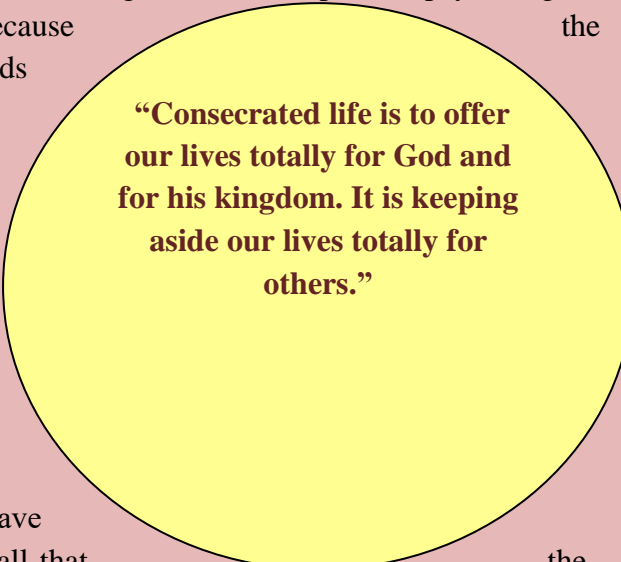
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When we speak of formation to the priesthood and to the religious life, we speak of psychological or mental, intellectual, human formation etc, because the candidate aspiring to be a priest or religious needs to have a certain amount of growth and maturity in all these aspects of our human life, for he is called to be a leader and a guide. So, is it sufficient to become a good human being in order to be a good Christian and a good religious or a priest? Hence, we stress on Christian formation which is meant to help a candidate to grow up as a true Christian and a true disciple of Christ. Therefore, how can we help a candidate to grow up as such? The answer is so simple: It is by imitating Jesus who formed his disciples.

How did Jesus form his disciples? Since we don't have enough space and time, we will not be examining in detail all that the Gospels speak of the formation given by Jesus to his disciples, except some indispensable things. In the beginning of his mission or ministry on this earth, Jesus called a group of men to follow him, who were later called Apostles. From that moment on they lived with him. Thus, they were privileged to become the real eye-witnesses of everything that Jesus taught and performed. The Gospels testify to us that besides taking them alongside during his public ministry, Jesus also used to spend private moments with them¹.

In one of such moments, most probably towards the end of his ministry on this earth, he puts before them a question (Mt 16, 13-28), "*who do people say that the son of Man is?*" They knew what the people thought of Jesus. They answered that for some he was John the Baptist, for others Elijah and for still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Then Jesus turns the question directly to his own men who lived with him all the time during those years of his ministry, "*Who do you say I am?*" It was Simon Peter who answered the question representing every one of them, "*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God*". Jesus was undoubtedly happy with the answer, because the men, whom he had been forming directly and closely, were a step ahead of the people. They have reached the stage of affirming that he was the Messiah, the Christ. They were definitely a step ahead but that was not the conclusion of knowing Christ. That is why the Gospel continues in this manner, "*From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer at the hands of the elders... and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life*". Although the disciples had reached the stage of saying that Jesus was the Messiah, the idea of Messiah that they had, was the one that the Jews generally had: a great king coming from the line of King David, who would free the Israelites from the hands of the Romans. That is why Jesus begins to explain to them that he has to suffer, that is to say, they have to remove from their head the concept, of Messiah the king, held by the Jews. They should come to the realization that the salvation that Jesus would offer, does not come through taking the life of others, but through giving his life for others, through giving himself totally

¹Mk 6, 31: And Jesus said to them, "Come with me privately to a solitary place..."; Jesus explains the parables to his disciples privately, Mt 13, 10-23: Then the disciples came to Jesus and asked him, "Why do you use parables when you talk to the people?" Jesus answered, "The knowledge about the secrets of the Kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them..."



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for others out of love for the Father. But we know that the disciples came to this realization only after the resurrection of Jesus. That is why, when Jesus was arrested, they all ran away, for they were dreaming that

the Messiah would be a successful king, and not someone who suffers at the hands of others. They had dreams of having a successful carrier with Jesus, being his closest men.

So, though knowing Christ is an important step in the Christian formation, it does not just limit itself in giving a theologically perfect title to Jesus, or in learning something by heart about Jesus. But it consists in knowing him personally and truly growing in him. It takes place by establishing a personal relationship with Jesus. When Jesus asks, “*who do you say I am?*”, more than a title, he expects a response that comes from our personal relationship with him. In other words, Jesus demands our loyalty and personal commitment to him. In this way we show that we know him truly as the one who has given himself totally and completely for us on the cross. Thus, we grow to be like him, that is to say, as men and women who are willing to give ourselves totally and completely for the growth and the betterment of others. Consecrated life is to offer our lives totally for God and for his kingdom. It is keeping aside our lives totally for others. Therefore, the Christian formation takes place not merely through bookish knowledge or through attending some lectures, but more than everything through our personal encounter with him, establishing our personal relationship with him, and thus every day growing in his image and likeness.