



FORMATION: *a matter of life and death*

Dear brothers and sisters,

Our **Constitutions** offer an inspiring and stimulating framework for ongoing formation.

In the opening of Chapter II on **Our Consecration**, it says:

11. 'The Holy Spirit led each of us along diverse paths to enter the Congregation in order to follow Jesus there. We commit ourselves to this following of Jesus, as out of love for Him, we embrace his own "way of life" by means of our religious profession. Thus we are free "to be with Jesus" and we are available "to be sent by Him" on mission for the building of God's Kingdom.'

And then in Chapter III on **Incorporation and Growth in the Congregation**, it adds:

66. 'When we enter the Congregation we commit ourselves to begin a life-long process of formation, growth and renewal.'

And then further on, speaking precisely of **Ongoing Formation** it says:

85.1. 'God calls us each day and invites a renewed response daily. Thus our formation as religious is never finished.'

2. Our Ongoing Formation is a decisive factor if the whole Congregation is to be renewed, and if its mission is to respond effectively to the challenges posed by the Church and by a constantly changing world.'

Ongoing formation is inscribed in the dynamic of God's call and our response which begins at the very start of our vocational discernment and continues throughout our whole life. God continues to call us through his Spirit. He does so every day through personal experiences and through the challenges posed

by the Church - whose *raison d'être* is missionary - to engage in a missionary dialogue of both proclaiming and receiving the good news of the Gospel in today's turbulent and ever-changing world.

Jesus and his Gospel at the centre

At the centre of this formation is Jesus and his Gospel. Through religious profession we commit ourselves, out of love for Jesus, to embrace His same way of life. It's a life lived together, permeated by a living relationship with Jesus and his mission, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. The various formation initiatives and programmes we follow aim to help us to grow in love for Jesus, freeing us to be dynamic, and following in his footsteps wherever they lead or precede. And the horizon of this formation is the same as that of Jesus: to make His passion for the Father's Kingdom our own, and thus renew ourselves in our willingness to collaborate in bringing about that Kingdom today.

This path of formation unfolds within the Congregation, alongside the brothers with whom we live our consecration to the mission each day. It is a community that builds itself up through attentive and ongoing dialogue with the challenges of the Church and our world. Our way of life is a concrete expression of the love of the hearts of Jesus and Mary, and of their passion for the world. In this lies the Congregation's capacity to make a meaningful contribution to our world.

Yet we know that our passion for God, for the work of Jesus, and indeed for humanity, goes through highs and lows. It becomes worn down and can lose its strength and inspiring freshness. For formation to become a true necessity rooted in our identity as SSCC religious, it is important to place ourselves in a position to listen to what the Lord is saying to us through his Word and through the events of our personal lives and of our world. We must be ready to open our eyes, to allow ourselves to be touched by what we experience, and to learn to read with intelligence and depth the movement of God - his coming, and even his silence.

In this sense, I find it instructive how other "professions" have established the need for ongoing formation: doctors in a hospital who meet with specialists from various fields to study complex cases and decide together on the treatment to follow for a patient; or teachers in a department who meet to deepen their understanding of topics in their specific area, and who design pedagogical strategies that convey meaningful learning outcomes that encourage further learning.

I believe that **in our "profession" as pastors, there is no shortage of opportunities for formation.** Sometimes we find ourselves overwhelmed by the abundance of options and limited by our overloaded schedules when choosing a course. But what I miss most is the desire, the passion for what is often perceived as needed in our world or in our Church: instead it remains at the level of a comment or criticism but does not translate into a movement of formation and transformation of the Church. The same can be said about our relationship with

Jesus, with God, and with the coming of his Kingdom. We have a certain jargon that we can use in preaching or in accompanying people, but we do not stop to ask whether this language is truly understood and meaningful for ourselves or for those who listen to us - or even whether we provide the means to ensure that it does.

Ongoing updating

From a pastoral point of view even, there is no area where we do not need to keep studying and updating ourselves: How do we accompany those who ask for baptism for their children, or those who request it as adults? What kind of Christian and ecclesial life do we propose to them so that they may continue growing in faith? How do we present Jesus and his Gospel - with their demanding beauty - in a way that speaks to young people, many of whom feel distant from the Church and even from faith? How do we proclaim the good news of the Resurrection to the sick and the dying? How do we speak about the salvation God offers to groups committed to peace and solidarity? How do we proclaim the God who makes covenants and calls people to specific families today? How can Christianity, together with other religions, help build bridges of peace in a world fractured by hatred and wars?

Each of us can add to this list with many other questions. If we do not ask these and other questions and create a space for resonance within ourselves and our communities, we will become irrelevant and insignificant, or we will realise, too late, that we already are.

In other words, **we need the things of God and of the world to not simply pass us by, but to affect us, to touch us, and to keep us in a continuous deepening** of practical study, so as to renew ourselves in our missionary service until the last moment of our lives. I think of the good done for medical staff by brothers in our communities who are ill: their preparation for death purifies and refines their faith in God, clarifies their hope in the promises of the Risen One who sustains them, and leads them to depart with very little baggage, loving and forgiving until the end.

The need for formation unfolds in a continuous **"now"** where God always speaks; in a **"here"** within a world that is changing ever more rapidly; and **"together"** with brothers, sisters and others who can enrich us with their perspective, experience, and wisdom.

Let us encourage one another on this path of formation that transforms and renews us.

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