

In Their Own Words

Wisdom for Formators from Newer Members

Background



Where did this information come from?



Surveys



Focus Groups



Individual Conversations

Core Themes that Emerged

The 3 I's of Contemporary Religious Life and Formation: Intergenerational, Intercultural, Intercongregational (Within Charism families and beyond)

Staying Current: Formation for these Times

It's Complicated: Relationships and Connections with Formation Directors, Formation Communities, Congregations, Associates, Partners in Mission, and Church

Elements that Matter: Specific Notes for Our Formation Processes and Programs

Formation: IDEAL or REAL/ACTUAL

The 3 I's of Contemporary Religious Life and Formation: Intergenerational, Intercultural, Intercongregational

Intergenerational

- Reality checks for intergenerational life
- Practical living skills
- Peer connections
- Differences between men and women

The 3 I's of Contemporary Religious Life and Formation: Intergenerational, Intercultural, Intercongregational

Intercultural

- Intercultural NOT multicultural
- Cultivating a more expansive worldview
- Much work to be done
- Gap between initial formation and ongoing formation

The 3 I's of Contemporary Religious Life and Formation: Intergenerational, Intercultural, Intercongregational

Intercongregational (Charism families and beyond)

- Giving Voice
- Shared formation (novitiate/initial formation)
- Virtual and in-person

“I am grateful for the Intercommunity experiences I have had during formation. The connections I have made with others in my peer group will be invaluable in the future. . .”

Staying Current: Formation for these Times

Form for what is and what will be

Current resources and practical insights

- In Our Own Words: Religious Life in a Changing World (Edited by Juliet Mousseau, RSCJ and Sarah Kohles, OSF)
- Religious Life for Our World: Creating Communities of Hope (Maria Cimperman, RSCJ)
- How We Love: Formation for the Celibate Life (John Mark Falkenhein, OSB)
- Prophetic Witnesses to Joy: A Theology of the Vowed Life (Juliet Mousseau, RSCJ)

Elements that Matter: Specific Notes for Our Formation Processes and Programs

Individualized Formation

- “Ask the women what skills, experiences, and processes they desire for this period of becoming. Co-create it with them. Process should be individualized, tailored, and created with the new member.”
- “Needs to be a balance between our own input being seen as essential but also shouldn’t be expected to create our own program. We don’t always know what we need or what questions to ask.”

Content/Courses

- Curriculum/Human Integration

Current resources and practical help

Ministry Pieces

Understanding Formation Well

- Orientation

Flexibility

Balance

- “At this juncture, I often contemplate the question: Together, how do we move healthily into the future? I’d spend time on family systems, psychology, self-awareness, helping people to name unhealthy triggers and patterns...helping them see where those patterns have originated and how to dismantle them and make healthier choices. I believe we are meant to be ‘free for mission’ and part of that means being so healthy that our own unfreedoms don’t get in the way of how we are with and for others.”

It's Complicated:

Relationships with Formation Directors

- Training and support
- Healthy state
- Power dynamics and dual roles

Relationships with Formation Communities

Relationships with Congregations and those connected to us

Relationships with Church

Formation: Ideal or Real?

“I think something that I have found challenging (and based on my conversation with Giving Voice sisters, I am not alone in this) is that canonical novitiate prepares novices for the ideal not for the actual. Most, if not all, religious congregations struggle to offer healthy local communities to candidates, second-year novices, and temporary professed. There are fewer sisters, many sisters live alone, other sisters aren't open to welcoming a woman in formation, or the dynamics at the house aren't healthy.

This places everyone – the novice, novice director, leadership – in a hard place. It is frustrating to be taught a lot of theory and theology of religious life and be given training around conflict, communication, intimacy, etc. and then be placed in a local community where those skills aren't practiced with sisters (40, 50 or 60 some years in community) who didn't receive that kind of training and formation.

It is hard to be a "newbie" that is trying to practice authentic relating, honest communication, vulnerability, etc. in a house where that isn't practiced, when the newbie is assumed to be being mentored by the sisters in the house with seniority – especially if those sisters are dealing with age related memory loss or other health challenges, mental health struggles, and/or unhealthy habits around substance abuse.

This is the circumstance I found myself in and it has brought up a lot of sadness, disappointment, disillusionment, and confusion. Is the religious life I am discerning the ideal that I was taught in canonical novitiate, or the actual that I lived as a second-year novice in local community?”

Formation: Ideal or Real?

“The canonical novitiate experience is a wonderful experience that stretches those who participate in all sorts of ways, encouraging personal and communal growth in the process. The difficulty with such experiences however is that the experience is rarely translated in returning back to a home congregation. I was transformed by deep sharing and prayer in the canonical novitiate and yet when I moved into my next local community, I found that the experience was radically different. And, while some wanted to engage in such sharing, many either had no idea how to or were resistant to the vulnerability it required.

This is a reflection of a bigger conundrum that the canonical novitiate poses - the experience of community, shared life, and prayer is different upon entering into daily life as a sister. What is modeled in the novitiate is rarely replicated and this is a disappointment. How you deal with this lived experience is a test of religious life and the charism you've discerned. The energy of the novitiate is circumvented by the tired nature of very many communities. Formation ministry meanwhile seems not to be cultivated and nurtured. Congregations seem to be far more focused on the realities of our older, aging sisters than our newest members.

This lack of support is tough. Having formation personnel who are not fully trained, ill-equipped for the task, or recycled from an earlier time [without retooling/updating]* is an injustice to those who desire to join our life. I'm left with a few of many questions: how can we better serve our newest members how can we provide life-giving community living to them? Why is the canonical novitiate more the ideal than the norm of every day religious life? These are big issues that require institutional and congregational/cultural shifts” (*This distinction emerged in conversations)



Questions for Reflection

What resonated with you? What did you hear that confirmed what you believe...thought...know to be true...?

What stretched your thinking?

What did you hear that you didn't expect to hear?/What did you expect to hear that you didn't hear?

What are the creative solutions that you see? What are some things you have already done in your formation processes that address some of what you heard here?

What questions does this conversation leave you with?

Offer

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“Here’s my theory about current religious life. The large groups that entered in the 50’s established a cohort majority. They then were faced with the enormous task of transitioning religious life from pre to post Vatican II. They had the numbers and youth to do it, and created modern religious life. What happened, though, is what they created became cemented as religious life. No one coming after them could budge the current model, so the message to newer members is, ‘Come along, we will teach you to be like us!’ As that cohort dies out, we must seize the time to create a sustainable religious life that understands what is eternal-foundational and what needs to be held loosely for changing times. New people bring in new ways and we must be able to integrate what they are bringing. I have seen so many gifted women leave religious life because they were being stifled”