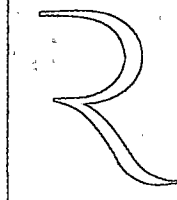


Cultivating Mature Relationships in Religious Formation

It is rightly said that “no one is an island.” Human beings like to live in relationships. Social psychologists have noted that people usually prefer living with others, in families and communal groups, to living alone.¹ Even amid relationships, however, there is yet in the human heart a certain hesitancy and fear at the possibility of losing oneself in others. Hence, naturally, diverse factors have significant influence in interpersonal relations. Difficulties and conflicts can spring up while a person tries to relate with others in an authentic way. This helps us understand why formators struggle in their day-to-day relations with one another and with those in formation. Individuals in formation experience similar struggles as they try to relate not just with their formators but also



**religious
growth**

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with their peers coming from different backgrounds.

In this article, we will examine some of the challenges to good communication and relationships in formation. People cannot claim to love God, whom they cannot see, while they have no love for their neighbor. And so we will explore some skills that can facilitate mature human relations in the formation ministry. We will make some suggestions on how to offer helpful feedback to persons in formation in ways that respect their integrity and enhance their personal growth. Learning this will no doubt flow into one's relationship with the Creator and make it flourish.

Obstacles to Mature Relationship in Formation

Intimacy versus isolation. As indicated above, human beings have a basic need for intimacy with other human beings, and consequently they desire to be close to others. There is a corresponding need for isolation, a need to be alone. Erik Erikson,² in his analysis of psychosocial development, identified the polarities of desire for union with or closeness to another (intimacy) and desire for aloneness (isolation). We experience a tension between wanting to be close to another and a fear of being too close. When you come closer to another person, or when you allow another to come close to you, sooner or later that closeness begins to make demands on you, on your time, your personal space, your freedom. This provokes a dilemma: Should I keep this person at arm's length, or should I create some space for him or her in my life? Usually, interpersonal relational ambivalence emerges because of the primary "striving for relatedness to other human beings" and the simultaneous striving for "a sense of personal identity."³ Because of these seemingly contradictory longings, persons who enter



a community or group go through different stages as they get integrated into it.⁴ The first stage is *inclusion*, in which individuals' primary preoccupation is whether they are loved and accepted. The next stage is *power*, in which people wonder about their autonomy and their capacity to challenge, in this case, both the formator and their peers. The third and final stage is *intimacy* or *affection*, in which the primary concern is equality with others, the readiness of all to give rather than to receive. These stages involve confusion and uncertainty regarding one's status and position in a group. Hence, before one can get fully involved in the give-and-take of interpersonal relations and communal life, one goes through these stages. And, naturally, these stages can involve personal difficulties.

When it comes to mature interpersonal relations, communication is vital.

Communication deficiency. When it comes to mature interpersonal relations, communication is vital. To be helpful, however, communication must be healthy and mature; if not, any authentic relating with the other at any level will be almost impossible. Can you imagine a religious formation community where people communicate only by slipping little pieces of paper under one another's door? "Unhealthy communication can be a block to healthy intimacy and affective maturity. Communication helps foster greater connection, and communication is fundamentally a learned set of skills and behaviors."⁵

Arrogance and a superior attitude. Whenever someone approaches another with an attitude of arrogance

and superiority, the other may respond with either anger, self-defense, or resistance. Alternatively, the person could cower in fear, feeling like a “lesser being.” When this happens, for example, between a formator and someone in formation, the formative environment becomes tense, and the one in formation may try to cope by external conforming. As a result, there could be apparent peace and tranquillity in the formation house, because such persons would seem to have no difficulty with answering “Yes, Brother,” “Yes, Sister,” or “Yes, Father.” In the long term, however, the result may be groups of young priests and religious who bully others because that was what was modeled for them in their own formation.

Aggression. The environments in which we are raised usually have an influence on us. In some cultures, shouting at one another seems to be an acceptable way of relating. Such scenes abound even in public places such as post offices, government offices, and marketplaces. To sell wares in the market or to get passengers into public buses, people have been conditioned to shout in order to draw attention. It appears to have become normal to shout to get some attention or make a point subjectively considered to be important. A sister once confessed that, when she was a postulant, whenever the directress gave her feedback gently without shouting, she did not take it seriously. She thought the matter was not serious because she had been socialized to believe that, if an issue was serious enough, the directress would have shouted at her to indicate the seriousness of the matter.

Aggression usually attracts aggression. Suppose someone approaches you to express his or her disapproval or ill feeling over how you handled an issue. What can happen if the person begins to speak to



you with strong and accusing words? You are likely to respond or react in the same way or with self-defense. The meaningful dialogue that could have taken place is thus aborted.

Low self-esteem and negative self-image. Just like an attitude of superiority towards others, low self-esteem is a great enemy of mature human relations. If people have a good sense of self, they are better disposed to relate with other adults as equals. Where this does not happen, an individual either too easily defers to others even in matters that need assertiveness, or reacts aggressively in subtle passive ways instead of clear self-expression. Low self-esteem also leads to feelings of envy, which can constitute a real obstacle to genuine caring regard and goodwill towards other people.

Prejudice, misinterpreting deeds and intentions. Prejudice is a negative prejudgment of individuals or a whole group. It can lead one to irrational and hostile behavior towards them. When people's way of seeing things is prejudiced or biased, they view other people and their intentions in a distorted way, and can hardly avoid relating to them distortedly. The flow of communication becomes blocked. A similar dynamic is operative in tribalism, ethnocentrism, and other forms of discrimination. One perceives others in a negative way and treats them in like manner.

Unrealistic expectations. The well-known Indian Jesuit spiritual writer Anthony de Mello⁶ maintained that to be truly happy in life you should "have no expectation of anyone." This might sound weird or exaggerated. Some might be wondering, "How can I live without having expectations of people with whom I live?" I have come to value De Mello's advice. A great source of difficulty in interpersonal relationships is that we tend to have too

high and often unrealistic expectations of other people. While it is good to have ideals and norms of expected behavior, our attitude towards persons in this regard is equally important. The Scriptures remind those who are

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strong to bear with the failings of the weak (Rm 15:1). But the question arises “Which of us is really strong?” Although we need to carry out our ministry diligently, the manner in which we do it is vital. It is better to be effective formators than just “efficient

machines” that end up producing battered individuals for the Lord’s vineyards. We shall come back to this point below, where we look at how to give feedback in a helpful way.

Some psychological baggage. Each of us is a “struggling human being.” Sometimes we struggle with unresolved personality issues from our childhood and our families of origin. Some battle with a self-centeredness that unmindfully uses others for self-gratification, some have addictive behaviors, and some have difficulty feeling empathy for others. Others tend toward anxiety, harbor resentment of authority, or have deep-seated anger. Some have deficient social skills or problematic psychosexual issues. These difficulties can and do interfere in interpersonal relationships to various degrees. Formators are challenged to take on the responsibility of dealing with their own issues first. This will facilitate their relationship patterns in ministry so that they can function more effectively and lovingly.



Skills for Mature Relationships in Formation

Growth in interpersonal relationships tends to point to maturity. It is equally a good indicator of openness to a good relationship with God. For instance, no one can say he or she loves God if the person detests fellow human beings. The following are some of the skills required for such mature human relations in formation:

A prayerful and reflective way of life. “An unexamined life is not worth living,” as Socrates said. It goes without saying that a reflective and discerning lifestyle is necessary for healthy living and good human relationships. People then are able to *respond* to others and to various situations instead of *reacting* to them.

Self-awareness and acceptance. There is also the important value of self-awareness in interpersonal relationships. Appropriate self-awareness helps much in cultivating good communication and relational skills. When people are more self-aware, the greater inner freedom they have to respond positively and maturely to people in various situations. Misunderstandings that often occur during conflicts can be more maturely dealt with. Recognizing and admitting their own motivations and personal struggles facilitates good relationships with others. It is not enough for formators to be committed to the faith and to Christian discipleship and ready to give both spiritual and human assistance to others. They must also have begun vigorously their own journey of self-understanding. They must be dealing with the major issues in their own life.

Self-care. A healthy and integrated formation environment is possible only with formators who are committed to fostering cordial relationships between themselves and those in their care. To be effective in their ministry, formators must also be taking care of their own physi-

cal and spiritual needs. Such self-care should include days off for rest and reflection, along with friendship and companionship with others not under their care. "Many religious and clergy have discovered the hard way through burnout and various overdependencies that not attending to self-care can have disastrous consequences."⁷ From time to time, formators need some form of supervision and spiritual direction. Interaction with other formators can help them sustain the capacity to relate, with compassion and genuine interest, to those who are in formation.

Trust and ability to be and work together. Interpersonal relations, whatever the context, always pose challenges. The work of formation includes training for trust and effective interpersonal communication. No matter the amount of expertise brought into the formation program, if we do not have social skills and the disposition to collaborate with others, our efforts might bear

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very little fruit. Good relationships are not just about "assembling" and "being together." That is too simplistic. A good "team" spirit and mutual respect are what is really needed. Mature people can safely count on each other in appropriate interdependence. They can disagree or differ in certain issues in a nonaggressive way, without undermining their respect for one another.

Self-discipline. The religious and priestly vocations are based on self-transcendence as the path to real self-fulfillment. Although, before Vatican II, forgetting self



to the point of near self-effacement was advocated, the pendulum swinging in the opposite direction can have an equally negative impact. Mature interpersonal relations do require a degree of “dying to self.” A measure of self-renunciation and discipline for the common good is important.

Nonviolent communication. Good communication skills are indispensable in the work of accompanying others in their religious lives. This accompaniment consists in more than verbal teaching of values. To be effective, teaching is to be done by example. In teaching people to be respectful of others, teachers must model respect for others in their very manner of communication. In his book *Non-violent Communication*, Marshall B. Rosenberg⁸ offers some tips on how to deal with others in harmonious, nonviolent, and nonthreatening ways. He does this under several headings.

1) What we are seeing/observing: First we need to be aware of what we are seeing or observing in another and to communicate that instead of offering our own judgment, our own interpretation of other persons' actions. Keeping observed facts separate from our judgments helps towards clear communication. Describing what we have observed, rather than judging it, respects others in our interpersonal relationships. Judgments can easily be wrong. An example of confusing observation with judgment is the following: Saying “Nigerians are proud” instead of saying “I met a Nigerian sister taking the same course who did not talk much to me.”

2) What we are feeling: According to Rosenberg, our feelings are the door to our inner world. They tell us whether what is happening is what we desire or not. To be in touch with our feelings is to be in touch with our inner world. Alienated from our feelings, we

are alienated from our values. For example, if I simply express how I feel about what I have observed instead of expressing a judgment, others respond to me better. We need to be present to our real feelings and express them clearly to others. People sometimes avoid awareness of their real feelings by merely using the word “feel” and then following it with more of a thought than a feeling. They say: “I feel I am right,” words that speak more of what I think than how I feel. Other such thought-filled “feelings” are “I feel inadequate” or “I feel misunderstood.” As judgments, they may be right or wrong, but they express thought more than feeling.

3) What we are thinking or what we value: What we value contributes to our feeling and may affect communication. Our feelings may result less from what we observe than from the meaning we attribute to it. When I fail to be aware of the meaning that contributes to my feeling, I may be blind to the cultural programming I bring into communication situations. Then, instead of constructively saying “I felt hurt when you did not ask me to go along with you,” I might say, unhelpfully, “When you did not ask me to go along with you, I felt hurt because it showed your rejection of me.”

4) What we are requesting: When we make our requests to others in positive-action language, we have a better chance of a good response. It is not enough to be sure of what you do not want; you should know what you want. When you make a request, ask specifically for what you desire the person to do for you. Avoid vague requests like these: “I want you to accept me as I am,” “I want you to respect my rights,” “I want some understanding,” “I want you to be more cooperative.” Instead, make specific requests in more positive words: “I like it when you call me, but once a day is enough”



instead of “I don’t want you phoning me every day”; or “Please keep the knife in the kitchen” instead of “Is this the place to keep the knife?” Learning to communicate with one another in these ways can greatly enhance the quality of relationships.

Giving Helpful Feedback to Those in Formation

There is no doubt that good communication patterns are the heartbeat of human relationships. Hence the manner in which feedback is done is crucial.

Feedback, not correction. Many readers may be familiar with the Johari window. It indicates, among other things, that there are aspects of ourselves known to others but not to us. It suggests that every human being needs some form of feedback or “reflecting back” from others in order to grow. Formation programs seek to provide such feedback regularly for those in training for the priestly and religious life. How this is done is important. First in importance is to have deep respect for people. Second is attentive listening. The purpose of the feedback given to persons in formation is to foster in them an awareness that will help them to truly internalize Christ’s values.

Formators need to be fully aware of that purpose. In addition, they need to be in touch with their own motives for giving the feedback. A variety of motives may be operating. Here are some: (1) care, concern, and love. (2) respect. (3) empathy for the other person’s perspective. (4) intimidation, to instill fear. (5) a sense of “duty.” (6) a sense of superiority (“I know it all” or “I know better”). (7) a sense of power. Feedback achieves its aim when it comes from motives 1, 2, and 3 above. It does not achieve its aim if it comes from any motive from 4 through 7.

Our manner of giving feedback ought to be mod-

eled on the values of Christ, and it should illustrate them. Otherwise it could do damage rather than help. The capacity to offer and receive good feedback greatly enhances relationships. It helps people to care for one another and enlighten one another. What does it profit if feedback only puts out the light in other persons or makes them think they are no good? Feedback should help others find and tap the positive resources that are already within them.

I shall end this article with a story of an old rabbi and his disciple. One day the disciple called on the Master confessing, "Master, when I study or join others in great feasts, I feel a strong sense of light and life. But when it's over, it's all gone. Everything dies in me." After some moments of thoughtfulness, the old rabbi raised his head and, looking lovingly at the youth, replied: "Ah, yes, of course. It is just this feeling that happens when people walk alone through a wood at night. If another comes along with a lantern, they can walk safely and joyfully together. But, if they come to a crossroad and the one with the lantern departs, then the other must go on alone, carrying the light inside." This is what mature relationships can help people do.

Notes

¹ D.G. Myers, *Social Psychology*, 7th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill College, 1999), p. 168.

² E. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1950), 1963, pp. 263-265.

³ L.C. Wynne, "The Epigenesis of Relational Systems: A Model for Understanding Family Development," *Family Process* 23, no. 3 (1984): 298.

⁴ E. Fried, "Basic Concepts in Group Psychotherapy," in H. Kaplan and B. Sadock (eds.), *Comprehensive Group Psychotherapy* (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, 1971), pp. 55-56.



⁵ Kevin McClone, "Intimacy and Healthy Affective Maturity-Guidelines for Formation," *Human Development* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 5-13.

⁶ Anthony de Mello, *Awareness* (London: HarperCollins, 1990), pp. 6-8, 31-32, 50-55. In his writings he often said we should not put such burdens of expectation and dependence on them, for it results in stifling both them and us.

⁷ McClone, "Intimacy," p. 10.

⁸ M.B. Rosenberg, *Non-violent Communication: A Language of Life* (Encinitas, California: PuddleDancer Press, 2003), pp. 25-102.

Word Made Flesh

*At the midnight hour
when the world is asleep,
you are born in a hovel
for donkey and sheep.*

*We wander in
from hills of unaware,
valleys of apathy,
deserts of despair*

*to gaze on you
in dumbstruck awe –
Lamb of God sleeping
on borrowed straw.*

Irene Zimmerman OSF