General Introduction

The Divine Master, Jesus Christ gathered, selected, trained and sent forth his disciples to continue his work: “And he went upon the mountain, and called to him those whom he desired; and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, to be with him, and to be sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.” (Mk 3: 13-15).

“It can be said that through her work of forming candidates to the priesthood and priests themselves, the Church through her history has continued to live this passage of the gospel in various ways and with varying intensity.”

Formation, in the Christian religious-priestly context, is a process of becoming a disciple of Christ, growing in union with and in conformity to him. “God the Father, through the unceasing gift of Christ and the Spirit, is the educator *par excellence* of those who consecrate themselves to him. But in this work he makes use of human instruments, placing more mature brothers and sisters at the side of those whom he calls. Formation then is a sharing in the work of the Father who, through the Spirit, fashions the inner attitudes of the Son in the hearts of young men and women.”

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In course of the last twenty centuries, different religious congregations that were founded in the Church had as one of their priorities, the formation of their members. St. Arnold Janssen (1837-1909) founded the Society of the Divine Word (SVD, from the Latin, Societas Verbi Divini), popularly known as Divine Word Missionaries, to work first and foremost where the gospel has not been preached at all or only insufficiently, and where the local church is not viable on its own.

**Scope of the Thesis**

Divine Word Missionaries came to India in 1932 and began the formation of their members from India in 1951. After 55 years, there are 600 Indian members with seven Bishops form 10% of the Society personnel worldwide. Therefore it calls for a scientific study of their formation in order to find the weaknesses and strengths of the system. This thesis is an attempt in this direction and can point out, among other things, its weaknesses and offer suggestions for improvement.

The study briefly deals with the formation of priests in the early Church in general and the Church in India in particular. The Council of Trent (1546-1563) was a major milestone in the history of the Church. The formation of clergy was one of the topics it dealt extensively, laying down guidelines and principles for the same. This was also the time of colonisation in India. The arrival of the Portuguese opened a new chapter in the formation of the native clergy. This period is treated in a separate section.
The Second Vatican Council (1963-1965), one of the major events of the 20th century, overhauled and modernized the priestly, missionary and religious formation in the universal Church; it had its impact on the formation system in India too, which is briefly discussed in this paper.

Since the thesis takes up as a case study the formation of Divine Word Missionaries in India, its recruiting system, formation at various levels, such as juniorate, postulancy, novitiate, philosophical and theological training, regency etc., they have all been examined in detail.

The constitutive elements of formation in general and of the Society in particular are studied in detail. They are based on certain basic principles: formation must be integral; rooted in one's own culture; community-forming; directed towards apostolic service; and open to the needs of the world, all of them seen in the context of the basic spirituality given to the Society by St. Arnold Janssen.

Methodology

As the thesis deals with a definite period in history (1951-2005), the method used is mainly historical analysis. Primary sources include the Code of Canon Law; Church documents, especially that of the Second Vatican Council; encyclicals of the Popes; documents of the Congregation for the Clergy; instructions of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and for Societies of Apostolic Life; documents of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India (CBCI) on Seminary Formation; and SVD publications, such as the Constitutions of the Society, Catalogus, Yearly Practice,
Verbum, Nuntius, Handbook for Superiors, and reports of the Society’s Formation Board in India.

A structured questionnaire was designed and distributed to religious aspirants in all the SVD formation houses with a view to elicit an objective assessment of the quality of formation through their confidential responses. The responses, indicated on a scale ranging from Very Good to Unsatisfactory and reflecting the qualitative rating of different aspects of training at various stages—Spiritual, Community, Religious, Academic, Affective, Missionary, and Physical—were analysed.

Secondary sources include the author’s research on the topic by renowned authors of books, articles, and periodicals on the subject from different libraries. Reports and office records in the archives of different formation houses of the Society, such as minor seminaries, juniorate, novitiate, major seminaries (philosophate and theologate), were consulted. Personal interviews with members of different groups and individuals under the formation were also conducted.

Aim of the Research

During the past 55 years of the Society’s existence in India, no scientific study has been conducted on the merits and demerits of its Formation Programmes in the country. From a missionary-receiving country it has become a missionary-sending one, with one out of every four Indian members (about 130) working in more than 30 countries. Accordingly, the formation programme is geared to suit their needs also. More than 70 members (16%) are engaged in the formation programme of the Society in India, and a substantial amount of finance also is involved in it. Today, India is one of the very
promising countries in the world where vocations to the Society are increasingly recruited and trained. This study, therefore, is very necessary and justified, especially with a view to improving the quality of formation. Hopefully, the analysis may also be of help for other congregations that are in search of guidelines to update their own formation programmes.

**Delimitations**

This thesis is the first of its kind after the Society started its formation programme in India in 1951. It is primarily a history of its religious-priestly formation for over five decades. The formation programme in India is acclaimed as one of the best in the Society at large and the best in Asia. This study, it is hoped, will help the formation personnel primarily in the Society at large and in other congregations as well.

It was again for the first time that a scientific study with interviews and with the help of a questionnaire at all levels of formation was undertaken and the data collected and analysed. The findings could be of considerable help and guidance for the Formation Board and the formation personnel to take note and implement the recommendations. The study is in no way exclusive, and more such studies can help the noble vocation of guiding the future ministers of the gospel.

**Structure of the Thesis**

The thesis is divided into five parts, and discussed under chapters 1 through 5. In the first part, priestly formation in the first four centuries is studied briefly. The Divine Master Jesus Christ himself called and selected the first candidates for priesthood, ordained them and commanded them to continue his ministry. During the first few
centuries, there was no formal training of the clergy. The Church did not have fixed rules for it during the first few centuries. The cleric obtained his theological knowledge first of all in the lessons of the catechumenate, and further, by private study in the designated training centres.

From the time of St. Augustine (354-430), seminary training became more systematic. Episcopal schools attached to the residence of bishops were the normal training centres for clerics in the western Church. This was followed by monastic schools and later developed into episcopal schools. This type of formation of clerics is treated in the first part of chapter 1.

Christianity is believed to have been brought to India by St. Thomas the Apostle. Thus Christianity was established in India in the first century itself. Priestly formation in India in the early centuries is known as the Malpanate system. Malpanate is very much akin to the Gurukulavasam of ancient India where the disciples lived with a Guru (teacher) and acquired knowledge. The candidates for priesthood were called together to the residence of a respectable, scholarly senior priest and basic instructions in liturgy and scripture imparted. This system was prevalent among the Syrian Christians of Malabar until the arrival of the Portuguese. This period is briefly treated in the second part of chapter 1.

The Council of Trent (1546-63) was a turning point in the history of priestly formation in the Church. The Council and its impact on the formation of the clergy in India, the seminaries established by the Portuguese and the training imparted there, the
Latinisation of the Syrian Christians, the conflict between the Padroado and the Propaganda de Fide and its impact on the formation of native clergy in India, are briefly discussed in sections 3, 4 and 5 of chapter 1.

The Second Vatican Council (1963-1965) made radical changes in the formation of the clergy throughout the world. Among other things, the Council updated the programmes for the formation of clergy and religious in India. The final section of chapter 1 briefly examines developments in this direction under 'Second Vatican Council and Priestly Formation in India.'

The Society of the Divine Word, popularly known as The Divine Word Missionaries, was founded in a small village at Style in Holland in the year 1875 by St. Arnold Janssen. The main objective of the Society’s foundation is to proclaim the gospel. The Society’s foundation, growth and expansion to other parts of the world and its main activities are briefly covered in sections 1 and 2 of chapter 2. The Society came to India in 1932. Its foundation and expansion in India and the admission of Indian members to the Society are the main contents of section 3 of chapter 2.

Chapter 3 deals with the formation of members of the Divine Word Missionaries in general. The first two sections of this chapter study in detail the formation programme of the members in India in accordance with the dictates of the Church, the documents of the Society, and the directives of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India. Formation programmes of the Society, including the formation of brothers in India are covered in sections 4 and 5 of this chapter.
Chapter 4 examines different fields of formation of the members of the Society, including regency, overseas training programme, training of formation personnel, advanced studies and training of specialists, ongoing formation, and the role of Formation Board. This chapter concludes with a brief study and recommendations on the formation for the 21st century.

Chapter 5 contains a summary of the findings, evaluation and conclusions of the thesis. A detailed study was conducted with the help of a questionnaire to elicit responses from aspirants, and by visiting all the formation houses of the Society in India to interview groups and individuals. The results have been analysed and integrated in this chapter.