A CRITICAL STUDY ON THE EFFECTIVENESS
OF THE FORMATION OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS IN KERALA

INTRODUCTION

1. Being a religious in a Congregation

Sandra M. Schneiders, a professor of Bible and Christian spirituality at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, California says, “Becoming a Religious is a process that begins with a decision by an individual who feels personally called by God to enter Religious life within a particular Congregation and the corresponding decision of the Congregation to accept the candidate for a period of mutual discernment”\(^1\). An individual chooses a Religious Congregation when his or her ideal is consistent with the institutional ideal. In other words, personal charism and the charism of the Congregation are in essence similar.

“A religious institute usually comes into being by the initiative of an individual or a group, the founder(s) or foundress who decides to establish a particular organization within the broad historical social movements of Religious life. The founding person, usually with the first members, decides on the purpose and way of life of the group, writes a Constitution or rule of life that both describe the group and its organization and prescribes its way of life, and then submits these documents to the appropriate Church officials for approval. If the documents receive approbation, then the group becomes a diocesan Institute if approved by the Bishop or an Institute of Pontifical right if approved by the Holy See, Vatican”\(^2\) “Until 1983, the Canon Law (Law specific to the Catholic Church) prescriptions governing


\(^2\) Ibid 4-5
Religious Institutes were so numerous and detailed that the Constitutions of various Congregations were virtually identical.

The 1983 Code reduced the “norms common to all institutes of consecrated life” to a minimum, thereby allowing individual Congregations considerable latitude in embodying their own charism and spirituality within their “particular law”, that is, their own Constitutions and other documents. Nevertheless, as Institutes, that is, as canonical entities, Religious Congregations conform to a certain pattern that is more or less standard. The elements all Institutes have in common include perpetual (continually renewed) profession of the vows of celibacy, poverty, and obedience; community life; a governmental structure; the requirement of appropriate formation of new members; and in ministerial institutes, a commitment to ministry specified in some way”. Thus a given Congregation is a social movement organization which has its particular agenda or mission, its means of achieving that mission through its lifestyle and ministry, its own rules and regulations, entrance requirements, style of government, and so on.

The state of religious life is formally initiated, after a lengthy preparation and careful discernment by formal solemn and public commitment which establishes a lifelong condition that affects everything the person will do and every decision she will make, for the rest of her life. Being religious is a public situation in the Church, and other members of the Church are entitled to hold the religious accountable for the commitments made.

2. Background of the problematic

The mode of life the women religious lead in Kerala raises serious questions regarding their commitment to the public. If, as stated above, religious life is an option to live for the public and the religious are accountable to the society, the members of the Church have the duty to

---

3 Ibid 5-6
examine whether their activities help uplift the poor sections of people in some way. Given their gender, the women religious have a higher responsibility as regards empowering the women flock in Kerala.

Mary Elizabeth Kenel, a clinical psychologist with the Legal Services Division of the Department of Forensic Psychiatry in Washington, in her article, ‘Women Religious as Mentors’, recalls that the role of mentor is one that women religious have fulfilled in times past. A good example of Teresa of Avila influenced John of the Cross; another Catherine of Siena’s influence on Pope Gregory XI. These women were mentors of note at a time in history when women were even more subservient than they are at present. Founders of religious communities, through their exemplary life, spiritual writings and the formulation of a rule of life, have also acted as mentors to their followers and as sources of inspiration for those women who, generations later, opted to follow in their footsteps. In less formal ways, too, women religious have acted as mentors.

Today, there seems to be an even greater need for women religious to assume the role of mentor and to exercise this role in such a way as to foster the integral growth of other women. By so doing, the woman religious has an opportunity to give concrete expressions to the primary life task of adulthood that is generally summarized under the concept of generativity. Many religious women today are suffering from stagnation without being generous to transcend themselves to their contemporary ladies, especially those abandoned by the society. A better formation might help them to imbibe the fundamental dispositions of Christ whom they follow, whose concern they take as their and who is their best mentor. Mentoring allows the religious to share directly in the creative flow that fosters and develops the next generation women and permits her to shape the future, not by the transmission of genetic material but by the transmission of ideas, ideals, traditions and values.

In *Mulieris Dignitatem* Pope St. John Paul II invites women very specially, to become teachers of peace with their whole being and in all their actions, on a realization that to them God “entrusts the human being in a special way”. In particular, women religious are called upon to become peace-makers. But if the religious donot enjoy peace within themselves, what kind of an atmosphere will they be able to create in the society? A religious woman in constant companionship with Almighty God has the enormous power of her femininity and can empower her fellow women in every circumstance of their lives. But in many cases, the reality is different. Being unaware of their power from within, they live in fear withdrawn from the society and at times they motivate the youngsters to lead a life withdrawn and in fear.

The members of many religious Congregations, even though they run orphanages, schools, colleges etc they are not able to respond to a girl or woman in distress. The ignorance of Government policies, their closed mind set and biased fundamental dispositions prevent them from rendering timely help for women in distress. Very often their service is restricted to institutionalized apostolate and any involvement with the problems of people is seen as outside the religious call.

In 2005, around 8087 cases of harassment against women were registered under the IPC in Kerala. Every now and then, the News papers publish shocking news of abandment, rape and murder of female infants, minor girls, etc. Ladies and mothers are attacked on the street. Dalit women are molested and attacked by their land lords. Very often, these incidents are just ignored by the religious as occasional events. Effective reaction in solidarity with the victim is very rare from the group of religious women in Kerala. This is probably because their formation as religious women has not equipped them to quickly respond such grave incidents in the society.

---

5 John Paul II (1989). *Mulieris Dignitatem* 114
Joe Mannath, a psychologist, now General Secretary, Conference of Religious in India (CRI), says, “The individual’s self gift to the community, the community’s effective concern for the individual and meaningful common activities that promote unity make happy and inspiring religious communities”\(^6\). Only such communities and members can give hope to the persons in hopelessness and difficulties. That is the mission of Jesus that should be carried out by the women religious. Also Vatican II teaches us “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men and women of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well”\(^7\).

At this juncture, the attention of those who are concerned about the service of religious women in the society turns towards the mode of formation given to the aspirants joining the various Congregations.

3. Towards the precision of the problem

Our search into the crux of the problematic wouldn’t be effective unless we look into the different perceptions prevailing in the field of formation of candidates for religious life.

3.1 Perennialist Concept\(^8\)

One of the existing categories of formation for the religious is “The perennialist position, exemplified by much of the pre-Vatican II period. It is based on the authoritative position of the formator as the person entrusted with the task of instructing others in the perennial truths of religious life. The relationship of formator and formee is in the context of master and pupils. The formator is very conscious of the expectations of the higher authority that, certain permanent truths are being taught in a didactic manner. The principal model of


\(^7\) Austin Flannery (1964). Document of Vatican II, Gaudium Et Spes, Pauline Publications. 11

instruction is that of teaching. The starting point of teaching is usually the prescribed Constitutions, the life of the founder or foundress, and the history of the Congregation. The theoretical motivation for both formator and formee is in essence the same: she is to teach, the formees are to learn. Under this model the duties of a good religious are emphasized in various ways: by being reminded of their personal responsibility to know and accept their call from God through frequent conferences, by being encouraged to be loyal to their formation group, and to be obedient at all times to those in authority. Besides regular prayer and Mass, numerous devotional exercises and retreat days ensure that a sense of piety is being fostered”

This concept is not altogether unsatisfactory. Many outstanding religious have come through such an initiation into religious life. For those who have come from devout Christian homes, such a formation style undoubtedly offers a security in relation to those coming from a secularized background.

3.2 Essentialist Concept

Another alternative model of formation at work today is essentialist in nature. “The essentialist concept” of religious life is above all things a life based on the doctrines of the Church. The biggest challenge offered to religious formators was to underpin their work with a genuine theology of religious life. The formators concentrate on imparting an understanding of religious life as a living out of the essential Christian ideals. The emphasis placed upon providing a scriptural and theological rationale for religious life gives an intellectual flavor to formation, and casts the formator in a lecturer role. It is largely an adult concept, which in turn requires a certain adult ability to view reality in a holistic fashion. Many such formation programmes however fail to see the relevance of their own lives in accordance with the Scripture, theology, Church history and liturgy.

Ibid 802-803
The positive side of this essentialist approach is that it reflects more understanding about the nature of the religious vocation. But it underplays the aspects of the present and future of society and the candidates themselves who are preparing for a religious profession. It is characterized by what can be called “pedagogy of object”. The models of learning it relies upon are almost exclusively concerned with handing on the charism of religious life, which itself is taken as an unchanging and universally understood aim”.

3.3 Existential Concept

A third model that is employed in the field of formation is the “existential”. “The basic concern of this approach is, person to be formed in his or her actual life situation. The words which characterize this approach are sincerity, dynamic, commitment, relevance, authenticity, choice, freedom, and experience. For those who look at formation in this way, the key to human and Christian living is the continuing choice of an authentic way of life. To be authentic means to acknowledge basic moral challenge, to be open to the ambiguities and contradictions of life and to respond to them by committing oneself afresh to the values one perceives to be at the heart of a meaningful existence”.

“Religious life in the existential sense, is viewed and understood as an expression of the life of faith, and so must find its verification in real life. If it is not to be a dead faith, it must be acted out in deeds. The formator here will give prominence to discussion methods as the way of learning, and will emphasize the importance of the differences in the life situation of each candidate in his or her personal response to the call to religious life. A greater measure of freedom will be extended in various ways to formee, and the view will be encouraged that both formator and formee are engaged in a common enterprise of describing the personal and social significance of the vowed life. Constitutions and histories of the Congregation will

---

10 Ibid 803-804
have only a limited role in an approach such as this. They may serve as reference or guidelines, but hardly as a starting point"

Without doubt, the existential approach makes being involved in religious formation a very creative and personally satisfying experience. Concern for the giftedness and insights of the formees is present here. But these insights had been largely subordinated to the immediate needs and interests of the Congregation, and formation was more often training or domesticating than a forming. “The chief problem with this approach to formation arises from the fact that it doesn’t provide the experiences that should be provided by a formation community. Since each candidate’s experience of life is unique, each one must have his or her own formation program. Faith and ‘well-meaning’ disposition of the candidates are insufficient to fill the vacuum created by the abandonment of a well-defined initiation process. When too much emphasis is placed on the inner search for meaning of those in formation, the past heritage of a religious Congregation can easily be forgotten, and responsibility for the future ignored”

3.4. Socialization conception of religious formation

The rationale behind this approach is that whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. One of the important prerequisites for religious profession was suitability for community life. A formee can only say “I am a religious” because we are a religious family. The main idea behind this method is that if a founding charism is most present in the lived reality of a religious community, then it is within a community that formation must happen. Here the core group of the formative community is made up of religious who are prepared to share their own personal and collective story of faith; to witness in an open way to the meaning of their

---

11 Ibid 805-806
Congregation’s charism; to support those in initial formation in a sisterly manner and to pray with and for them. In this “shared praxis” approach, the formator is not the sole authority of formation, but acts as a guide in a fraternal network of relations. Such an approach to formation may be successful with mature candidates, but the story could be a wholly different with the younger or more immature types.

Much of the process in the above models was devoted to assimilating the candidate into the group. Hence very many Congregations modified their formation programme using psycho spiritual development theory put forward by Prof. Rulla S.J. Psychological tests are used in various stages of formation. But this is not sufficient to meet the challenges arising from the growth of globalization which affect the spiritual values. Individualism, extreme secularist thinking and the cult of freedom, affect the concept of obedience. The centrality of the human person has lessened esteem for authority and church discipline. The sense of transcendence and the supernatural is weakened; the concepts of sacrifice and mortification are out of the religious dictionary. There is a search for easy, convenient and luxurious life; the lack of community witness. The decline in the spirit and culture of religious life demands a new integrated method of formation process which can help the women religious to be effective in serving their fellow beings till the last moment of their lives with commitment and dedication. The goal of this research is nothing other than developing an integral project of formation for the women religious and there by empowering them to commit themselves for the causes of afflicted women.

4. Delimitation

In order to make this research profound and fruitful we have to define the limits within which the subject will be studied.

a) We have to fix the list of Congregations whose formation programme will be taken as corpus for research. According to the Directory of Conference of Religious in India, there are
Women religious Congregations dedicated to service in Kerala. Among them there are Cloistered Orders, not engaging in external activities and they may not come in the preview of our study. Some others are of foreign origin and we eliminate them in order that our study remains indigenous and contextual. Among the Congregations of indigenous origin we will focus on Congregation of Teresian Carmelites (CTC), Congregation of Holy Family (CHF), and Sisters of Destitute (SD) because they are engaged in different ministries of education, social work and health care respectively.

b) The research has to be also limited with regard to the stages of formation. The four important phases of formation are

i) Aspirancy: This is the beginning stage. During this time more importance is given to create a free mind in the candidate to mingle with the community members, and to see what is going on in the Congregation from a distance. The intellectual study is also initiated with catechism, history of the Congregation, history of religious life and different forms of religious life.

ii) Postulancy: During this period the young girl verifies and clarifies her own vocation and begins to discover the charism of the Congregation and her personal charism. Some exposure programme are arranged to make them participate in the missionary activities of the Congregation. They are also introduced to the theological, liturgical, and scriptural subjects.

(iii) Novitiate: In the two years’ training of novitiate, the postulant is initiated to the life of the Congregation. In the first year, the concentration is to develop personal relationship with the Lord: Prayer, meditation, initiation to the spirituality and charism of the Congregation. The importance and the obligations of commitment, consecration, vows and Constitution are the main areas of study. In the second year, the novices are given opportunities to do the apostolate, and practice of living in another community.
iv) Tertianship: Once the novitiate is successfully completed the novices make the public profession of vows. Periodical renewal of vows can go up to nine years of time. Before completing nine years the professed sisters undergo one year strict formation as preparation for perpetual vows. This one year of Tersianship is an important period of formation where there is a set syllabus and the religious sister deepens her convictions, imbibes the charism of the Congregation clearly and starts her life with renewed consecration and commitment.

For this research we concentrate on the stage of Novitiate and the Tertianship. These two periods offer intense study and opportunities for life transformation and attitudinal changes. Since the transformation happens only through change in attitude we select these two stages for our specific research. These are critical periods where the youngsters take decision about what kind of a religious life they should live.

c) We have to determine the “service age” of the sisters we plan to study. We will select sisters who completed novitiate before 1990. The choice of this group is significant since just after the novitiate the religious start their academic studies intending to take up an apostolate specific to the Congregation. Then, they make their perpetual profession and then only they enter into the public life. Thus, it takes around 10 years for a religious woman to be ready to engage into the social activities after the novitiate. Hence the effectiveness of the formation programme can be evaluated fruitfully from their lives of consecration and commitment to the apostolic activities.

5. Objectives of the Study

In the light of the above discussion we list the goals of our research as follows:

- To examine the various reasons for the failure of religious women to empower the marginalized.
To assess the effectiveness of the present formation models through analysis of diverse corpus: surveys, interviews, formation, literature etc.

- To reflect on the means to improve the effectiveness of religious formation in accordance with the principles set by the Gospel and the values and priorities put forward by the constitutions of each Congregation.

- To develop proposals for a new model of formation suitable for women empowerment based on the Gospels and teachings of the Church.

6. Procedure

In the first chapter, a few books and articles published in the field of religious formation is reviewed and it is the background study for this work. In the second chapter the various services done by the women religious in Kerala is explained. The public opinion about the life and activities of religious women is also recorded. The third chapter is the analysis of the qualitative survey: the data collected through the personal interview conducted with forty sisters belonged to three different Congregations giving primary importance to three different social activities such as, education, caring the sick and empowering the women. The fourth chapter is the result of quantitative survey and its diagrammatic representation. The fifth chapter gives an account of the expected principles of religious formation in accordance with various traditions, Bible, and Church documents. As the outcome of this research we will bring forward in the last chapter a formation programme which will equip the women religious to commit themselves for the cause of the marginalized at large and the vulnerable women in particular.

7. Methodology

The methodology used in the research varies according to the nature of each chapter. Subsequently, The first and the second chapters are descriptive in nature, focusing on a review of the literature and on services of women religious in Kerala. The third and fourth
chapters which study the data collected through surveys, follow an analytical and hermeneutical approach. The fifth chapter is both descriptive and analytical; it explains how the Bible, the Constitution of the Congregation and teachings of the church shapes the formation of the religious. The final chapter which proposes a new formation programme, is interpretative and argumentative in nature. For the citations we use the APA manual.