

*WHEN YOU LEAVE RELIGIOUS LIFE, WHAT THEN?  
ACCOMPANYING PERSONS IN THE PROCESS OF  
DISCONTINUATION FROM RELIGIOUS FORMATION*

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## **Introduction**

Around the world, people have continued to seek admittance into seminaries and houses of religious formation. Usually, this is in response to what the individual has perceived as a call to embrace the priestly or Religious Life. Enthusiasm and proclamation of ideals about what religious vocation entails are often elements in the desire for this way of life. In recent years, in some parts of the world, the numbers seeking religious life have decreased considerably. As a result, greater investment and diverse kinds of creative endeavours have been launched with the aim of attracting and recruiting potential candidates. It appears a great deal has been written about the work of fostering and recruiting vocations, but I dare say, not enough seems to have been written about the accompaniment and preparation of persons for discontinuation during the course of the actual formation process. In other words, more discussion and reflection are needed on how to accompany persons humanely and creatively, who after they have entered formation, come to a point when indicators begin to surface as to the need to seek paths of the Christian journey other than the religious life or priesthood.

Normally, at the completion of the formation programme, beautiful liturgies and social celebrations are planned to ritualise and enjoy the day of profession of vows or ordination to the priesthood. The community, family of candidates, friends and well-wishers are brought together by this happy event. Nevertheless, it equally happens sometimes in the course of the formation programme that some candidates freely make a choice to discontinue. At other times, such decisions can come from the congregation through the formators who are directly involved with their personal accompaniment. The Gospel scene comes to mind of the young man who volunteered to follow Jesus wherever he went. Jesus, however wisely declined his offer: 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head' (Lk 9: 57-58). There is equally no doubt that there is a struggle on the part of the ones 'invited' or 'called' as seen in the young man whom Jesus asked to follow him: 'Let me go and bury my father first.' 'I will follow you, sir, but first let me go and say good-bye to my people at home' (Lk 9: 59; 61). A person who perceives a call to the religious life or the priesthood and is open to explore that, might discover or be helped along the way to see that it is not necessarily his or her calling. This can often be very difficult and emotionally taxing for all parties.

While this is a reality of the religious formation situation, it is nonetheless interesting that not much literature on this crucial aspect of religious formation seems readily available. Considering the importance of such a ‘pastoral issue’, it is uncertain how much attention seminary rectors, bishops, leaders of religious congregations and formators have accorded the issue of how persons leaving the seminary or houses of formation can be adequately prepared and accompanied to leave, living joyfully, and still continuing the practice of their faith. Arguably, the number of candidates who discontinue from a formation programme might appear generally smaller in comparison with the number who stay. Yet, the seemingly fewer numbers nonetheless, need to be well prepared and accompanied in every possible way in the often daunting process of readapting to the ‘world’ they had left behind to enter the seminary or convent. Since no one is an isolated entity, each one’s own unique journey of life has effects on the lives of numerous other people – family, friends, the Church and the wider society. The seminary or convent of which they had been part is not excluded from this network of interconnectedness.

## **The Focus of the Article**

This article first points out the need for constant attentiveness to the Spirit in formation accompaniment and in the discernment process. It also explores possible reasons for persuading candidates to leave the formation programme and continue their Christian journey elsewhere. This can range from candidates in the initial stages of formation, to those who are already professed but still in temporary vows. It needs to be emphasised however, that because of the complexity of persons and situations, one can never grasp all the reasons. To help formation directors, attention will be paid to what they might expect when a person discontinues from their programme. Awareness of what to expect can be good anticipatory tactics to help them cope better. Finally, some strategies on how to accompany with sensitivity those in the process of leaving will be proposed. This no doubt cannot be exhaustive. They are simply indicators and suggestions. Formation directors will find out what might suit a particular individual and situation best, as each person is unique and identical to none.

## **Discernment is crucial**

A significant part of religious formation work is discernment. Because of the nature of this form of Christian vocation, which is somewhat ‘unconventional’, discernment is doubly crucial. Discernment, for the purpose of this article is seen in the sense of an ability to obtain sharp perceptions or to judge well, going past the mere perception of something and making nuanced judgments about its properties or qualities. This equally involves wisdom and good judgment especially in matters which could be easily overlooked if the inner discretion of discernment is not employed. In Christian literature, the word ‘discernment’ can be used to describe the process of determining God’s desire in a situation or for one’s life. In large part it describes the interior search for an answer to the question of one’s vocation, namely, determining whether or not God is calling one to the married life, single life, consecrated life, ordained ministry or any other calling (cf. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discernment> - accessed 28 July 2015). A recent article on ‘St Thomas Aquinas and Vocational Discernment’ aptly illustrates the significance of discernment with regard to the consecrated life:

The existence within the Church of several forms of personal consecration, matrimony, evangelical vows, and Holy Orders, raises the question of what today is known as ‘vocational discernment’. In other words, how do I know what God wants me to do? How do I discover God’s plan for my life? How do I learn the ways by which God will make me a saint? Because of the natural attractions that draw men and women together, discernment is not ordinarily applied to those who aspire to marriage. Instead, one finds the right spouse...Priesthood and consecrated life, however, enjoy no such natural pull or attraction. Why? Priesthood and consecrated life exist because of the Incarnation. Only Christ the High Priest gives legitimacy to a celibate priesthood and makes becoming a priest a justifiable option for a young man. There is no such thing as a natural inclination or yearning towards remaining celibate. The divine command given to men and women, ‘Be fertile and multiply’ applies to

every person on the planet. Those who *cannot* fulfil this command are called ‘eunuchs’ (see Mt 19:12). Likewise, only the example of the virginal Christ allows men and women to imitate him by committing themselves to a life of consecrated virginity or chastity... (R. Cessario, ‘Thomas Aquinas and Vocational Discernment’, *Religious Life Review*, volume 54, number 291, March/April 2015, p. 70).

It is crucial to work at getting to know each candidate reasonably well as to be able adequately to help them discern properly where they might be called and fitted in according to their own particular gifts. Another dimension is being attentive to not only identifying candidates who are unsuited to a specific congregation, but also where else a particular candidate might be better suited, happier and well-adjusted. Although some of the candidates may not be at a chronologically young age, assistance in discernment is still very important to them as some could still be struggling with self-knowledge and identity formation in terms of to what career or vocation they might devote their lives. Hence, the following questions could be helpful:

What psychological traits are needed in abundance, in this group or geographical area, at this time in history? What traits are seldom needed? What traits would be a hindrance or a problem? Another important question may come to mind after some months of working with a candidate: Could it be that this candidate’s traits indicate a religious vocation but not to this particular order; or not the diocesan priesthood? Candidates usually knock on the doors they know about, and most candidates do not know the full array of options. Furthermore, they may not know themselves well enough to know what they should seek for themselves. Formators must consider that their role may sometimes be to encourage a candidate to leave his or her chosen programme and seek another. (J. M. Greer, ‘Vocational Assessment’, *Human Development*, Vol. 20, number 2, 1999, p 29).

Formation directors need therefore to ensure that they are personally attuned to the voice of the Spirit in their day to day living. They are to assist those they are guiding to equally progress in attentiveness to God speaking through the daily experiences of themselves, the whole of life and the actual work with them. Discernment ‘allows the Spirit of God to shape not only our actions but also our ‘hearts’, the centre from which those actions flow. By responding in daily life to the call of the Spirit, we are allowing God’s will to be done in us...’ (D. Lonsdale, *Dance to the Music of the Spirit – the Art of Discernment*, London: DLT, 1992, p 114). No one is born with clairvoyance of God’s will in every situation. Seeking is therefore vital in this process and journey of faith. Fortunately, good guidelines for discernment and discovering God’s will abide, namely: the gift of our intelligence and good sense/intuition, the example of the life of Jesus, the Scripture, daily experiences and events, and of course, the power of prayer. For authenticity in discernment, five imperatives, as propounded by B.J.F. Lonergan, can be very dependable guides: ‘Be attentive, sift through experiences intelligently, be reasonable, be responsible, and be in love with God and God’s creation.’ (M. C. Blahut and R. P. Maloney, ‘A Guide for Religious Beginning Spiritual Direction’, *Review for Religious*, 68.1, 2009, p 80). In addition and very importantly, those in formation are to be assured that their openness and audacity to make the journey is what counts most, hence the same openness to the discernment of their perceived call is imperative. As Paul Theroux wisely said, ‘The journey, not the arrival, matters; the voyage, not the landing’ (<http://www.azquotes.com/quote/959496> – accessed 28 July 2015). For those accompanying them and for the individual as well, the love of Christ and the courage to make the journey are the root of all endeavours in the formation process and the exercise of discernment.

### **Some Possible Indicators for discontinuation from Formation**

Owing to the complexity of life and the unique spiritual nature of the religious life, it is not always easy perfectly to *identify* and *enumerate* the reasons why a person may need to discontinue her/his religious formation. Although every follower of Christ, in whatever state of life, is called to the fulness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity, Religious Life is certainly not a perfect state for perfect persons. It should,

therefore, not be about impeccability of a candidate. The religious formation and growth in Christian maturity is a process. And being a *process* implies that it is gradual, and lasts all through the life of a person.

Certain criteria and levels of maturity are nevertheless required of individuals at the beginning of the journey of religious formation. In the *Directives for Formation in Religious Institutes*, it is clearly stated that: 'It certainly is not required that a candidate for the religious life be able to assume all of the obligations of the religious life immediately, but he or she should be found capable of doing so progressively' (*Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes*, No 42, Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, London: Incorporated CTS, 1990). It is admittedly true though that at times, intuitive experience corroborated by certain events can help confirm the necessity for a person to discontinue formation. In every action, Christian love and compassion are to be at the base. No one must be asked to discontinue formation merely at the whim of the formator or simply out of pure personal displeasure with an individual. One important aspect, which requires a great deal of patience, is suitable preparation of people before they are admitted to religious formation. Hurry or need for increase in numbers is certainly not a good way to handle admission to religious formation. If, however, issues that will warrant discontinuation from formation arise, in spite of all the initial preparations done, they still have to be adequately followed through.

One of the requirements of various Religious congregations is usually some degree of reasonably good *health*. Health embraces not just physical health, but psychological as well. Depending on the nature and charism of the group, there are varying health requirements for applicants. For some, if a candidate has certain medical problems that could hinder fuller participation as a member and ability to engage in the ministry and the demands of the life, it could warrant letting the person go. The person might find a home with other groups with different health requirements, or else, seek another way of life altogether. According to the Code of Canon Law, even though contracted after profession, a physical or psychological infirmity which, in the judgment of experts, renders the member in temporary profession unsuited to lead a life in the congregation, constitutes a reason for not admitting the member to renewal of profession or to perpetual profession, unless the infirmity was contracted through the negligence of the congregation or because of the work performed in the congregation. (Canon 689 §2). (In order to understand this canon 689 (*i.e.*, §§ 1, 2 & 3) and all its ramifications more fully, it might be helpful to study it in its entirety, with all the explanatory notes therein.) In certain instances, an individual could conceal a serious matter in their medical history during the admission process and it is discovered later in the course of formation. When this happens, it can be very difficult for all parties. At times, the congregation might recommend withdrawal to that individual. Giving proper care to the person would be the first approach, and a charitable one. Afterwards, sound medical advice could be sought before making a decision about that person's future in the congregation. In the instance where a candidate would have to discontinue for health reasons, it might be helpful to bring the family into the picture so as to be prepared and plan on-going care of the person after his return home.

The world is changing fast. Religious need to keep up with the pace in order adequately to grasp and respond to the 'signs of the times'. Owing to the realities of the modern world, there is a level of *intellectual/academic* qualification/competence required of religious. Unfortunately, in certain situations, because of pressure to get more members, some of those could be overlooked during the admission and screening process. Alternatively, a candidate might come in with a good enough paper qualification. However, in the course of the formation programme, it could be seen that he or she has considerable difficulty grasping the content of the programme. When this happens, it could warrant a decision either to advise the person to leave and update or otherwise seek other paths in life. Even if a person is not gifted intellectually, he or she can still make positive contribution to the society in other ways. Because the consecrated life as it is lived today is often in community with other persons, there is needed a capacity to *live communally*, sharing life with other individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds, personality and dispositions. Where one experiences almost

unbearable discomfort and difficulty in accepting this reality, the better option might be a life style where one is not necessarily compelled or required to share life with others in such close proximity.

There could also be *the problem of 'fitting in'* or struggles with *emotional development*. An important question formators and the person in formation need to be open to exploring, is honestly *gauging* in some way one's emotional maturity and ability to sustain a life where regular and consistent spiritual exercises are a prominent prerequisite. If such seems like a burden to a person, that might be an indicator for not 'fitting'. Would the candidate embrace and live celibate chastity without extraordinary difficulty and an unbearable burden? These questions are worth exploring honestly with the candidate. To be effective in accompaniment and discernment in the formation work, those assigned to the formation ministry are to be *au fait* with the particular nature and requirement of their congregation; the realities of their context or mission. This will help to identify and be confident about whether a particular individual candidate's personality, gifts and disposition fit.

Sometimes, a person may pass through serious *inner struggle* and considerable *resistance to some necessary change* required for the way of life that he or she is being prepared to embrace and live. When a candidate tends consistently to utter statements like: 'You should accept me as I am, this is who I am, and there's nothing anyone can do about that'; 'I am used to this, and this is the way I function', there could be cause for concern. Statements such as the above can mask an unwillingness to transformation through the formation experience and exposure to new ways. Does the formation environment seem to stifle the individual and prevent him or her from living authentically as the person deems right? Discontinuation from the programme might be a healthier option for a person; for Jesus came that we might have life abundantly, not suffocated (cf Jn 10:10).

Human nature is complex. For this reason, it is not surprising to find that for some individuals, at the time of admission into the formation programme, there can be a confusion and *mix-up of motivations*. A young entrant might be motivated by youthful exuberant infatuation for some perceived ideal of life. It is hoped, however, that as the individual progresses in the spiritual journey, prior motivations can become clearer. Entering religious life, it is not unusual for one to have both conscious and sub-conscious motives for doing so. Almost always, the ideals can be quite high, but upon entry, they begin to discover that religious life may not be exactly as they had expected. Sometimes, a person is unable to reconcile their stereotyped notion of the religious life with the reality of the human condition, accepting their own human vulnerability in it all. This can adversely affect them in a way that warrants exit from the programme.

For some, the initial *enthusiasm* for religious life can just *wear out* quickly. Spiritual stagnation can set in as a result, and there will not be much emotional stamina to engage fully in the formation process. For instance, a novice or seminarian can show signs of growth in gaining insight into some significant personal weakness. However, he or she can tend to glory too much in the growth, without showing a matching ability to progress to any further step of utilising the fruit of the self-discovery for change. More often than not, this can be simply a basic inability: A person's level of awareness is the door to change, but it does not mean that they will go through it. There are those who can't and those who won't but generally formators are dealing with blindness, not ill will'. (M. Drennan, 'Special Issues in Formation', in B. McGregor and T. Norris [eds], *The Formational Journey of Priests: Exploring Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Dublin 1994, p. 89).

Another possible indicator is a seeming visible *joylessness* in a person in an early stage of religious formation. Pope Francis maintains that Consecrated men and women can respond to the invitation to follow Christ in the Consecrated life first, by 'being joyful': 'Show everyone that to follow Christ and to put his Gospel into practice fills your hearts with happiness.' For him, this happiness should be contagious, and lead people to seek the reason for this joy, so that they too can share in it. It is indisputable that 'Where there are religious, there is joy.' Hence, when a person in formation goes around with a long sullen face and infects everyone around with negative energy, it will be worth exploring with the person what is happening with him or her, and whether they are in the right place. (Cf Apostolic Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, *passim*.)

At times, a candidate might simply have inner battles; like *personal uncertainty* and *self-doubt* about their suitability for the religious life or priesthood, although on the part of the formator, there might be no visible signs indicating serious concerns or unsuitability. In this case, it is helpful to engage in active discernment process with the person in order to help them choose correctly and be at peace with the outcome of the discernment. At times too, their inner struggle might corroborate the formator's observation of their outward behaviour. In all cases, openness to discernment and the 'voice of the Spirit' remain vital.

## **Preparation of those who are to leave**

Taking time humanely to prepare and accompany the individuals on their way out of the formation programme can be a strenuous process. There is no denying this fact – that it can be quite demanding. For this reason, there could be a temptation to seek an easy way out by avoiding full engagement in this difficult process. There is no doubt though that many try their best in handling this crucial aspect of the formation ministry. Some may be simply ill-equipped for this difficult part of their work. The good news, however, is that help is available if one truly desires to be committed to this difficult aspect of formation work.

## **What Formators can expect**

### ***Personal inner turmoil***

While there is a good level of inner conviction of doing one's work to the best of one's ability, it is not unusual for formation personnel to agonise over this, worrying about the authenticity and accuracy of her or his decision to prepare a candidate to abandon the formation programme. The formator can experience self-doubt and guilt which crops up from inner wonderings if his or her own personal bias is not blocking the process and journey of another fellow human being. There could also be fears that one might be making a mistake and 'depriving another of their vocation'. A formator once approached me because of her struggle around an impending decision to ask a novice to discontinue from formation. Although she gave many examples of her experience of the young woman and seemed clear on her true state in the process, she still experienced the inner struggle and desire to get another person to help confirm her. Her approaching another person for confirmation of her own perception was probably a way of getting someone outside of herself to affirm and 'validate' her inner conviction regarding the unsuitability of the said young woman for her congregation's way of life. That seemed important to her to put her mind at rest.

### ***Varied reactions from companions of the candidate leaving***

Considering the reality of peer affiliation and mutual support, it is understandable when companions in the programme of the particular individual in the process of leaving feel or react angrily to their formator who is 'sending away' their companion. Their reactions can also be ambivalent. With the sense that perhaps the person needed to leave anyway, they nevertheless struggle with fear for themselves who could be 'the next' to be asked to go. It is not uncommon too that in many cases, the other candidates had perceived the one going as the one who is really doing everything right in the formation. Hence, they wonder: 'If this person who seems so perfect is leaving, what could become of me?'

### ***Reactions and judgment from other Members***

It often happens, unfortunately, that usually those who are not the formators could be quite quick at judging the actions and decisions of formators. The same applies to those in leadership. When some persons are not the ones directly responsible for formation, they could feel themselves as knowing how best to treat those in formation. In addition, since some persons

believe in numbers as a sure sign of the success of formation, when anyone leaves, irrespective of whatever reason, their reaction is usually negative, laden with criticism of those in the formation work. The formator could be accused of high-handedness and strictness with expectation of young people that are too high. When a candidate had been introduced to the congregation by a sister or confrere, it could become even more toilsome for the persons directly involved with the formation. In certain cases, the particular confrere or sister reacts very strongly to the said formator for 'expelling *my* candidate'. Added to the already present inner turmoil, there can be tremendous suffering for the formation directors. These are realities that formators could face if a candidate is leaving.

### ***Resistance from the part of the Candidate leaving***

In the discernment process, if a person tends to take the issue of religious vocation as a do-or-die affair, it is almost always a negative sign. This is not a good sign at all because authenticity and openness seem to be lacking. It can serve as an added indicator for a formator that this individual might be unsuitable for the religious life. Wherever unyielding stubbornness and insistence on one's perceived vocation no matter what anyone else sees or says come from, it is clear they do not come from the spirit of Christ, whose core disposition was always to do the will of the Father- "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to complete his work" (John 4: 34). Meeting with disappointment or events going against one's plan can be very challenging and difficult. Whether a candidate leaves of his own volition or is advised to withdraw, it can be a real loss – of a treasured way of life even if one has not yet made perpetual vows. Because some people are not really affected by a particular experience *per se*, but by the meaning they attribute to it, leaving can be taken as not merely a loss, but also a failure in one's life project. This can threaten a person's sense of self and accomplishment. For some, it could also lead to a loss of faith and belief in the Church. Formation personnel can devise ways and processes to enable those who leave adequately to 'mourn' their loss and at the same time seek to find the faith and will to move on in life and embrace other opportunities and ways that Life will open up for them. One can only do this with a healthy letting go of what has passed, having honoured it as part of their graced life story/journey. The feelings experienced by those who leave can be comparable to those who lost their jobs. Formators need to pay attention to this and not take it for granted. The skills to facilitate this important process are greatly required on the part of the formators.

### ***Reactions of the Family of the Candidate***

This particular point might be shocking to some persons, depending on their cultural backgrounds and contemporary reality. In some cultures, leaving the seminary or convent could be seen as a sign of failure. It can be worse in the case where the particular individual is advised to leave. A feeling of hurt self-pride could be triggered in both the individual and his or her family. However, where a candidate is fortunate to come from a family that has openness and understanding of the human condition, it can be much easier to handle. A good example is Dr Van der Mal in the film, *The Nun's Story*, who told his daughter Gabrielle (Sr Luke) as she left home for the convent that once she felt she could not cope with convent life, she could come home and would be always welcomed back. This kind of family background can be highly supportive to an individual in formation to engage freely in the discernment involved. She is spared a heavy burden of untold fear and anxiety about the future and its outcome. In cases where the opposite is the case, that is, where family and relations consider quitting the seminary or convent as a failure and dishonour to their family or even the clan, it can be unduly difficult for a candidate who leaves to cope. To readjust and make a reasonable life for themselves becomes harder. In certain such instances, persons have been pushed to take their own lives as a way out of the predicament. It is helpful therefore to help them all to see that if one door closes, another can be allowed to open.

### **Some Strategies for accompanying candidates discontinuing from formation**

Be it a postulant or novice who has not been long in the formation or an already professed member in temporary vows, the process of exiting from formation can be a very challenging one. When the decision to leave is the initiative of the person, it could be relatively easier, although there are still issues to be dealt with. For instance, the emotional letting go and parting from companions with whom one has shared life - joys and sorrows, faith and dreams. In addition, the future is uncertain. Hence, it is likely there will be feelings of fear, apprehension and worry about what the future could bring. For all these reasons, significant consideration is required in finding adequate ways of accompaniment and care in handling the exiting process. It is very important that those who leave are accompanied to do so graciously, not with bitterness and ill feeling. Instead, respecting their basic human dignity is to be aimed at with all intent.

Since human beings are individuals and unique, it is not easy to prescribe any single strategy to suit the needs and temperament of every candidate in the process of preparing to leave a religious formation programme. Nevertheless, since human nature is basically universal, there are certain values that might have a wide appeal irrespective of personality or context.

### ***Empathetic accompaniment***

It is essential to remember that this is a very difficult time for the individual leaving. This person had come into the formation programme with all intent to become a professed religious. It has come to a point, however, that they are to withdraw from the formation programme possibly because 'it was not working out' as anticipated, or that it is possibly 'not their calling'. Whereas it is usually a considerably difficult experience for most persons who have to discontinue in the course of their formation programme, those whose choice it was not to discontinue, but were rather advised by their formators to leave, can experience more sense of failure and threatened self-esteem. Sensitivity and empathy are highly required in this case. The formator needs to tread very gently on this holy ground. What can help one is to imagine oneself in the position of this person in the process of preparation to exit. The Gospel exhortation to 'do to others as you would have them do to you' (Mt 7:12; Lk 6:31) comes in handy in these circumstances. It will help to keep the formator empathetic. Empathy enabled Jesus' genuine concern for people, *feeling* their emotions and thoughts, which consequently moved him to loving action (Lk 7:11-16; Jn 6: 1-14; Jn 11: 33-35; Jn 2: 1-11). Empathetic accompaniment is definitely needed in order to be meaningfully with a candidate on the path of departure. The saying of Kahlil Gibran is quite true: that one gives but little when she gives of her possessions, but it is when she gives of herself that she truly gives. This is a challenge and an invitation to formators at this delicate time in the life of an individual, to really give of the self – time, care and attention - to this individual at a very vulnerable time in his or her life.

### ***Utmost care and Gentleness***

Irrespective of the reasons for discontinuing religious formation, the individual in question needs to be dealt with gently and humanely. Undoubtedly, the more tenderly and humanely persons are accompanied in the process of leaving, the more likely there will be positive results in terms of their personal response and equanimity. In other words, persons who are shown genuine love and consideration when it comes to helping them withdraw from the formation programme are more likely to have less resentment and strong negative reactions towards the formators and the congregation. It is likely that the necessary re-adjustments and finding their way in life will be easier for them. This is the reason why it is more important to work hard at building up their esteem and self-appreciation, than repeatedly harping on their shortcomings. A strong temptation that a formator could face is highlighting the weaknesses of the candidate to justify the decision and assuage feelings of inner struggle and pain that often accompany such decisions. This way of coping with the situation would produce more negative thought and

reactions. It is not enough to say, 'yes, I have warned her time without number that she is heading for the door if this *carry-on* continues!' Formation accompaniment and discernment are not about warning. Such threats are more likely to increase the fear or self-doubt of candidates, which can lead to compliance to avoid being 'sent home'. That a person does not fit in a particular congregation does not mean that he or she is no good and cannot make an excellent life in another setting or another congregation for that matter. It is good always to bear this fact in mind.

### ***Awareness of the Power of words used***

Words are powerful in the force of their influence on human beings. When candidates are in the process of leaving, they usually feel vulnerable and often unsure of themselves. At times like this, a person might tend to be more sensitive to little stimuli of all kinds than they would ordinarily be. That is why it is important to be attentive to the words one uses with them at this time. If a candidate seems unsuited to a particular congregation, it is only fair to accompany and redirect him or her instead of bombarding the one with negative condemnation, judgment and 'putting down'. This is not at the service of love. 'Do not use harmful words, but only helpful words, the kind that build up and provide what is needed, so that what you say will do good to those who hear you' (Eph 4: 29).

It is true that candidates exiting from religious formation need to be sensitively cared for and counselled, however, it appears even more important to pay special attention to those in whose case the initiative to discontinue had not come from the individual but instead from the congregation. This is crucial because of the possible inclination to link their being asked to leave as a personal failure which has shaken the very foundation of their ability as a person. Giallanza therefore wisely counsels formators to 'take care that their message does not diminish the person's self image or self-esteem. The decision to tell a person to depart from the formation programme is never an evaluation of his or her worth, goodness or lovableness...' (J. Gallianza, 'The Ministry of Initial Formation', in *Human Development*, Vol. 10, number 4, 1989, p 7.) This is crucial, as fairness and respect for the individual are at stake.

### ***Honest and transparent Feedback***

Formation has to be carried out in a mature way; that in the day-to-day journeying with a person, he or she is aware of what is happening at a personal level. If such is the case, when it comes to advising someone to discontinue, it will not be 'a surprise' or seem like 'an act of meanness'. The Igbo of South Eastern Nigeria have a proverb: if you pick a tick out of a dog's skin, show it to him so that he does not think you were trying to pinch him. Letting the candidate be in the know of why she is being advised to withdraw is important. Respectful and sensitive feedback is a prerequisite for a healthy formation process. This is to be so because preparation time for exiting is not meant to be a time when a candidate is given 'a list of faults' as reasons for departure. In ideal situations, the decision to ask someone to leave is never the decision of one sole person. While accompanying a postulant, novice or one in temporary vows, and it becomes increasingly evident to the formator that exiting might be a better option for the person, it is helpful to begin letting the individual know this. Ultimately, the formator will work this through with him or her, that they are not going to be given a recommendation to continue. Taking such a stance is more mature than pushing it to 'a higher authority' in the congregation like the regional, provincial or general council, and finally telling the person: 'they did not give you the votes for profession' or advancement to the next stage of formation. In the course of the formation accompaniment and daily living, one is to be made aware of what is happening and how one's progress and response to formation is viewed and assessed. '...Formators must take the time and be clear and fair as possible in explaining the decision that has been made and what led to it'. (ibid., p 7). Such honest transparency helps to build trust. It makes exiting easier when or if the candidate is ultimately going to be

advised to discontinue. It is regrettable that sometimes, one encounters an ex-postulant, ex-novice, ex-brother/sister or ex-seminarian who claims that they never knew the real reason for discontinuation, and it was never brought to their awareness. These allegations or claims, unfortunately, cannot always be verified. Nevertheless, whatever the case, formators are to ensure sincerity with people they accompany in their day-to-day work with them.

### ***Finding some 'Outside help' for the candidate***

Finding some sort of 'outside help' applies especially when the person is already a professed member although where necessary, such an opportunity can be given to a postulant or novice. Sometimes, the individual might prefer to talk to a person other than her formator who is directly involved with her formation. Possible negative feelings towards the formator, the congregation, and others can be given vent to where an opportunity to meet with a competent spiritual director has been given. This can be very helpful. Such an alternative safe and *holding* place often gives the person a chance to deal with their possible overload of emotions in these circumstances.

### ***Care of the Peers of the one leaving***

Having shared life, faith, dreams, etc with a person, we realise that every parting evokes myriads of emotions in people considering their own different backgrounds and prior experiences in life. When a postulant, novice, a seminarian or young professed religious is leaving, the other companions on the journey are usually affected in varying degrees. It is not only the person who is leaving who experiences some emotional upset. The other companions and confreres equally feel the impact. This is to be taken seriously. It is worth reassuring the companions that God has a plan for each person and leads each on his or her journey in a unique way; that the divine plans for each one are 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future' (Jer 29:11). Creating a safe space for them to share their feelings is helpful.

### ***Ritualising the Transition experience***

As part of the transition that is a core element in discontinuing from formation, depending on the suitability of the situation, formators can organise some form of ritual to mark and bless the process of leaving. This can be done on one to one with the candidate leaving, if he or she is open to that; and secondly with the group or community. Depending on the atmosphere and choice of the person leaving, it could include a prayer session and some symbolic acts of honouring the time/life shared with the group in a seminary, novitiate or community (mission), moving on and entering through another wide open door of a wide range of opportunities. This can be done with the discretion and creativity of the formator, and of course with the cooperation and approval of the person leaving. Where the person does not wish to have any of these, it is better they are not imposed. However, it can be noted that in certain instances, with some encouragement from the formator, the individual in transition sometimes comes around and in hindsight, is grateful for that ritual before their exit. The pain and agony of separation and goodbye can be a reason for the resistance of engaging in this kind of undertaking. Nevertheless, it has the potential of being a healing balm for both the one leaving and the group.

### ***Family education and involvement***

It can be helpful to initiate discussion with the candidate in preparation on how and when they want to involve their families in anticipation of their imminent exit from the formation and return home. In addition, feelings can be processed with the candidate around this. In some congregations, before the start of initial formation, parents/families of the candidates are invited to a 'family meeting'. At these 'family meetings', parents are educated on what religious/vocation discernment entails and the need for them to give their son or daughter all the support he or she needs on the journey. The opportunity is equally employed to educate them on realistic expectations of their wards in this venture. This prior preparation has helped in getting parents and family members attuned to the realities of religious formation and discernment. For some, it had helped them to welcome back their son or daughter with open arms when discernment points them to other paths in life. This

has in many cases gone a long way in motivating and empowering those individuals to engage in life and live it fully after their exit from formation.

## **Support for the Formator**

To be cared for, as well, is the formator, the one who accompanies the person in the process of leaving the formation. Unfortunately, it is not often easy to find much support from among confreres or one's community. They too might equally be angry with the formator, that a would-have-been member is leaving. Leadership needs to be attentive to this reality. Formators also are to be aware of their need for support, and seek appropriate ways of self-sustenance at this difficult time in their ministry. Availing of spiritual direction and supervision can be very helpful. Dealing with feelings of possible guilt and self-doubt, which can sometimes plague many a good formator at this time, cannot be underestimated.

### ***Post departure support***

Putting in place a kind of good exiting counselling and support for young people who have left at various stages of a congregation's formation can be a positive venture. Some congregations have tried out setting up post-departure care of their ex-members and ex-novices, seminarians and postulants. The support can consist of not only material, but equally some form of checking in for those who might be in need of such, as well as counselling and guidance support. This might not be a simple and straightforward matter. It will definitely have financial and personnel implications. Without doubt, such a venture will be a good contribution to the life of those persons, giving them a start in their 'new' life, to face and live it meaningfully in the challenge of transition. In addition, when people are well treated and prepared before they leave, there is more opening for maintaining a good rapport and friendship with the group with whom they had shared some precious years of their lives. In fact, some of them eventually become associates of the congregation they had left, supporting them as co-workers, collaborators and benefactors in some of their missions and apostolates. Exiting from a congregation should be an experience in response to the voice of the Spirit, instead of an exercise of hatred and resentment.

It is worth adding that leaving earlier rather than later in life could indeed be a blessing in disguise. For this person, there is more probability of having the time and opportunity to adjust and make another life for herself, including starting a family for those who might wish to do so.

## **Conclusion**

These are real challenges. There is no denying that this aspect of formation work can be onerous and formidable especially for formators directly involved with accompaniment of candidates. Fortunately, challenges and difficulties somewhat have a capacity for leading people to growth. The difficulties involved could 'seem insurmountable and could easily lead to discouragement, if it were a question of a merely human enterprise'. (*Redemptoris Missio*, §35). But as people of faith, it is taken, not as 'a merely human enterprise', but God's. It is God who really calls and sanctifies all things and beings. One simply needs to be aware of this and totally surrender oneself to God's guidance in this whole enterprise.

It seems fitting to conclude this write-up with a beautiful poem by Tagore:

*No; it is not yours to open buds into blossoms  
Shake the bud, strike it; it is beyond your power to make it blossom.  
Your touch soils it, you tear its petals to pieces, and strew it on the dust.  
But no colors appear, and no perfume.  
Ah! It is not for you to open the bud into a blossom.  
He who can open the bud into a blossom does it simply.  
He gives it a glance of his eyes, and the life sap stirs through its veins,*

*for he who can make the bud to blossom does it simply.  
At his breath the flower spreads its wings and flutters in the wind.  
Colours flush out like heart-longings, the perfume betrays sweet secrets.  
He who can open the bud does it so simply.*