

What is Ongoing Formation?

The month of October is special for every Marian devotee as it celebrates a simple but powerful prayer – the Rosary, more so for us Salesians who believe that it is Mary who in collaboration with God brought us into this congregation. In prayer life, recitation of the Rosary is not merely a daily activity but an expression of love. It is an ongoing growth of a person in one's devotion to Mary and an exercise of schooling oneself to meditate on the mysteries that form the foundation of our faith. Rosary trains us to grow in ongoing fervour for God and to realise it in one's life, keeping Jesus and Mary as our example and role model. In this month we will also celebrate important saints like St. Theresa of Child Jesus, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Theresa of Avila, St. John Paul II and also two Salesians: Bl. Alberto Marvelli, Bl. Michael Rua and a Salesian co-operator: Bl. Alexandrina Maria Da Costa. These holy men and women have one thing in common, they all chose God above all, had very special devotion to Mother Mary and offered themselves as religious or priests or lived a Christian life totally in union with God. Their life underlines that the journey they began did not end at a particular stage or with a goal they attained, but continued as an ongoing following of the Lord. They were completely engaged in conforming oneself totally to Christ.

Holy men and women, and the religious who have gone before us teach us that the query "who am I?" serves as a profound foundation for the process of ongoing formation, inviting individuals to engage in a deep and transformative reflection on their identity in Christ. This introspective journey encompasses one's past experiences, present realities, and future aspirations, allowing individuals to uncover the layers of their personal and spiritual narratives. By acknowledging their unique history, including the influences that shaped their decision to embrace a particular charism, individuals can better understand the motivations driving their vocation and mission within the Church. This exploration also requires an honest acknowledgment of our weaknesses and failures, recognizing that these challenges are integral to our growth and sanctification. By overcoming our imperfections, we can cultivate humility, resilience and foster a deeper commitment to our religious identity. As we navigate through ongoing formation, this foundational question helps us to remain grounded in our purpose and empowers us to become authentic instruments of God's love and grace, capable of responding to the needs of the Church and the world with compassion and creativity. Ongoing formation is like the breath of our life, a continuous process of inhaling and exhaling that sustains our spiritual vitality and must persist throughout our journey. Ongoing formation for us is becoming more like God, following Christ in the Don Bosco way, as we seek to embody His love and service in every aspect of our lives. Ultimately, the question "Who am I?" becomes not only a question of identity but a transformative call to live united with God and become Christ-like.

In other words, ongoing formation concentrates on the processes of 'Deification' and 'Christification'. **Deification** (also known as **Theosis**) is a central concept in Christian theology, particularly in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, where it refers to the process by which a human being becomes united with God and participates in the divine nature. This

does not mean becoming God in essence but sharing in God's divine life through grace. St. Athanasius stated, *"God became man so that man might become God."* This concept is rooted in Scripture, notably: *"...that you may become partakers of the divine nature"* (2 Pet 1,4). Deification is realized through the transformation of the believer's life by grace, aligning them with the life of Christ through the sacraments, prayer, and virtuous living. It involves deepening one's participation in God's holiness, love, and glory. **Christification** is the process of becoming more like Christ, conforming one's life to the image of Christ. It is closely related to deification but emphasizes the transformation specifically into the likeness of Christ in thought, action, and character. Christification means allowing Christ to live in and through the believer, as St. Paul says in letter to the Galatians *"It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."* (Gal 2,20). This transformation is gradual and takes place through grace, sacraments, prayer, and spiritual disciplines, particularly by imitating Christ's love, humility, and obedience to God. In the context of ongoing formation, **Christification** for religious and priests involves: continual spiritual growth in Christ-like virtues; a commitment to lifelong learning, self-reflection, and pastoral conversion; and deepening their relationship with Christ through prayer, community life, and apostolic work.

For a Salesian religious, Deification and Christification take on a unique character, deeply embedded in the charism. This includes,

- 1) **Youth-Centered Mission:** As Salesians, we engage in Deification and Christification through our apostolate for and with the young. By modeling Christ for young people and helping them discover God's love, we experience a deep union with Christ.
- 2) **Preventive System:** Our educational approach, which focuses on reason, religion, and loving-kindness, mirrors Christ's own approach to guiding and transforming others. Through this system, we foster the divine image in ourselves and in the young we serve.
- 3) **Living Joyfully in Holiness:** We emphasize the importance of joy in Christian life, as St. John Bosco did. We live and promote a spirituality of optimism, which reflects the joy of union with God.
- 4) **Missionary Spirit:** We embrace the missionary aspect of Christ's life by evangelizing through education, catechesis, and pastoral work, which helps us to grow in likeness to Christ, the Good Shepherd.
- 5) **Community and Fraternal Love:** Deification and Christification happen within the Salesian community. Through mutual support and shared life, we grow together in holiness, reflecting the communal love of the Trinity.

In Scripture, ongoing formation is a constant process of growth, conversion, and deeper understanding of God's will. The Bible portrays numerous figures who undergo continuous transformation in their spiritual and personal lives as part of God's plan. However, let me limit to three characters of the Bible.

- (1) **Moses:** Moses experienced ongoing formation throughout his life. From his early years in Egypt to his exile in Midian, and ultimately his leadership of the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses was continuously shaped by God. His encounters with God, particularly in the

burning bush (Ex 3) and at Mount Sinai (Ex 19-20), demonstrate that his formation was a lifelong journey of deepening trust, learning, and service.

(2) David: David's life is another example of ongoing formation. As a young shepherd, he was anointed king, but his journey to the throne involved years of preparation, struggle, and growth in faith. His formation continued even after becoming king, especially through moments of repentance, such as when he was confronted by the prophet Nathan after his sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam 12). His ongoing formation led to a deeper understanding of God's mercy and kingship.

(3) Peter: The apostle Peter underwent significant ongoing formation during and after his time with Jesus. Despite his impulsiveness and initial misunderstandings, Peter was constantly being shaped by Christ. After denying Jesus three times, Peter's repentance and later encounter with the risen Christ (Jn 21,15-19) led to his transformation into a leader of the early Church. His growth continued as he navigated the challenges of spreading the Gospel.

From the Catholic Church's perspective, ongoing formation is a lifelong journey of conversion and growth for religious and priests. It begins with initial formation but must continue throughout life, ensuring that individuals grow in their spiritual, pastoral, intellectual, and human dimensions. The **Fathers of the Church** emphasize lifelong spiritual growth, recognizing that no one is ever fully formed in holiness or knowledge. Notably, **St. Gregory of Nyssa** articulates the idea of continual progress in the spiritual life, saying: "*The perfection of human nature consists perhaps in its very growth in goodness. Our perfection is not marked by reaching a final state, but by an eternal journey of ascent.*" Thus, formation is seen as an ongoing journey toward greater intimacy with God and service to the Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC 1593) highlights that the journey of holiness [for a religious] and priestly ministry requires continuous formation. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992) underscores the need for priests to continually develop in their pastoral, spiritual, and intellectual lives. The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (1996) defines "ongoing formation as the continuation of the journey of holiness that began with initial formation. It is an indispensable necessity for every consecrated person to deepen their response to the call of the Holy Spirit and to keep alive their fidelity to the charism of their religious institute." Pope Benedict XVI in his *Address to Superiors of Institutes of Consecrated Life* (2011) observes that "ongoing formation is the work of a lifetime, a renewal in the Spirit that deepens one's initial consecration. It is a continuous engagement with the Church's teachings, the sacraments, and prayer, so that the religious grows into full maturity in Christ." Pope Francis calls ongoing formation "the nurturing of the heart," where priests and religious deepen their commitment to God and their mission. In his speech to seminarians and priests (June 2013), he said that formation "is a work that is never finished, because priests never stop being disciples of Jesus." He stresses the importance of constant renewal, humility, and openness to growth. Again, while giving a *Message to the USG General Assembly* (2016) he said: "Ongoing formation means keeping the heart open to the surprises of God. It is about being docile to the Holy Spirit, learning to discern the signs of the times, and adjusting one's life and mission to the demands of the Gospel in our changing world."

Our father and founder St. John Bosco, embodied the spirit of ongoing formation in his own life and for those under his care. He was a constant learner, both spiritually and intellectually. He was committed to deepening his theological knowledge, pastoral skills, and personal holiness throughout his life, attending to the needs of the young and the Church's mission. His frequent retreats and spiritual exercises are examples of his commitment to growth. Don Bosco understood that those working with youth, especially in the Salesian mission, needed continuous formation. He stressed this in the formation of the early Salesians, establishing **schools, retreats, and practical training programs** for their ongoing spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral growth. Don Bosco created a system of education and formation that was meant to be lived out continuously. He encourages us to learn from our experiences with young people, adapt to the times, and remain rooted in prayer and devotion.

Article 119 of our constitution is titled: "Ongoing formation as a permanent personal frame of mind" and it reminds us of the daily need for ongoing formation. The article reads as follows: "Living in the midst of the young and in constant contact with working-class surroundings, the Salesian tries to discern the voice of the Spirit in the events of each day, and so acquires the ability to learn from life's experiences. He sees his ordinary activities as effective means of formation, and he also makes use of any other means of formation that may be offered him. Even when he is fully occupied he finds opportunities for renewing the religious and pastoral meaning of his life and of learning to carry out his work with greater competence. He also feels it his task to make the best formative use of any situation, and to see it as a favourable opportunity for growing in his vocation."

Keeping the spirit of the constitutions, our Congregation places significant emphasis on ongoing formation. Perceiving ongoing formation as an essential element of Salesian identity and mission, the General Chapters insist that formation does not stop after first profession or ordination but must continue to deepen one's vocation and effectiveness in serving young people, especially the poor. **GC 26 (2008)** called for a renewed commitment to ongoing formation, particularly emphasizing the need for Salesians to grow in pastoral charity and adapt to the challenges of the modern world. **GC 27 (2014)** focused on the need for inner renewal, which must be accompanied by constant spiritual and professional growth, particularly in responding to the challenges posed by youth in a secular and digitalized society. **GC 28 (2020)** emphasized on the importance of ongoing formation as a continuous journey for Salesians. It highlighted the need for personal and communal development, integrating spirituality and mission. The General chapters called for a commitment to lifelong learning, enabling the Salesians to grow in their vocation and effectively responding to the needs of the youth, world and the Church.

To make clarify the concept of ongoing formation, let us answer some rudimentary questions. **What is the purpose of ongoing formation?** Socrates would say that an

unexamined life is not worth living. The true purpose of ongoing formation is to examine oneself. The purpose of ongoing formation is multi-faceted, aiming at:

- a) **Spiritual Growth:** To deepen the priest or the religious' union with Christ, fostering a life of personal holiness and pastoral charity.
- b) **Intellectual Development:** To continue theological and pastoral education, staying updated with the Church's teaching and contemporary issues.
- c) **Human Development:** To improve the personal and social skills necessary for a mature and well-rounded life, fostering balance and psychological health.
- d) **Pastoral Skills:** To refine pastoral competence, adapting to the needs of the faithful and the challenges of modern society.

What is the process to be followed in ongoing formation? The process of ongoing formation includes various stages and aspects that should be incorporated into the life of priests and religious:

- 1) **Personal Commitment:** It begins with a personal commitment to continual growth, recognizing one's own need for ongoing conversion and development.
- 2) **Structured Programs:** The Church provides structured opportunities through diocesan or religious community programs, retreats, spiritual direction, study sessions, and sabbaticals.
- 3) **Self-Assessment and Accompaniment:** Ongoing formation includes regular self-assessment and accompaniment from spiritual directors or mentors, encouraging reflection on one's spiritual and pastoral life.
- 4) **Ecclesial Integration:** Priests and religious should integrate into the broader mission of the Church, participating in diocesan or religious community initiatives for renewal and growth.

What are the key strategies for effective ongoing formation? Some key strategies for effective ongoing formation include:

- a) **Spiritual Exercises:** Frequent retreats, Ignatian spiritual exercises, or days of recollection can help to deepen spiritual growth.
- b) **Intellectual Study:** Regular study of theology, Scripture, Church documents, and relevant contemporary issues can ensure intellectual development.
- c) **Community and Fraternal Life:** Active participation in the life of one's community provides support, fraternal correction, and mutual encouragement.
- d) **Regular Spiritual Direction:** Engaging in regular spiritual direction helps individuals to discern their growth areas, challenges, and potential for deeper holiness.

- e) **Participation in Workshops and Courses:** Engaging in ongoing theological education and pastoral skill development through seminars, conferences, and online courses.
- f) **Pastoral Review and Evaluation:** Regular reflection on one's ministry and the effectiveness of pastoral initiatives, often through meetings or pastoral supervision.
- g) **Engagement with Cultural and Social Issues:** Studying contemporary cultural and social developments and discerning how best to respond pastorally.

Let me suggest a few reflective questions to put to test the stage of our ongoing formation and do what is required of it, as we have heard so far.

1. **Personal Relationship with Christ:** How am I growing daily in my personal relationship with Christ, and how does this relationship reflect in my ministry to the young and poor?
2. **Living the Charism of Don Bosco:** In what ways am I embodying the Preventive System of Don Bosco, and how am I adapting it to the challenges of today's youth while staying true to its spirit?
3. **Spiritual Maturity:** How am I allowing my ongoing formation to deepen my prayer life, and how does this spiritual maturity influence the decisions I make in my pastoral and community life?
4. **Conversion and Inner Transformation:** In what areas of my life am I being called to greater conversion, and how open am I to allowing the Holy Spirit to transform my heart in those areas?
5. **Community Life:** How does my participation in community life challenge me to grow in humility, patience, and charity, and in what ways can I contribute more fully to building a spirit of communion within my Salesian community?
6. **Formation of the Mind:** How am I continuing to engage my intellect in my formation, ensuring that I am growing in theological and pastoral understanding to respond to the needs of those I serve?
7. **Service to the Marginalized:** How is my service to the poor, the marginalized, and the young deepening my understanding of God's preferential option for the poor, and how am I allowing this encounter to shape my identity as a Salesian and my ongoing formation?
8. **Pastoral Creativity and Innovation:** In what ways am I fostering creativity in my pastoral approach, staying open to new methods and technologies, while remaining faithful to the core values of the Salesian mission?
9. **Balance Between Prayer and Action:** How do I maintain a balance between the active demands of my ministry and the need for contemplation and prayer, ensuring that my actions flow from a deep relationship with God?

- 10. Ongoing Conversion through Sacraments:** How frequently and meaningfully do I engage with the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist and Reconciliation, as sources of ongoing conversion and grace in my Salesian life?
- 11. Witness to the Young:** How am I being a witness to the young through my example, and how am I accompanying them not only as a mentor but as a brother or sister in faith, journeying with them toward Christ?
- 12. Commitment to Lifelong Learning:** How committed am I to lifelong learning, both spiritually and intellectually, and how do I see this as essential to my ongoing formation in becoming a more effective Salesian religious?

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