

What formation?

Conference for Lay Cistercians
Dubuque Meeting (May 2011)

Two introductory remarks

I was asked to help you reflect on the question of formation in the context of groups (fraternity/community) of lay people associated with a Cistercian monastery.

I would like to start with two preliminary remarks, and tell you first that this question is quite legitimate, but then that it is far from being new.

- *Legitimacy of the question*

First of all, your desire to reflect on the issue of formation is completely legitimate. It is legitimate because it is fundamental, and it is fundamental because it relates to the fundamentals. The issue of "formation" contains indeed close connections with the issue debated during your previous international meeting at Huerta. There, you reflected on the issue of the Cistercian lay identity. What is more "fundamental" indeed than the issue of "identity"? It is true first of all in terms of *personal* identity. At this level, suffice it to remember the three questions Saint Bernard asked Pope Eugenius III in his treatise *On Consideration*. According to Saint Bernard, these three issues represent in fact what a so-called "study program" should be reduced to. What are then these issues that are at the heart of the "formation program" according to Bernard? Nothing less than inviting the pope to a *threefold consideration* on himself, and thus to reflect on the major components basic to his *own identity*, on three separate but complementary levels. They are in fact three simple questions, and even very simple. Here they are: *what* am I? *Who* am I? *Which one* am I? In other words, a threefold question

- on the *quid* that focuses on the *nature* of things ("What?");
- on the *quis* that focuses more on the identity of the person ("Who?")
- and finally on the *qualis* which, beyond the *social* identity ("which one" am I in the eyes of others: question of "status"), relates mainly to the *quality* or *moral value* of the person ("which one?"¹.)

In fact, the mere statement of these three questions shows very clearly from the outset the issue raised by *formation*, as considered by Saint Bernard, and as I would also like to consider with you, while following him: namely, that the issue of formation should be closely articulated with that of *identity*, or more broadly (in the philosophical vocabulary used by Saint Bernard), with that of "self-knowledge." We will of course have the opportunity to come back to that later.

For now, let us notice one more point: the link between the issue of "formation" and that of identity is valid not only in terms of personal identity, but also in terms of collective "identities". For proof, just think about the central place, or rather the "strategic" place occupied in any country by a department such as the department of national education; one of its specific responsibilities is to develop study programs. Now it is obvious that the choices made in this area (especially in terms of history) are far from neutral. The development of such programs aims in fact at "forming" a national identity, at strengthening the sense (or the consciousness) of a common belonging to a country, a nation, and a culture. To take only

¹ On this point, see Bernard, *De consideratione* II.IV.7.

the example of Europe or France, I think especially about the debate which took place on the preamble to the European Constitution (when one wondered if one had to mention the Christian roots of Europe). I also think about the recent parliamentary debate in France on "national identity", with in its background the difficult issues related to immigration (especially populations of Muslim origin), to their integration into the social and cultural fabric of France, and therefore to the implications this may have, precisely in terms of identity.

If I insist so strongly on these current issues, it is obviously not to give you a course in contemporary history, but rather to make you feel how much the issue of "formation" (intellectual formation or transmission of a how-to, of a knowledge) is actually inseparable from that of identity; therefore, one cannot treat one without taking the other into consideration. To put it briefly, any formation, somehow, helps to build an identity: identity of a *person* of course (for the sake of "self-awareness"), but also identity of a *group* or society (for the sake of a sense of common belonging). Besides, the first identity (the *personal* identity) is "ordered" to the second one (the *social* identity) and the second one also allows a strengthening of the first one.

- *A question of old...*

Having established this link between "formation" and "identity", and having also recognized it as something "fundamental" (in the sense that it is not possible to access what constitutes an "identity" without first going through a formation that helps to build it), you will understand at once, and this will be my second preliminary remark, that you are neither the first ones nor probably the last to raise this issue of "formation".

We found traces of it in all societies and throughout history, including and especially in monastic history, where the question is presented in paradoxical terms. Let us consider the famous oxymoron so often highlighted by a certain monastic tradition conveyed (among others) by Gregory the Great who, speaking about Saint Benedict, made him "knowingly ignorant and wisely unlearned" (*scienter nescius et sapienter indoctus*²). It is also the idea of "learned ignorance" ("the wise unlearned" and "learned without wisdom".)

Anyhow, there is always the same underlying tension between two poles: formation and identity; it can be phrased as the following question: "What type of *formation* for what *identity*?"

However, as I just suggested, the way of resolving this tension and of addressing the issue of "formation" has varied over time, but also according to spiritual traditions, to the extent of embracing the entire spectrum of possibilities between two extremes: one extreme going as far as rejecting in principle any kind of intellectual formation (in short, for example, the anti-intellectualism attributed to Cistercian Trappists in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and against which, among others, fought Dom Anselm Le Bail, the great abbot of Scourmont in the first half of the twentieth century); the other extreme, on the opposite, went to a kind of superposition of two levels, having virtually monastic identity and "science" or "scholarship" coincide with each other. It was a kind of reduction of the monastic vocation to the mere erudite dimension.

Hence these two images that still inhabit the imagination of many, where you have, on one side, the image of the monk "peasant", the Trappist!, with calloused hands, the spade or pitchfork on the shoulder, returning from field work, and on the other, the "learned" monk,

² GREGOIRE LE GRAND, « Vie de saint Benoît », dans *Dialogues*. Texte critique et notes par A. DE VOGÜE ; traduction par P. ANTIN. Paris, cerf, 1979 (coll. « Sources Chrétiennes », n° 260), p. 127.

the Benedictine monk, with delicate fingers, his head leaning on old and dusty manuscripts, holding a magnifying glass in one hand and a quill in the other!

These two images may be somewhat cartoonish, but they reflect quite well the importance of the issues underlying the question of monastic formation; in the seventeenth century, Rancé and Mabillon opposed about it in a polemical and passionate way!

An additional particular difficulty

This short diversion through history obviously only brings back our issue and makes even more manifest the difficulty of giving it an adequate answer: "What formation for what identity?" Besides, we also notice that this issue is coupled with an additional difficulty if, moreover, we are open to remember that when it deals with monks and nuns (or more broadly with all those in religious life), the nature of identity is specifically affected by the fact that it is placed under the seal of the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience; that is to say, as rightly pointed out by Father Timothy Radcliffe, under the seal of "non-identity." Why? Because in pronouncing these three vows, monks renounce very clearly to found their identity on the basis of the main anthropological landmarks that one usually uses to define oneself personally and socially. Speaking about religious people, he said "we leave behind the usual signs of identity" because, he explained, "we abandon many things that give identity to human beings in our world." And he specified: "money, status, a partner in marriage, career."³

To put it differently, what establishes the identity of a consecrated man or woman, of a religious, is a "you alone are the Lord" said to Christ, a "you alone" of which religious life has obviously no monopoly because, one way or another, every Christian, whatever his/her specific vocation, is also called to make Christ the center from where he/ she always "starts afresh"⁴. But, unlike the Christian vocation to marriage where this "you alone" passes through the mediation of the spouse, for the religious who pronounces vows, this "you alone" is pronounced with "no other human 'you alone' as a partner"⁵.

And it is precisely to this "you alone without any other you alone" that the whole formation given in the context of religious life is oriented. Such a formation is "initiation", that is to say, according to the etymological meaning, a "setting a path." It especially involves a "form-ation" of existence through a "way of life" that is specific to each charism, to each institute or religious order, or even to each monastery.

And that is where lies the difficulty that I was announcing a while ago. One can phrase this difficulty as follows: "Is it possible, and if so, how, to connect the Lay Cistercian identity with the issue of 'formation'", since in religious life, this question of formation has a specific shape: that of a "form-ation" of the existence or a 'way of life' made explicit, and which does not include married life or a life in the world, as everyone is here called to invent such a form of life depending on his/her own external circumstances.

However, luckily for you, it is possible to give an affirmative answer to this question, otherwise I would obviously have to stop my presentation here. And if it is possible to give

³ T. Radcliffe, *Que votre joie soit parfaite*, Cerf, 2002, p. 128.

⁴ See *Starting Afresh From Christ: A Renewed Commitment To Consecrated Life In The Third Millennium*, by the Congregation For Institutes Of Consecrated Life And Societies Of Apostolic Life, cosigned by Eduardo Card. Martinez Somalo et Piergiorgio Silvano Nesti, Rome, 2002.

⁵ Cf. *L'identité de la vie religieuse. Proposition théologique*. Document de la Commission théologique de la Conférence des religieux et religieuses de France, Paris, 2011, p. 26. (=Theological Commission of the French Religious Conference)

an affirmative answer to this question, it is because of the reason given by Timothy Radcliffe, whom I already quoted earlier. He said: by pronouncing vows, monks "refuse the usual signs of identity"; therefore, they are able to "highlight the true identity and true vocation of every human being⁶." Along the same line, he offers two lines of thought: first, that religious life shows that every identity is a *gift*, and as such, any identity we would claim to forge in this society *always falls short* of our deepest vocation. Then, that this human identity given to us is not given to us once and for all and for now, but that it finds its full expression *only in the extent that it embraces "the whole history of our life, from beginning to end, and beyond" (ibid.)*.

With a more classical vocabulary, but also more technical, this is what is meant by the statement that the full meaning of all existence is only achieved within *the eschatological horizon* in which all existence is called to take place. Without of course having the exclusive monopoly of the mission to proclaim the kingdom to come, religious life is however expected to be for the world and in the world a sign and a reminder. This is actually emphasized with great accuracy by the document written by the Theological Commission of the French Religious Conference, that I quoted earlier: "Different from the Christian marriage, called to recognize in the here and now the seal of God, the vocation of the religious life is *to live here on earth from the life beyond*, to announce the promise and the anticipated realization of the life beyond⁷."

You will therefore understand that, viewed in that light, and with reference to the eschatological dimension of Christian identity, the issue of formation has a much more fundamental shape than the mere development of a study program or the mere transmission of a knowledge, however necessary these can be.

Towards a "different and deeper" vision of formation: "From icon to likeness."

We must therefore now try to find this "different and deeper" formation. To phrase it already in advance and with Lytta Basset's words, a Swiss Protestant pastor, one must ask the question of formation depending on what the Christian revelation itself sets as its horizon of all existence. She states that this horizon is nothing but "our fulfillment in love." The horizon towards which all existence constantly and endlessly tends, and that one must always work at, (isn't the horizon actually what always challenges our attempts to grasp it and that always eludes us when we think we approach it?), the goal of each of our lives, is indeed to establish ourselves as "icon in the likeness of love⁸."

This is already what Saint John and Saint Paul stated, each in his own way.

John wrote:

"My dear friends, we are already God's children, but what we shall be in the future has not yet been revealed. We are well aware that when he appears we shall be like him (*similes ei*), because we shall see him as he really is." (1 Jn 3.2)

Paul specified:

"We are well aware that God works with those who love him, those who have been called in accordance with his purpose, and turns everything to their good – because, as the apostle to the nations continues:

He decided beforehand

⁶ Radcliffe, *Que votre joie soit parfaite*, Cerf, 2002, p. 128.

⁷ *L'identité de la vie religieuse*. p. 32 (the highlight is mine).

⁸ Lytta BASSET, *Aimer sans dévorer* (Albin Michel), p. 264.

- who were the ones destined *to be con-formed (conformes fieri)* to the image of his Son;

(this was in Latin);

Or according to the Greek:

- he also *gave them as horizon* (in Greek, Paul uses the verb *pro-orizein*, which has the same root as the word "horizon") to reproduce (in Greek: *sun-morphes*) the image of his Son." (Rom. 8.28-29)

Now, notice that in both texts I just quoted, Saint Paul and Saint John have three things in common:

- first, both insist on the fact that the revelation of the *divine plan* on man, or if you prefer, the revelation of the *destined horizon* he is promised, is the object of a "knowledge", a knowledge of faith and certainty: "We are well aware", as both strongly assert!
- then both stress as strongly that this "knowledge", far from being a *mere theoretical erudite knowledge*, is -let's put it this way- an *ethical knowledge of conformation*. For the Apostle to the Nations, as for the beloved disciple, what it is indeed at stake here is to be *conformed (sun-morphes)* to the Son or to become *like (similes)* Him! In other words, it is not a "discourse about God", but rather a "let the God-Word - the *Logos/Word* made flesh be written in our lives."
- Finally, as this "knowledge" is an "ethics of conformation", Paul and John both highlight the issue itself of Christian life as a "sharing *with Christ*": it is a mystical and baptismal participation *per excellence* in the being of Jesus. It is the spiritual and theological significance of the prefix "syn-/cum-/with" so dear to Saint Paul; adding it to many verbs, he did not hesitate to create neologisms: new words of his own, rooted in the experience of his overwhelming encounter with the Risen Christ.

Obviously, with these two texts by Saint Paul and Saint John, we are at the heart of our question. They tell us as clearly as desired, that the "formation" at stake in this Christian (or monastic) context is not primarily about the *transmission of a knowledge* (if we stuck to that, we would reduce the issue of formation to a simple problem of "education"/erudition). More fundamentally than that, formation is situated in the context of *participation in the mystery of Christ*; it aims therefore at the person itself or, if we use New Testament vocabulary, it is situated in the context of *configuration of our person to the very being of Christ*. Again: the horizon of our existence is to become an "icon in the likeness of the beloved Son."

In the light of the Cistercian monastic tradition

To express this "reality" of Christian formation, the Cistercian monastic tradition is particularly rich. More than that: it is remarkably constant throughout history, from Saint Bernard up to now. To realize this, one needs only to quote two texts, at each end of this tradition.

- *Saint Bernard*

The first will be of course by Saint Bernard. It is the famous passage of his treatise *On Grace And Free Will*, in which he speaks of the three works divine grace operates in us: the work of our creation, the work of our "reformation" (*reformatio*), and finally, the work of our

perfect configuration. Moreover, in the passage I am going to quote, pay attention to the three prepositions he uses to describe specifically each of these three "works": *in*, *through* and *with*; they actually coincide with the three "moments" constitutive of the integral spiritual dynamism of Christian "formation" as we identified them earlier when, following Lytta Basset, Paul and John, we talked about the "horizon of all existence" as a "goal" which, in Christ, tends to become a "with Him", by means of a "through Him." Note that this movement replicates the one operated in us by every Eucharistic celebration when, right after the moment of consecration, we recapitulate this movement by saying: "Through Him, with Him and in Him"!

So here is Saint Bernard's text:

« First we were created *in Christ* (cf. Eph. 2.10) unto freedom of will (1st step), secondly (2nd step) *we were reformed through Christ* unto the spirit of freedom (cf. 2 Cor. 3.17-18) ; lastly (3rd step) we are to be consummated together *with Christ* unto the state of eternal life.

Bernard specifies these three steps immediately after:

- (1st step) that which did not exist (meaning: man) needed to be created in Him who existed (meaning: Christ) - [in more technical words: *human nature* is ontologically and originally rooted in the person of Christ, "first Adam"]
- (2nd step) the *deformed* (the fallen man) [needed to] be *reformed* by means of the *Form Himself* (Christ). [This is the ethical moment of Christian existence called to unfold in time and according to our *respective personal vocations*. I will come back later to this dimension when speaking about the more practical question of ways of implementing "formation"]
- it then needed that the members should not be made perfect save only in union with the Head. Which last result will then indeed be brought to completion when *we shall all attain unto a perfect man, unto the measure of age of the fullness of Christ* (Eph. 4.13); *when Christ appearing, who is our life, we also shall appear with Him in glory.* (Col. 3.4)⁹ – [This is the end and fulfillment of human history totally assumed and recapitulated in the person of Christ, both in its personal dimension (each member as an individual) and in its community or group dimension (each member as also referred to the entire body and its Head.)]

- *Echoing: the OCSO Constitutions and the "Charter of Formation"*

So much for Saint Bernard. Echoing him, we have the *OCSO Constitutions* approved by the Holy See in 1990. Chapter 4 part II, especially devoted to the "formation of monks,

⁹ BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX, *On Grace and Free Will*, XIV.49. See also in the same treatise §33 : "He came, therefore, the very essential form to Whom the free choice had to be conformed: for, in order that it might receive again its original form, it needed to be reformed from the same source from which it had been formed. But the form is Wisdom; the conformation consists in the image (meaning: man) doing that work in the human body which the Form (Christ) does in the whole world." And he speaks more about the work of Wisdom, using Wisdom 8.1: "it reaches from one end to another mightily, and sweetly does it order all things."

"reads as follows - it is the very first *Constitution* of this chapter:

“Formation to Cistercian life has for its purpose *the restoration of the divine likeness* in the brothers through the working of the Holy Spirit. Aided by the maternal care of the Mother of God, the brothers so advance in the monastic way of life that they *progressively attain the full measure of the stature of Christ.*”
(Const. 45.1)

We could discuss this *Constitution* at length. Suffice it here to draw attention to the two phrases used to clarify the *purpose* of training. Both are taken from Holy Scripture; the first refers to the book of Genesis, and the second to the Epistle to the Ephesians. It is said that the purpose of formation is "to *restore the divine likeness*" (Genesis) and to allow each brother to " *progressively attain the full measure of the stature of Christ*" (Eph. 4.13). In this regard, it is also worth noting that you can find the same perspective in the OCSO *Charter of Formation*, which states indeed as early as the second paragraph, that “the goal of the monastic journey is a gradual transformation into the likeness of Christ through the action of the Spirit of God”; besides, this perspective has been entirely set in the light of 2 Cor. 3.18: "Called to be transformed into the image of Christ."

The spiritual relationship between this perspective and that of Saint Bernard is so obvious I don't need to insist.

Means of formation: two ways. Institution and experience

A crucial question remains, which must undoubtedly bother you. "This is all well and good. But how to do it?" In fact, it is not enough to know the goal. One still needs to know *how* to get there. In other words: "What means do we have? and what specific content should be given to formation?"

To answer these questions, I would like to propose a double way of research. One will be *objective*, the other more *subjective*. But we will see in fact that they not only complement each other, but also come together around a foundational point. To discover this double way, I rely on the common testimony of Saint Bernard and his disciple Aelred. In particular, I would like to turn to the *Mirror of Charity*, of which Aelred, as a young professed, undertook the final draft in 1141-1142, urged by Saint Bernard.

1) The "objective" way: the "instituting" dimension of monastic observances

Without going into all the details of this monumental work of prodigious wealth, suffice it to say that in the spirit of its author, and more in that of Bernard, the point is to offer the readers a *manual of monastic formation* intended to justify in a systematic and rational way, that is to say, on the dual foundation of Scripture and theological spirituality, the legitimacy of the Cistercian reform ("observances" and asceticism) as an authentic "school of charity." By this, I mean very specifically an "instrument" particularly well suited to make possible the unification of the whole person, by the "ordination" of our emotional powers (by setting in "order" the natural dynamism of desire.)

a. A text by Aelred: *frater...disciplinis regularibus instituendus (Mirror of Charity II, § 41)*

Now, the vocabulary chosen by Aelred to account for this process of "formation/unification/ordination" seems particularly illuminating for our topic. Thus, in Book II of the *Mirror*, he introduces a long conversation he had with one of his novices by

these few words (I quote from the English translation): "Not long ago, when a certain brother renounced the world and entered the monastery, our most reverend abbot entrusted him to me, meager fellow that I am [and here is now the phrase to remember], *for his formation in regular discipline.*" (Mirror II, §41). [Note by the translator of this conference: in French, Aelred's text reads: "*to teach* him the regular discipline," and what follows comments on that.] Admittedly, the French translation is not in itself absolutely incorrect. But unfortunately, it does not fully do justice to all the semantic richness of the Latin expression used by Aelred. Undoubtedly, the translation would have been correct if Aelred had been considering his charge of novice director, and therefore of formator, exclusively in terms of *teaching*. By this, we mean the transmission of a knowledge or even a "how-to" (ie: to initiate into the usages of monastic life). As he knew Latin very well, he would have used an appropriate verb corresponding to this idea of "teaching", for example Latin verbs such as *instruere*/to instruct (hence the word "instruction") or *docere*/to teach (strictly "matching" the verb *discere* from which derives the word "disciple" in the dual relationship between a "teacher (*doctus/doctor/magister*)" and "the person taught (*discipulus*.)") But Aelred has chosen neither of these verbs! He preferred another term that may certainly include the idea of teaching or transmission of a knowledge, but its meaning is actually far more extensive and richer. Literally, Aelred said in fact that his abbot put him in charge of a brother "to *institute* him by means of the regular discipline (*disciplinis regularibus instituendus*¹⁰.")

The "personalistic" meaning of this expression is readily apparent: what Aelred aims at in his charge of formator is not to transmit a knowledge (*docere*), as we have already said; it is even less to "format" somebody by making him, so to speak, "enter" the mold of monastic usages, however venerable they may be. If this had been the case, we would have found in Latin, before the phrase "regular discipline (*disciplinis regularibus*)" the preposition *in*, and the text would then have read: "to institute someone *into* the regular disciplines." But Aelred used an ablative absolute *without* preposition. What does this mean? It means that before even considering any transmission whatsoever of a "knowledge" or of a "how-to-live-monastically" (although, of course, he will have afterwards to initiate him *also* into monastic usages!), what Aelred aims at in his charge of formator is primarily and foremost *the person itself*, a brother entrusted to him precisely to "institute" him, that is to say, as Aelred uses this verb in an *absolute* way, *without* object, to "establish this brother in all his stature (*statuere in*) as a person, to establish him in what constitutes his identity"; and to do this precisely by using "regular discipline", considered as it should be: simply a means towards the structuration/unification/edification of the person.

This means also, somehow, that regardless of any "academic" formation or any specific study program, Aelred reveals himself to be a firm believer in the eminently structuring and "forming" value of monastic discipline as long as it is embraced with seriousness and conviction! In this, he also reveals himself to be faithful to the whole monastic tradition. Suffice it to think of the 8th degree of humility in Saint Benedict, where the monk is invited to do "only what is endorsed by the common rule of the monastery and the example set by his superiors." Along the same line, we have the famous saying in which an elder told his

¹⁰ Note that this distinction has also escaped the Italian and Spanish translators who also translated the Latin verb *instituere* by the verb "instruct". Thus, Father Domenico Pezzini translated into Italian: "per essere *istruito* nella disciplina della regola" [p. 221], and in Spanish, Father Mariano Ballano: "para que *lo instruyera* regulares en las academic disciplines" [p. 142]). The English translation is better: "*for his formation in regular discipline.*"

disciple, his teaching would be useless if he did not let himself be instructed by his very silence!

From all this, let us draw a theoretical conclusion and a practical consequence.

b) Theoretical conclusion

On the theoretical level first, notice that if it is true that the goal of monastic "formation" is to "institute" the person, to establish him/her in his/her identity, it follows then that this formation will focus on three areas: the monk, the Christian, and the person, as the monk is first a Christian, who is first a person.¹¹

So one must first help *the person as such* to "stand up", that is to say, as Saint Bernard liked to specify, to give him back his original "uprightness", to erase from him the "incurvation"/crookedness of the soul due to sin, and thus to enable him to live up to his "intrinsic" dignity as created in the image and likeness of God. In the Christian regimen, this "ordination" of the "intrinsic" nature of the person to his/her vocation or divine dignity/greatness consists in "configuring" one's human existence to the "form" that Christ gave to it. It thus means to give our existence a *forma Christi*.

Common to all Christians, this planned configuration of the human existence to that of Christ has indeed been initiated on the day of our baptism (this is called the baptismal consecration); but obviously, we are called to "embody" it and to give it a concrete form; this is achieved precisely through the *singular orientation* that each of us gives to our lives. The *forma Christi*, common to all, takes thus the specific shape of a *sequela Christi*; its characteristics are defined by the form of life we choose to embrace (mainly: marriage and religious life). This is what we call "vocation": a singular way, unique to each of us, of embodying our baptismal consecration, or "the answer that each of us gives willingly to a specific call from God, an answer that commits our life in time."¹²

Viewed from this three-dimensional perspective (*forma nativa*: the person; *forma vitae instituta*: the monk; and *forma Christi*: the Christian), formation, in the integral meaning of the term, has for mission and primary function to help someone dare taking the risk of such a *commitment of the whole existence* in time, through a specific form of life (*forma vitae instituta*) that allows the person, according to his/her own vocation, and in a human community, to bring his/her *baptismal consecration (forma Christi)* to the full measure of Christ, by living in the image and likeness of God (*forma nativa*¹³).

It is clearly stated by the *Ratio Institutionis* of the OCSO: after saying that "the goal of the monastic journey is a gradual transformation [of the person] in the likeness of Christ through the action of the Spirit of God" (Prologue, §2, which echoes Const. 45.1, already quoted earlier on), it adds a little further, about initial formation, that "the various stages that comprise this initiation are meant to assist the candidates to grow as *human beings* and as *disciples of Christ*" (§17). In other words, they aim at edifying persons through "regular disciplines" (using again Aelred's words) that make precisely out of him a "disciple of Christ" or *institute him* first as such in his own being (formation of Christ *in anima*); later on, they also allow him, as a member of a community, to edify the whole/ecclesial body of Christ (formation of Christ *in ecclesia*¹⁴).

¹¹ See Chart 1 in the Appendix.

¹² On this definition of "vocation", cf. « Introduction » dans Bernard de Clairvaux, *Le précepte et la dispense* (« Sources Chrétiennes », n°457), p. 132-133.

¹³ See Chart 2 in the Appendix.

¹⁴ On both aspects, see the spiritual doctrine of Ælred of Rievaulx.

Once again, the *Ratio Institutionis* of the OCSO is instructive: it states about the formative role of the *Cistercian conversatio* that "it is essentially by living out [its] various aspects that a person gradually becomes ever more truly a Cistercian" (§6). In the same paragraph, it adds that "through the daily practice of the monastic disciplines (and under the pastoral care of the superior and those who share in the superior's ministry), this *conversatio* provides *the means for personal and communal growth*"; it highlights that as a consequence, "the community is the ambience where the transforming action of the Spirit of God takes place."

b. Practical consequence

Such a statement allows us to draw the practical consequence I announced earlier. If indeed, for us monks and nuns, the simple experience of the various elements proposed by the Cistercian *conversatio* offers us the very place where our spiritual transformation occurs; and if, to put it differently, the simple fact of living the monastic life as proposed in a monastery constitutes the first place and the first "means" of our formation (even before any intellectual formation), then it follows that for you as well, lay people who wish to live in the world of the Cistercian charism, it will be the frequent visits to the monastery with which you live in communion and charity, that will be your first "place" and the very condition of your "formation".

Isn't it the very meaning of Article 4.1 of the Huerta document on Lay *Cistercian Identity*, which specifies that "Lay Cistercian communities, *through their communion with a monastic community, receive light and formation* from the monks and nuns¹⁵?"

It is what my mentor in monastic life, Father Charles Dumont, taught me when he said, following Kierkegaard, that "the remedy is in the user guide." It is also what Mother Jean-Marie Howe stated in her own way, when she used the very evocative and baptismal picture of "immersion" to suggest the nature of what monastic formation should be. In this regard, she herself made the distinction between three complementary levels: a *physical* immersion in the concrete reality of the monastic milieu; an *intellectual* immersion in Scripture and monastic doctrine; and finally a *spiritual* immersion (in prayer, *lectio divina*, and liturgical life); all three however are ordered to a still deeper immersion: *the effective participation in the mystery of Christ*¹⁶.

But she also added that to be truly effective as a method of monastic formation, this immersion of the whole being (body, soul, mind, and heart) in the mystery of Christ required being the object of a real experience. Thus, after *the "instituting" dimension of monastic observances* that we just mentioned, we must now turn to the second way: experience.

¹⁵ Here is the complete text of this article: "The monastic community is the heir of the Cistercian charism in its present form. Lay Cistercian communities, through their communion with a monastic community, receive light and formation from the monks and nuns. However, there are differences concerning the concrete bonds of union and the ways to describe these bonds." Moreover, the text clearly suggests that this principle applies in all cases, *regardless* of the specific nature of the bonds between the lay people and a monastic community; it is admitted that they can vary from one lay community to the other: "However, there are differences concerning the concrete bonds of union and the ways to describe these bonds." This will be stated one more time with different words in the last article of the same section (4.8) where it is specified that even if "many members of lay communities go to the monastery individually, ... all agree that in order to be Lay Cistercian, it is not enough to simply feel attracted to a monastery, but that it is necessary to belong to a lay community."

¹⁶ see Jean-Marie HOWE, *Itinéraire spirituel. La voie monastique* (Collection « Voix monastique 7), Oka, Abbaye cistercienne Notre-Dame du Lac, 1993 (especially p. 37-54, here p. 40.)

2. The way of experience

a. From "reading" to "understanding", and from "hearing" to "tasting"

To introduce this way of experience, nothing is more enlightening than the exchange of letters between Bernard and Aelred, where the former required from the latter that he wrote the *Mirror of Charity*. We know the answer of the future abbot of Rievaulx who, to escape the request of his immediate Father, used as an excuse that he worked in the kitchen and that, having therefore no sufficient intellectual formation (he does say about himself that he has poor grammar and is almost "illiterate"), he is not up to the service requested of him. However, far from discouraging Saint Bernard, this excuse only, as he said, "enlivened the spark of his desire" (*Mirror*, Bernard's "Letter-prologue", §3). Why? Saint Bernard explained it a few lines later using many biblical images (honey and milk from the rock.)

"I believe, he said, that with your mallet, you can draw from these rocks something that, with the penetration of natural talent, you would never have got from the notes of the teacher; in the noon heat, in the shade of trees, you will sometimes understand something you would never have learned in schools" (Letter-Prologue, §4 – [translated from the French.])

Saint Bernard had already used such words and images a few years earlier, in a letter to Henry Murdac, the illustrious professor of York, to encourage him to give up his academic position and invite him to enter Clairvaux:

Believe one who has tried (*Experto crede*): you shall find a fuller satisfaction in the woods than in books (*aliquid amplius invenies in silvis quam in libris*). The trees and the rocks will teach you that which you cannot hear from masters (*Ligna et lapides docebunt te, quod a magistris audire non possis*).

Do you think that you cannot draw honey from the rock and oil from the hardest flint (Joel 3.18)? Do not our mountains drop sweetness? The hills flow with milk and honey? And the valleys stand thick with corn (cf. Ps. 64.14)?¹⁷

We are at the heart of our topic! But it is also important not to err in the interpretation to be given to such words! Contrary to what was too often believed, Bernard was absolutely not saying here that any serious and solid intellectual formation would be unnecessary and even bad, because, for example: "knowledge puffs up" (cf. 1 Cor. 8.1)! What he criticizes is a science that would be purely "bookish", that is to say completely "detached" from an experience rooted in life. Suffice it to see, in the same letter to Henry Murdac, the verbs he used: judiciously and deliberately chosen, they highlight "passages" or "thresholds" of knowledge and know-how Bernard invited his correspondent to go through, ranging from "reading" to "grasp", and from "hearing" to "tasting":

"If you seek to grasp (*apprehendere*) Christ, I assure you that you can attain to Him sooner *by following Him than by reading (citius illum sequendo quam legendo consequi potes)*!" The goal is therefore correct: to seek (*quaerere*) Christ, and to seek Him in order to find Him, or to "grasp" (*apprehendere*) Him! But in between, Bernard mentions three steps that in fact mark the way to follow, in a kind of gradation that goes from the most exterior to

¹⁷ Letter 106.2.

the most interior, or from the most objective to the most subjective: one needs indeed first to "hear (*audire*)", and then to "understand (*intelligere*)" what was heard (this is the most intellectual or rational stage of the journey); and finally to "feel (*sentire*)" (passage from intelligence to the heart/emotions). Only then can we get to "grasp" and "taste".

So Saint Bernard has no contempt towards the intermediate steps; they are all in his eyes necessary and indispensable; there isn't any trace either of any anti-intellectualism! Rather, what Bernard seeks to do is to help situate correctly the place and value of "knowledge" in the context of spiritual life. However, from this point of view and in the context of spiritual life and of a genuine *quaerere Deum*, only a "knowledge" that has some "taste" has any real value for him; and so, only a knowledge that opens up to what he calls wisdom (*sapientia*), as opposed to *scientia* (which may actually always puff up!); only what has some taste and gives some taste. In other words, and in fact, the holy Abbot of Clairvaux wants to warn us against the excesses of seeking "knowledge for knowledge sake"; he does not reject any value to knowledge or science.

b. From "knowledge" (*scientia*) to "taste » (*sapientia*)

The theme is so recurrent in his writings that we could indefinitely multiply examples. Not to follow what Bernard denounced, I will content myself with a few instances.

First sermon 23 on the Song of Songs, where he specified that if instruction is for sure able to "make us learned" (*Instructio doctos reddit*), it is however absolutely unable to "touch" the heart. It does not allow us to "taste" God, to "savor" Him for what He really is, let alone to love Him fully, and thus to become true *sapientes*. Only affection makes this possible: *Affectio [reddit] sapientes!*¹⁸ But as we just said, only this is important for Bernard; and this is what he wishes for us: that we become not "wells of science" ("scholars"), but rather beings steeped in "wisdom" that "taste" God for what He really is.

And for Bernard, this "taste of God" is none other than a *practical* wisdom ordered to "acting rightly", or aimed at what he calls the "holiness of life." This is what he explicitly told his former novice who became pope under the name of Eugenius III. In the treatise he addressed him *On Consideration*, he talked about the "knowledge" of the four dimensions of divine love described by Saint Paul in the Epistle to the Ephesians: the length, width, height, and depth. All of it, he told him, but urging him to *experience* it:

It is not argument that comprehends them (*non ea disputatio comprehendit*¹⁹), but holiness, if at least that can in any way be comprehended which is incomprehensible (*si quo modo tamen comprehendi potest quod incomprehensibile est*).

¹⁸ *Affectio [reddit] sapientes*. The difference of "degree" between these two types of "knowledge" of God (one being merely intellectual, the other fully spiritual, because it is "proved" by experience) is also highlighted by the image of wealth. "To know where great wealth is to be found is not the same as possessing it." In other words, it is not *knowledge as such* (or the erudite accumulation of knowledge) that makes us rich, but its *possession* (by experimenting all the savor of life). For all this, cf. *Sermon 23.14* on the Song of Songs.

¹⁹ The word *disputatio* is obviously to be understood in the technical sense of "discussion" as an academic exercise practiced in "schools" of theology.

But unless its comprehension were possible, the apostle would not have said, that "we may comprehend with all saints" (Eph. 3.18).

The saints, therefore, comprehend. Do you ask how? If you are holy, you have comprehended, and know; if you are not, be holy, and you shall know by your own experience (*tuo experimento scies*)²⁰.

We are thus warned: only the "science" or "knowledge" rooted in experience has any value! However fundamental this remark may be, we must go one step further. For what is it exactly we must experience? Or, to use Saint Bernard's verbs, what is it exactly we must "taste" and "feel" so that our knowledge may become "wisdom" and not erudition?

c. Taste..., what?

Saint Bernard, once again, gave to this question answers varied in their form, but remarkably constant in their content, throughout his writings. I especially think about his first three major treatises, written a few years apart (between 1124 and 1128²¹): *The Degrees Of Humility And Pride* (1124-1125), *On Loving God* (1126) and *On Grace And Free Will* (1128); but I think about the later series (between 1139 and 1145) of five *sermons on the Song of Songs* (Sermons 34 to 38), that he devoted precisely to our question: what place should be give to studies in monastic life?

Without developing in detail Bernard's teaching on this, suffice it to note that the answer he gives to our question ("what knowledge is wisdom?") is interesting, because he always combines it in one way or another with the question of *identity*. In fact, for Bernard, what one must primarily "know" is:

- first *oneself* of course: "Who am I? What am I? Which one am I?"
- then, correspondingly, *God*: "Who am I before God?" or "Who is God compared to what I am?"
- both kinds of "knowledge" (of oneself and of God) need finally tangentially, that is to say, in a way open to infinity, to open onto an ethical "knowledge" focused on the *other*; it must also include a requirement never perfectly or completely fulfilled of justice/compassion towards our neighbor: "What are the others before me?" and "What must I be for them?"

Through these three areas of sapiential knowledge, we are brought back to what we noted at the beginning: that the question of "formation" or studies can absolutely not be separated from that of identity: the former (formation) needs to provide access or be ordered

²⁰ *On Consideration*, Book V.30.

²¹ This group of sermons alone deserves a detailed study. Suffice it here to indicate that one can read these five sermons as "themes and variations on the same subject", namely that of knowledge. *Sermon 34* emphasizes the connection to make between humility and a "just" self-knowledge. *Sermon 35* deals again with the same theme, by taking the opposite position and showing that self-ignorance leads to unlikeness of God. *Sermon 36* develops this point and seeks to distinguish between knowledge whose acquisition is not essential (*unobjectionable* ignorance) and knowledge that is absolutely essential to know: self-knowledge (one's condition of misery) and knowledge of God (His infinite mercy), the former being a "degree" to the latter. *Sermons 37 and 38* develop the opposite position: "what if I do not know myself?" (*sermon 37*) and "what if I do not know God?" (*sermon 38*)

to the latter (the question of *identity* in its three axes: self, neighbor and God). The former allows, in a reverse movement, to judge the usefulness of "knowledge" provided by the former.

This the whole argument of Sermon 36 on the Song of Songs, in which the abbot of Clairvaux brings forward four main ideas:

- He begins by making a distinction between knowledge which, in spiritual life, *is not essential*, such as "arts and crafts" or "letters", and knowledge that it would be *really disastrous* not to know: namely, and I shall come back to it later, self-knowledge (knowledge of one miserable condition) and knowledge of God (knowledge of divine mercy)²².
- He then takes care to anticipate an objection according to which one should despise knowledge as such, because, he says, it would not only be contrary to the teaching of Scripture, but it would also deprive the Church of an effective tool to combat heresies and instruct simple people²³.
- However, in the process, he recommends paying attention to a new distinction: there is a "knowledge that puffs up" (cf. 1 Cor. 8.1) and a knowledge that leads to wisdom: the "sober wisdom" that Paul speaks about to the Romans (Rom. 12.3)²⁴.
- He finally specifies that because of the "shortness of time" that makes the desire to learn everything vain and impossible to attain (however interesting any field of knowledge may be!), monks should primarily and even exclusively devote all their efforts to the acquisition of this "sober wisdom." And what is this sober wisdom made of? It is made of a knowledge "useful" to salvation. And what is a "useful" knowledge? He explains that it is a knowledge aimed at one's own edification or at the edification of one's neighbor: in short, a knowledge aimed at to inform our action.²⁵ Bernard writes: "There are some who long to know in order to be of service, and this is charity. Finally there are those who long to know in order to benefit themselves, and this is prudence." And he concludes by quoting Psalm 110.10: "understanding (*intellectus*) is good for all those who put it into practice»²⁶.

This "ordination" of knowledge to the acquisition of a practical wisdom that must inform our actions and conduct, is none other than what we would now call *moral theology*. It goes without saying however that such a theology, the proper object of which being (in short) to discern, in the ethical domain of action, what is "good and acceptable" (cf. Romans 12.2²⁷) for oneself and others, can only be developed *independently* of a knowledge of "who we are", along what constitutes our human nature (this is the field of anthropology), and also along what characterizes the nature of relationships between man and God (this is the specific field of spiritual theology, or even of mysticism.)

²² Sermon 36.1.

²³ Sermon 36.2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Sermon 36.3.

²⁶ Sermon 36.3 (end) and 4 (beginning), slightly adapted.

²⁷ "Do not model your behavior on the contemporary world, but let the renewing of your minds transform you, so that you may discern for yourselves what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and mature."

This epistemological "antecedence" (in the field of knowledge) of "physics" (the nature of things and man) and "mystics" (the nature of our relationship to God) compared to "ethics" (which defines the standards of right actions), explains exactly why Saint Bernard insisted so much, as a preamble to this "ethical" knowledge, on the importance of self-knowledge and knowledge of God²⁸.

One can notice in passing that these are the three "degrees of truth" Saint Bernard enumerated in chapter 3 of his first treatise on the *Degrees Of Pride And Humility*. One will also notice that these three degrees of knowledge also correspond to the spiritual journey he marked out at the opening of his vast collection of 86 sermons on the Song of Songs (Sermon 1 on the Song of Songs). But as I noted earlier, I would especially like to highlight here the dimension of "experience" to which Bernard attaches a central importance, in order to check the value and validity of knowledge. From this point of view, it is a bit like the inhabitants of Sychar, in the Gospel of John, who having heard the Samaritan woman, went to meet Jesus; but as the Evangelist specifies: "many more came to believe on the strength of the words He, Jesus, spoke to them", because, as they said, "Now we believe no longer because of what you told us; we have heard Him ourselves and we know that He is indeed the Savior of the world!" (Jn 4.42)

As it is impossible to present here all the richness of Bernard's doctrine on the double knowledge of oneself and of God, let us limit ourselves to the main points.

d. From the "bitter self-vision" to the "joyful vision of God": from *misery* to *mercy*

As for self-knowledge, Bernard insists in fact on the two "sides" of human condition: on the "light" side, on the greatness and dignity intrinsic to human beings, who carries within themselves, as a gift received at creation, the indelible mark of their divine creator (in the image and likeness of God) and on the "dark" side, on the "miserable" condition of human beings, tested by a freedom which is neither immediately nor spontaneously adjusted to the creative project of God. That is what Bernard calls the "misery" of human beings, which has partly (but not only) to do with "self-forgetting", that is to say, "not knowing" what my dignity is.

Experience in spiritual accompaniment reveals that this self un-knowledge or self-forgetting, in the theological meaning of the word, and as Saint Bernard unfolds it, may come from several reasons. There are at least two principal reasons: perhaps this dignity was never "taught" to me; but it can also happen (and more often than one might imagine), that it was ridiculed, abused, scorned, and this sometimes from an early age, so that I can doubt the fact that I am lovable (or worthy of love), or I can no longer believe or not believe at all in my own capacity to love, because love and trust have been killed in me.

²⁸ See below Chart 3. In fact, to be exact, it should be clarified that the order in which Bernard presents the three areas of knowledge (of self, of God, and of our neighbor) may vary, depending on the adopted perspective. Thus, in the *Degrees Of Pride And Humility* III.6, the sequence is rather: knowledge of the truth in ourselves (*in nobis* = "knowledge" of one's misery), knowledge of the truth in relation to others (*in proximis* = openness to compassion), and finally knowledge of "truth in itself" (*in sui natura*, which is contemplation of God). But in other treatises, for example *On Loving God* and *Sermon 36 on the Song of Songs*, the slightly different perspective seeks mostly to show how important it is to "balance" self-knowledge (ie our misery) by the knowledge of God (ie His mercy), lest this self-knowledge overwhelm us in excess and lead us into despair. In this perspective then, the knowledge of our neighbor comes in third. Incidentally, this would mean there would be two kinds of "knowledge" of God: one about knowing Him as He is *in Himself* (*in sui natura*) and the other about knowing Him as He is *for us* (*pro nobis*), even though, obviously, to some extent, His "being-for-us" (His existence as manifested in how we experience Him) actually coincides with His "being-in-Himself" (His "essence" or substance), since in God, there is no separation between essence and existence (what He does manifests who He is.)

Experience also teaches that such "un-knowledge" or the emotional scars it causes, can sometimes be in denial, that is to say, we can refuse to acknowledge that we are all more or less "lame in love", either because we did not receive enough (or as we would have liked it) of this initial love that would have allowed us to stand without exacerbated selfishness or oversized narcissism; or also, when our stories are not too damaged (and fortunately it happens!), because anyway, as Bernard pointed out in *Sermon 50 on the Song of Songs*²⁹, love will always find us in debt ...

Anyhow, the denial of our miserable condition and the forgetting of our more or less damaged emotional stories can be disastrous, first for oneself, of course, but also for our relations with others. In the first case, this may indeed lead to self-contempt (for sure not according to the Gospel!), sometimes to the point of being disgusted by life and even to the point of total despair. As a reminder, it is such an experience of dissatisfaction and disgust that led Aelred to knock on the door of Rievaulx. In the second case, that of relationships to others, it can make any community life absolutely "unlivable" because in fact (all of you have probably more or less experienced this), any common life, one way or another, includes this therapeutic virtue, sometimes experienced as very painful (but beneficial and purifying when one agrees with its work!) that exacerbates or rekindles old "forgotten" emotional wounds. Thus come to light feelings such as jealousy or hatred. Thus aggressiveness and violence manifest themselves or, conversely, unbearable emotional expectations.

In short: the experience of common life, after a stage of wonder and delight that lasts for a longer or shorter period, leads often if not always (provided of course that we do not try to escape it) to a second stage, a stage of "bitter discovery" of what I am in truth (*visio amara mei*). For Bernard, like for so many other spiritual fathers, it is a crucial and pivotal experience, because in spiritual life, it is offered to us as *the* ultimate tipping point where we are challenged to make a decisive choice; indeed, the question that arises then is whether I will remain in this bitter self-vision risking then, as I said a moment ago, to fall irretrievably in the utmost "spiral of despair" or whether, instead, I will turn my eyes to an "elsewhere" other than myself, somewhere deeper than the very depth of my misery, where the most secret source of life is hidden.

For Bernard, therefore, even the most dreadful experience of one's unhappy condition reveals itself to be an extraordinary opportunity - a stepping stone (a "degree") to attain what he calls a "joyful vision of God" (*laeta visio Dei*): the discovery of the true face of God, that is to say, of a God "greater than our heart," because He is "rich in mercy"³⁰. Bernard invites us never to separate "self-knowledge" and "knowledge of God", because in his view, the former is the condition for attain the latter. Let us listen to Saint Bernard:

This vision of God is not a little thing. It reveals him to us as listening compassionately to our prayers, as "truly kind and merciful, as one who will not indulge his resentment." (Joel 2.13) His very nature is to be good, to show mercy always and to spare. By this kind of experience, and in this way, God makes

²⁹ *Sermon on the Song of Songs 50.2.*

³⁰ On this "stepping stone", cf. *Sermon on the Songs of Songs 36.5-6.*

himself known to us for our good. When a man first discovers that he is in difficulties, he will "cry out to" the Lord who will "hear him" (Ps 90.15) and say: "I will deliver you and you shall glorify me." (Ps 49.15) In this way your self-knowledge will be a step to the knowledge of God; he will become visible to you according as his image is being renewed within you.(Col 3.10) And you, "gazing confidently on the glory of the Lord with unveiled face, will be transformed into that same image with ever increasing brightness, by the work of the Spirit of the Lord." (2 Cor. 3.18)³¹

These few lines say everything about the study program and formation Bernard wants for us, until its end, that is to say, and let us dare use the word, until its "transfiguring" and mystical aim, which is renewed from beginning to beginning in an endless process.

This experience of transformation from the bitter experience of one's own misery to a joyful discovery, more and more unfolding, of the divine mercy, is what monks are called to live, day after day; it is perfectly expressed by the traditional formula of the "petition" they pronounce on the day they publicly ask to enter the Order. To the question of the abbot, "What do you ask?", they are indeed invited to answer: "The mercy of God and of the Order.

We obviously do not necessarily measure immediately the full extent of this phrase, but as we move forward, it is expected to take on more and more density and truth.

You are also invited to this same experience, you lay people who desire to live in connection with a monastery. And even before any transmission of a "knowledge", it is perhaps the best we, monks, can offer you. I mean: to offer you also the possibility to attain a "reconciled" and pacified vision of yourselves and of your history; to offer you then the possibility to attain this loving truth of yourselves, that will set you free to love with the very love with which God loves you. Because ultimately, there is but one truth for us: the truth that "edifies us, structures us, and makes us grow"³². Now the first of these "truths" that "edifies us, structures us, and makes us grow", does it not consist primarily in receiving ourselves with gratitude as a gift that God offers first of all to ourselves, so that we can then be offered (and offer ourselves) to others? This is the reason, I believe, why Saint Bernard was able to write to Eugenius III:

"He is not learned who is not learned to himself. The learned man will be learned to himself, and will first of all drink of his own well."³³

And if Bernard can say about this "learned" man that he will be *the first* to drink of his own well, is it not because he also knows from experience that others will come to drink with him: all those whom I will help benefit from my own experience of being reconciled. This is an awe-inspiring requirement, because it presupposes that everyone agreed to follow the same journey of truth to be set free.

Br. Pierre-André Burton

³¹ *On the Song of Songs* 36.6.

³² Cf. Lytta Basset, *Aimer sans dévorer*, p. 164.

³³ BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX, *On Consideration* II.6.

Appendix

Chart 1: The three dimensions of human beings

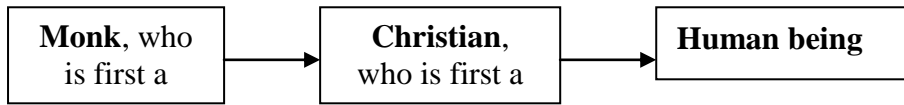


Chart 2: The three "forms" of all human vocation

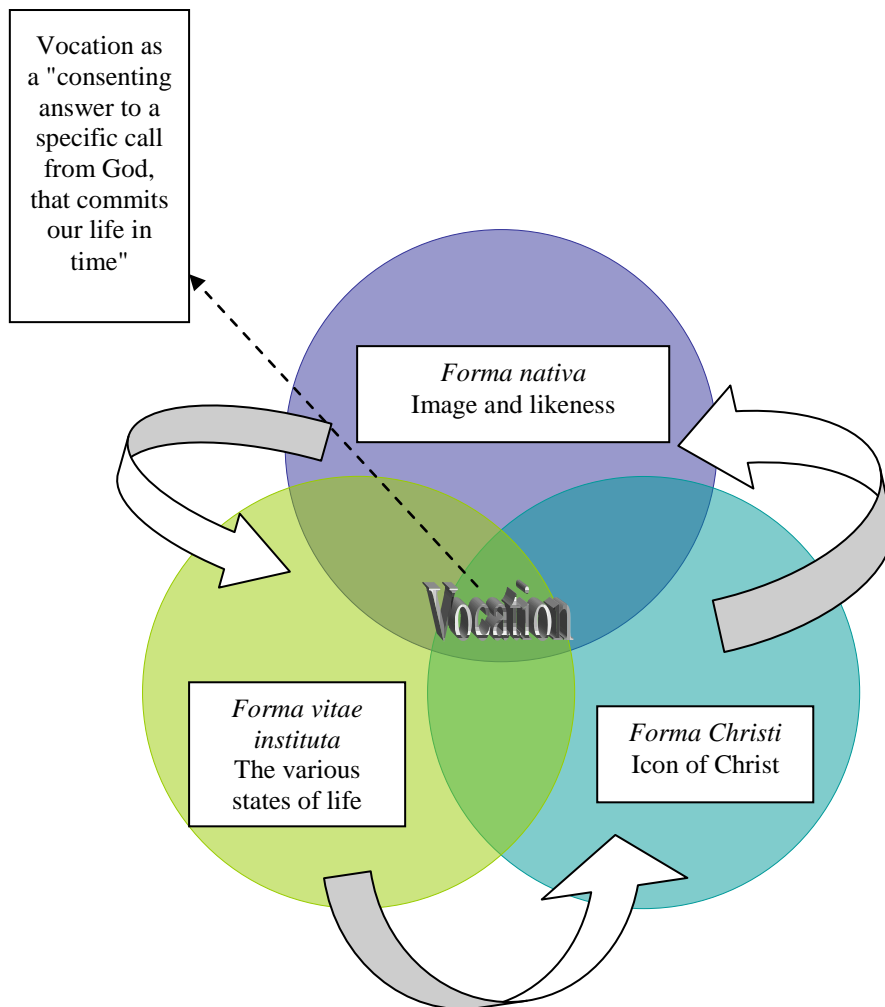


Chart 3:
Triple dimension of "knowledge"
and epistemological antecedence of "self-knowledge" and "knowledge of God",
in relation to the knowledge of our neighbor.

