Columns
Religious Life



The theological student-sisters of Dominican Missionary Sisters of the Phu Cuong Diocese in Vietnam (Nguyen)



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> The formation of consecrated women ... should be adapted to modern needs and should provide sufficient time and suitable institutional opportunities for a systematic education, extending to all areas, from the theological-pastoral to the professional. Pastoral and catechetical formation, always important, is particularly relevant in view of the new evangelization, which calls for new forms of participation also on the part of women [*Vita Consecrata*, 58].

In response to the 1996 call of the Holy Father John Paul II in his apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, Dominican sisters in Vietnam — specifically the consultant committee sisters of the Dominican Missionary Sisters of the Phu Cuong Diocese — turned their attention to the formation of young sisters.

Recognizing the particular importance of this group to religious life, we were especially concerned about the formation of sisters in temporary profession (the five years of temporary vows) preparing to consecrate themselves to the Lord. This younger generation will determine whether our congregation will develop strong or not. The initial formation program is a developmental process for the young women passing through every stage of personal maturity. Because of this, the formation of sisters in temporary vows is a constant concern of every member of the congregation.

After the young sisters have completed the prenovitiate and novitiate period, they take temporary five-year vows. During that time, they attend a three-year program at the Inter-congregational Dominican Institute of St Thomas, Ho Chi Minh City. The purpose of this program is to help sisters gain a background knowledge of the basic dogmatic theology, sacred Scriptures, philosophy, pastoral theology and psychology. All these subjects are good preparation for the sisters' future mission.



Temporary professed sisters visit the sick and the poor on weekends. (Nguyen)

The temporary professed sisters are also involved in teaching catechism for children in parishes and visiting the sick and the poor on weekends. Occasionally in the summer, while in their three-year theological program, they have practical two-month experiences at some communities of our congregation.

When sisters have graduated from the theological program, they have a two-year ministry that gives them a practical exposure to the work of our communities, before returning to the motherhouse to prepare for their perpetual vows.

However, sisters with special abilities or knowledge may be sent abroad to study, or will improve their expertise in pedagogy, music, choir direction or other specialized ministries. They must finish their program before entering the final preparation for their perpetual vows period.



Sisters receive their theological certification. (Nguyen)

However, we always remind young sisters of the importance of their spiritual and prayer life. While they are studying theology, they are advised to learn to love God and serve everyone, not to focus on achievements or just becoming talented persons! They are to experience who God is in their life, and recognize God as the ultimate goal of life: "Apart from God you can do nothing" (John 15:5). They learn that before challenges, difficulties or suffering, they are to run with trust to the Eucharist for strength and grace. "Come to me, all you who work hard and who carry heavy burdens and I will refresh you" (Matthew 11:28).

Besides the common prayer hours with the community and monthly retreat, they are encouraged to make their own hour of eucharistic adoration. Developing this relationship with their Lord, they will have the energy to overcome the temptations of later life, generously serve all people they meet, and go anywhere they are assigned.

We guide them to an awareness of the important role God plays in their religious life. Later when they are busy and tired or burdened with responsibility, they will save time for God, and do all for the sake of God — becoming a messenger of hope to all they meet, especially those marginalized and rejected by society.

Yearly, on special feast days, we gather all the young sisters at the motherhouse, and invite someone to speak on the consecrated life, relationship with God, or the saint of the day to refresh their vocation or help them grow in the religious life.

To relieve the stress of work and life, we also provide outings for sisters to meet each other, and share about their community life or ministry or even vocations.



To relieve the stress of work and life, the Dominican Missionary Sisters provide outings for sisters to meet each other. (Nguyen)

I went through a similar formation program, and learned many useful things from the practical two-month and two-year experiences at communities and parishes. These experiences made me more confident, and increased my faith in God.

When I became a perpetually professed sister, I felt less worried and confused in taking charge of assigned ministries such as teaching doctrine, or sharing Scripture or my faith life with others. If I have been successful in my ministry, it is because I learned to pray before doing anything, thanks to God's grace!

When I was assigned to take charge of the formation of the postulants, I realized that it was my responsibility to guide young sisters to be real religious women.

Three principles that I try to use myself, and teach the young sisters to use, are:

- Be honest in words and deeds. "Say yes when you mean yes and say no when you mean no. Anything else you say comes from the devil" (Matthew 5:37).
- Become a holy and moral woman. "Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).
- Consider our congregation or local community as our real family — not just a "rented house" — in which all the members love each other. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

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Even now, as a sister with perpetual vows, I still try to act by these principles, and try to guide young sisters to live by them too. However, training a grownup human being is not easy, and the formation of a religious woman is even more complicated. So we completely turn over the formation of these young sisters to God — a wonderful Trainer — who will guide and accompany them.

With God's grace, we try our best to create good conditions and opportunities for young sisters to learn to be messengers of God in the future, ready to bring the good news of God to everyone in the world. As Pope Francis said, "Where there are religious, there is joy. "

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