The Spirituality of the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception: A Proposed Aspirancy Program

Sr. Maricris Diuyan, MIC
Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception
mdiuyan@yahoo.com

Abstract: This study was done primarily to design an Aspirancy Program for the MIC Sisters of St. Joseph Province in the Philippines. The researcher gathered the result of data from three focus group discussions of MIC selected Professed Sisters and Formators. The researcher also obtained the result of the data garnered from the meeting of MIC Inter-Asia and Africa on Initial Formation.

The study revealed that MIC spirituality inspires the Sisters to live meaningfully, grow graciously and serve enthusiastically in their community and in their ministry. The six elements of the PSAAC (Physical, Spiritual, Apostolic, Academic, Affective, and Community) model by Futrell are already established in the initial formation program of the MIC Sisters. Furthermore, the data obtained from MIC Inter-Asia and Africa on Initial Formation meeting are the following: SWOT Analyis and strategies regarding the current program of the Aspirancy plan; modification of the objectives for both of the Aspirant and that of the Sister Accompanying the Aspirant; and modification of the criteria of passage of the Aspirancy Plan, the setting of goals and the formulation of vision-mission of a proposed Aspirancy Program, the group considered the aim of this formation stage that is: to have a holistic formation and vocation accompaniment of an Aspirant that will enable her to make a discerned choice in following Christ in the MIC way of life. It is a holistic approach for the reason that formation process touches the totality of the person. And vocation accompaniment is essential in the discernment process of an Aspirant in helping herself clarify her motivations and sees her capacities and abilities that are demanded of her, to see whether she is called to religious life in this particular congregation.

Key Words: religious life; spirituality; initial formation; aspirancy program; focus groups

1. INTRODUCTION

Within the person lies the dynamism to keep going beyond oneself, the desire to be 'something more' than just living in the cocoon of comfort life. This is an innate desire that reasons cannot explain. This desire according to Lonergan is the pure desire for ultimate Value, who is God (Moloney, 2004). What is paramount in this dynamism is the person being in love with God, the ultimate Mystery, who is always the One who is 'beyond'. Another way of saying this desire is called self-transcendence. For Lonergan, the 'falling in love with God' is not the person's initiative but God's, as

expressed in the following scriptural texts: "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us." (1John 4:9-10 NRSV); " For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16 NRSV) and "God's love has been into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5:5 NRSV). This dynamic state of being in love with God as the universal call to holiness is articulated in the Gospel of Mark, " you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and, with all your soul, and with all your

mind, and with all your strength." (Mark 12:30 NRSV). Chapter five of the Dogmatic of the Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium) is especially devoted to the call of the whole Church to holiness. "Therefore in the Church, everyone belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness." (page 66). The religious person must, first and foremost, seek God and God alone in whatever confusion, uncertainty and endeavours in life (Chittister, 1995). Ultimately, what is important about religious experience is the development of a personal relationship with God. It is not only to know that God loves the person but to experience God's persistence despite one's sinfulness (Keegan, 1997).   It is the irrefutable fact that this transforming love is the center of all religious experience. It calls forth to rise out of self-centredness and be converted into the force of love in the world. This becomes the principle of the person's whole subsequent life and in particular it sets the pattern for one's spirituality.

1.1 Background

In the Second Vatican Council, certain norms and decrees for religious life were promulgated: the decree on the appropriate renewal of the religious life, *Perfectae caritatis* and the doctrinal principles and general norms in chapter VI of dogmatic constitution, *Lumen gentium* (Abbot, 1966). Changes in religious life in the years after the Second Vatican Council were much given attention. A great deal of effort had been done and directed towards rethinking and reimaging religious life (Clark, 2009).

The MIC's, on their part and by their way of life are trying and doing their efforts to follow the directions and changes demanded from religious life. The focus is emphatically given to living out their charism and the expression of their spirituality. This is, indeed, an answer to one of the basic criteria of *Perfectae caritatis*, "a continuous return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original inspiration behind a given community" (Abbot,1966, p. 468). Furthermore, the apostolic exhortation, Vita Consecrata of Pope John Paul II (1996) after the Synod on Consecrated Life, recognized anew the importance of the initial formation of those wishing to consecrate themselves to the Lord. It urged all Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life to draw up as soon as possible a complete and updated "formation program inspired by their particular charism, presenting clearly and in all its stages the course to be followed in order to assimilate fully the spirituality of the respective Institute." (p. 122).

In 2008, the MIC General Directory on Initial Formation was revised and updated in consideration of Canon Law, MIC Constitutions and General Code and the key principles of the new process of MIC initial formation. This is in response to the second mandate of the MIC General Chapter 2005: "To continue the elaboration of the new process of MIC initial formation having as the integrating axis the spirituality of Thanksgiving, and to see that it is implemented". Furthermore, the revised directory is intended as an instrument to foster the following: understanding of the essential elements of the M.I.C. initial formation; faithfulness to the transmission of the spirit of the Institute; and the unification of the criteria on initial formation throughout the Institute (p.1).

MIC Formators had their sessions and meetings to work out an action plan to concretize the new general directory and the implementation of the new process of MIC Initial Formation with the spirituality of thanksgiving as its axis of integration. In summer 2009, the Asian/African MIC Formators met in the Philippine for their two-week session on this process. They discussed the pedagogical elements in each formation stage as well as implications of intercultural living. Consequently, the MIC's of St. Joseph Province in the Philippines had reformulated and updated the Province's Initial Formation Program according to the revised general directory. Thus, aspirancy stage and its modalities were included in the plan.

1.2 Objective of the study

This study was done primarily to design an Aspirancy Program for the MIC Sisters of St. Joseph Province in the Philippines. It is an initial formation program that is integrated with the Spirituality of the MIC Sisters in consonance with the MIC Revised General Directory on Initial Formation. The need to design a program is one of the recommendations from

the thesis of Sr. Irene Ferrer, MIC, on *Formation of the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception (MIC): A Journey Towards Becoming Prophets in our World Today*. The recommendation helped to prepare adequately prospective candidates for postulancy.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research design of this study used a descriptive-qualitative method in seeking a clearer understanding of the MIC Spirituality based on Revised General Directory on Initial Formation, MIC documents, lived experiences of the MIC Sisters. Furthermore, the study solicited suggestions and information from MIC Formators and Superiors in the formulation of a proposed aspirancy program. The respondents were selected from the group of Formators and selected Professed Sisters. The researcher employed interpretive/constructivist approach in discussing with the respondents. The instrument used for the study is focus group discussion (FGD). Aside from FGD data, the MIC documents and the data obtained from the result of the MIC Inter-Asia and Africa Initial Formation meeting were used for discussions. During the course of discussions with respondents, the researcher utilized an interpretive, constructivist perspective. This was followed by the procedures of data gathering and analysis. In analysing the FGD data, content analysis was used. And SWOT analysis was prepared for the result of the workshops acquired from the Formators' report.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As a result of the analysis of data drawn from the focus group discussions and the presentation of the MIC documents and other related reviews together with the data gathered from the MIC Inter-Asia and Africa on Initial Formation meeting, seven main emerging themes and categories were created: (1) The Perceptions, Knowledge and attitudes of the MIC Sisters towards MIC Spirituality; (2) The MIC Spirituality; (3) The elements of the MIC Lived Spirituality; (4) The Challenges in the initial formation; (5) The Requirements for a candidate in the Initial Formation; (6) The Elements for Initial Formation; and (7) The Inputs for Designing an Aspirancy Program.

3.1 The Perceptions, Knowledge and attitudes of the MIC Sisters towards MIC Spirituality

The first category is on perception, which most of the Sisters have shared about the gratuitous love of God, when they first thought about MIC spirituality. The second category speaks about the knowledge about the experiences of the Sisters concerning the MIC spirituality. These experiences through their perceptions and inspirations resulted to a profound impact on their lives. Thus, the third category is on attitudes as a response to these experiences. The Sisters gratefully declared that their life is a hymn of thanksgiving to the Lord.

3.2 The MIC Spirituality

The MIC Spirituality was introduced in the Initial Formation and from MIC documents and related reviews. Teaching and witnessing are the two approaches of introducing MIC spirituality in the Initial Formation. On the category of teaching, the Sisters recalled that they learned about the MIC spirituality through sessions and classes on religious life and the MIC Institute especially the works and writings of the MIC Foundress. The other category on witnessing was widely discussed by most of the Sisters. They claimed that MIC spirituality was not introduced to them formally but saw it through the living out of the Sisters. They were amazed to witness the Sisters' dedication to work and prayer. Thier daily encounter with them had somehow epitomized their balance of relationship in community, prayer and mission.

3.3 The Elements of the MIC Spirituality

The elements of the MIC Spirituality are the: experience of God's love, charism of the MIC foundress, positive attitude and witnessing. These four categories were most discussed by the Sisters as the important ingredients in designing an Aspirancy Program. First, on the experience of

God's love, the Sisters believed the importance of the awareness and the recognition of the gratuitous love of God in one's life. Second, is on the charism of the MIC Foundress.   It is the spirituality bequeathed by the Mother Foundress as the axis and the raison d'etre of the MIC Sisters. Third, is on positive attitude. What is common among their discussions is the joyful attitude of the person on how one expresses herself and with that sense of fulfillment, humor, awe and wonderment and gratitude. Fourth is on witnessing.   The Sisters believed that living out or the experiential dimension of the spirituality of thanksgiving is also important. This element is addressed to the Sisters and to Formators in particular.

3.4 The Challenges in the Initial Formation

The challenges in the Initial Formation are the following: transition stage was the first challenge for them to live in a new lifestyle in the religious formation; relationship, the Sisters find the challenge or difficulty of their relationship in the community due to different background and upbringing; rules, the Sisters were challenged to follow the rules and regulations; and lastly, was their difficulty in language especially French. They had to learn and to pray in French. The same struggles for the Sisters with the language used in their ministry and apostolate were also evident.

3.5 The Requirements for a Candidate in the Initial Formation

The required qualities for a Candidate in the Initial Formation are the following: First, is their trust in God. With their deep faith, their prayer and relationship with God they are assured and they believe in the reality of grace. Second, is their perseverance to face the challenges. For them the challenges were just part of their journey in the religious formation. It was a matter of attitude on how they looked at those challenges.   They considered them as part of the consequences of their choice that was expected to happen. Third, is about Openness of a Formand to the Formator. The Sisters saw the importance of the accompaniment of the Formator and more so the openness of the Formand

to be accompanied. And lastly is the openness to peers which is another important attitude to see the gift of their group mate whom they called their support group or their friends.

3.6 The Elements for Initial Formation

The six elements for Initital Formation were mostly liked by the MIC Sisters are the following: physical, which helps the persons to attend properly to health such as diet, recreation, and exercises; spiritual, which stresses on prayer life and was conducive during their initial formation; apostolic, the Sisters understood that mission and religious life were introduced to them as the offshoot of the spirituality of thanksgiving; academic, which deals on study on sacred scriptures, MIC Constitutions and other MIC documents; affective, on how Formators have helped them in their vocation journey; and commmunity life where there was group sharing, group dynamics, common activities and sharing of common tasks and responsibilities.

3.7 The Inputs for Designing an Aspirancy Program

The inputs for designing an Aspirancy Program are drawn from the data obtained from the results of the meeting of the MIC Inter-Asia and Africa on Initial Formation and the SWOT analysis acquired from the Formators' workshops.

The presentation of the data garnered from the above discussion was expounded on how an aspirancy initial formation program would be conceived with the following areas: the purpose of designing a proposed aspirancy program; the Candidates; setting of goals; formulation of vision-mission statement; SWOT Analysis that resulted from the data of Formators' report and their group workshops; presentation of the modified objectives and criteria of passage; and the list of suggested activities.

a. Purpose of designing an Aspirany program

Initially the purpose of designing an aspirancy program is one of the recommendations from the thesis of Sr. Irene Ferrer, MIC, on

Formation of the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception (MIC): A Journey Towards Becoming Prophets in our World Today. Furthermore, the revised General Directory on Initial Formation provides only the plan and the accompaniment sheets for the Aspirants.It is then the responsibility of the Sisters in the formation team and the authority of each MIC province to be creative in implementing the aspirancy plan and the use of the accompaniment sheets in this stage of formation. Thus designing an aspirancy ``initial formation program is deemed appropriate to these needs.

b. Candidates

The Candidates are college graduates and initially prepared to enter to the postulancy stage of initial formation.

c. Setting of Goals

The following proposed goals state that:
1. MIC Aspirants are facilitated in their human and Christian formation in a holistic way in view of discerning their religious vocation, especially to the MIC life.
2. MIC Aspirants are accompanied in their vocational discernment, clarified their motivations and discerned God's will of following Christ in the MIC way of life.

d. Formulation of Vision-Mission Statement

The formulation of the Vision-Mission is as follows:

Vision

Inspired by the general orientation of the MIC Institute, its spirituality, vision mission of the MIC St. Joseph province and in consonance with the MIC Revised General Directory on Initial Formation, the Aspirancy Program envisions itself to be: a holistic formation and vocation accompaniment of MIC Aspirants who are desirous to make a discerned choice of following Christ in the MIC way of life.

Mission

Guided by the MIC values, the MIC Aspirancy Program is committed to provide holistic formation of MIC Aspirants through dedicated and committed Formators who will facilitate and accompany the Aspirants' formation and vocation discernment that will uphold the vision of MIC Sisters of St. Joseph province in living out the Sprituality of thanksgiving in and through Jesus Christ in a Marian way.

e. SWOT Analysis

The result of the workshops acquired from the Formators' report came up with common points: its positive and negative aspects of the aspirancy initial formation, its challenges and needs for improvement. From this SWOT analysis data resulted to SWOT Matirx Strategies (See Table 1).

Table 1
SWOT Matrix Strategies

S-O Strategies pursue the maximum use of opportunities that suit to the strengths of the organization
o Encouraging the Formators to be more creative and flexible in using the accompaniment sheets as a process of integration so as to attune to the needs of the Aspirants;
o Allowing the Aspirants to get involved in the MIC apostolates such as the MIC retreat house that will help them know more the about the MIC life and mission as part of their discernment process in their formation;
o Involving the Aspirants in the parish activities will help them fulfill their commitment of their Christian Vocation;
o Making use of other resources such as the inter-congregation courses/sessions will make the aspirancy formation more enriching for the Aspirants;
o Making sure that physical well being of the Candidates and activities such as peer group inter action and aesthetic enhancement should be visible in the aspirancy program;
o Providing Advanced English lessons to the Aspirants so as to facilitate a better communication among themselves in their multicultural community.

W-O Strategies aim to overcome weaknesses to open new (pursue)   opportunities

o   Involving the Aspirants to MIC apostolate and in parish activities will promote teamworking/peer interaction among themselve and help minimize the work of Formators;
o   Sending the Aspirants to join the intercongregational courses and sessions will make their formation more substantial and help minimize the work of Formators;
o   Making use of other resources and supplements regarding Aspirancy formation will have substantial contents in the accompaniment of Aspirants;
o   Finalizing the research work of designing an aspirancy program will be give more direction, guide, substantial contents, detailed plan, list of activities that address to a holistic approach of formation;
o   Ongoing formation of MIC Sisters will help facilitiate a better witnessing of Sisters in the community and to the Candidates.

S-T Strategies attempt to identify ways of using the strengths of an organization to avoid facing threats;

o   Ensuring a regular accompaniment of dedicated Formators with the Aspirants will enable the latter make a better decision with their discerned choice;
o   Making use of the holistic approach of formation will help the Aspirants understand more about themselves, clarify their motivations, make discernment of God's plan for them and their capacity to make a better decision;
o   Keeping that interest and zeal of Aspirants through their exposure to the life and mission of MIC Sisters will hopefully find them more appealing and compelling in following Christ through the MIC way of life;
o   Inviting the family members especially the parents of Aspirants to MIC feast day celebration will create ties among the family members with the MIC Sisters and help the former understand the kind of life that their daughters have chosen.

W-T Strategies establish a defensive plan to keep the weaknesses of an organization from making it susceptible to external threats.

o   Minimizing the responsibilities of multi-tasked Formators so that they can have quality time to accompany the Candidates in their initial formation;
o   Ongoing formation of Sisters to enable them to be a good witnessing to the Candidates. This would help the Candidates find religious life more appealing;
o   Reaching out to the families of Candidates and help them understand about the chosen vocation of their daughters;
o   Screening of Candidates who qualify to join the program in order to avoid haphazard ones who are undecided towards life's commitment and choices.

f.   *Modification of Objectives and Criteria of Passage of the Aspirancy Plan*

The group workshops considered in modifying the objectives for both of the Aspirants and that of the Sister Accompanying the Aspirant Alongside with these objectives are the criteria of passage that show the desired result or expected outcome that Aspirants must attain at the end of the aspirancy period. These criteria of passage are also indicators that the Aspirant is ready to go to the next formation stage. Furthermore the attitudes and qualities of the MIC Foundress are added to show the affinity of the Aspirant with the Foundress and the MIC way of life. Through these criteria of passage, a mutual discernment is met for both Apirants and the MIC congregation, represented by the Sister-in-charge.

g.   *List of suggested activities*

The suggested activities in the aspirancy program that are according to Human, Spiritual, Academic and Apostolic dimensions of initial formation.

Through the results of this study, a formulation of a Proposed Aspirancy Program was designed, which consists of program description,

participants of the program, Sister in-charge of the program, the time range, location of the program of implementation, list of program activities, evaluation scheme, and the proposed aspirancy program of implementation.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The overall conclusion of this study includes MIC spirituality and its important elements and essential aspects of initial formation in designing an aspirancy program.

This spirituality then as the raison d'être of the society is the very core of the MIC life and mission of the Sisters. It is equally important to be present in the initial formation of the MIC Sisters. Thus important elements of MIC spirituality: the experience of God's love, charism of the MIC foundress, positive attitude and witnessing should be developed in the life of the Candidates so as to embrace and eventually live out the spirituality of thanksgiving. In addition, the six elements promoted by Futrell as the "PSAAAC" (Physical, Spiritual, Apostolic, Academic, Affective, Community) model is suggested to be present during all stages of formation and must be adapted accordingly in the process of growth. The attitudes of trust, perseverance and openness must be developed in the life of a Candidate, which assures her tenacity in facing challenges and difficulties in the initial formation.

The formulation of designing an Aspirancy Program should consider the following: the vision-mission statement of the program; the setting of goals; the articulations of objectives; the criteria of passage that correspond with the objectives and the list of program activities that give contents to the objectives and goals of the proposed program. It is also essential to have a regular evaluation to ensure the implementation of the program and its improvement.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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