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THE FORMATION
OF AFFECTIVITY
A Christian Approach



The Formation of Affectivity

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ST. AUGUSTINE'S PRESS
South Bend, Indiana

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Original title: *Con todo tu corazón, con toda tu alma, con toda tu mente.*

Formar la afectividad en clave cristiana, Palabra, Madrid 2021

Translation: Mel Cusi & Dale Parker

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Manufactured in the United States of America.

1 2 3 4 5 6 28 27 26 25 24 23

Library of Congress Control Number:

Hardback ISBN: 978-1-58731-247-2

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-58731-249-6

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences – Permanence of Paper for Printed Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

St. Augustine's Press

www.staugustine.net

*To all those who,
by sharing with me their eagerness to improve,
have shown me
the greatness of the human heart*

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INTRODUCTION

1. Teacher, What Should I Do to Achieve Eternal Life?

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Lk 10:27). Jesus refers to two texts of the Pentateuch in his dialogue with a doctor of the Law (cf. Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18). The two commandments summarize what we should do to gain eternal life: love God and love our neighbor. Matthew and Mark narrate the story in a way that differs slightly from Luke (cf. Mt 22:37–39; Mk 12:30–31). In their versions, the answer is in response to the question, “What is the first commandment?” In all three gospels, we see Jesus challenging us to live a radical, complete love, because that sort of love not only fulfills all that God asks of us, but opens the door for us to live a happy life and enjoy him for all eternity.

This kind of relationship with God contrasted with some proposals offered by Judaism and especially with those offered by pagan religions, which tended to emphasize adoration, submission, and obedience, attitudes born from consideration of God’s absolute transcendence. Before God, man could only prostrate himself and recognize his nothingness.

Jesus Christ opens a new perspective that touches the most intimate aspects of man—but without excluding the previous idea. God calls man to enter a loving relationship that includes several dimensions: heart, soul, strength and mind. Jesus stresses that dealing with God involves all aspects of man: his intellect, his will, his sentiments and his passions. The same should happen in his dealings with his fellow men. Indeed,

we do not have one heart to love God with and another with which to love men. This poor heart of ours, made of flesh, loves

with an affection which is human and which, if it is united to Christ's love, is also supernatural.¹

The twofold precept (loving God and neighbor) is based on a basic tenet: God is a loving Father who cares for us. "He first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19), he *firsted* us, to use the words of Pope Francis. We respond only partially to the love of God, who created us, gave us a family, abilities, talents ... and prepared a dwelling in heaven that is waiting for us (cf. Jn 14:2–3). It is the same thought behind the lines we sing at Christmas, "*sic nos amantem, quis non redamaret*" from the hymn *Adeste fideles*: who would not love back one who loves us thus?

The love that all human beings give and receive from God fully satisfies our deepest longings. The first commandment is not forced upon us. It is the proclamation of what makes man happy: "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."² God is not a tyrant who is unhappy with our submission, who *forces* us to love him, but a Father who loves us, cares for us and watches over us, and only he can fulfill an unavoidable need: "What can make us feel happy if not the experience of giving and receiving love?"³

2. The Formation of Affectivity

The past few decades have increasingly made clear the need to form others in affectivity. This is especially true for young people. The idea would be to enable them to develop their own interiority in a healthy and serene manner, and so achieve a cheerful, comprehensive, meaningful and apostolically fruitful Christian life. However, those in charge of their formation often state that they have few tools to carry out their task, presumably because the intellectual and spiritual dimensions of formation have been over-emphasized for many centuries. Many excellent works have been written that deal with those areas, but little attention has been given to the formation of affectivity.

- 1 St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Friends of God*, Scepter, New York (NY) 2002², n. 229.
- 2 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, I, 1, 1.
- 3 Francis, *General Audience*, July 14, 2017.

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Some dimensions have been stressed to excess at times, to the exclusion of others. The resulting imbalance has created distortions like intellectualism, voluntarism, or sentimentalism. All these dimensions need to be combined within the unity of the person.

Affectivity could initially be defined as the set of emotions, affections, feelings and passions within man that make him feel comfortable or unhappy in his various real-life situations. The result is pleasure or discomfort, which points to what should be sought or avoided. Pleasure or discomfort could be in the sensitive sphere (enjoying a meal) or in the intellectual sphere (a pleasant conversation or a good read).

Having said that, the goods or the evils identified by affectivity are only partial and may contradict each other. For example, short term discomfort (tiredness) pitted against a long-term greater joy (winning a race). We all have a hierarchy of values with which we figure out which goods are worth sacrificing for the sake of greater goods. This hierarchy of values is usually not overt. That is not to say that some affects are bad or mistaken, but that they sometimes claim undeserved priority, and other goods, more important for the whole person, could be jeopardized.

The formation of affectivity seeks to help the intellect and the will achieve a right order: finding out what is good, wanting to reach it, and using the appropriate means to get there. It is not just about controlling or repressing particular human trends, nor rationalizing instincts, but to reach such a deep rapport with the good—in the head and in the heart—as to give all the things that call for our attention the right level of importance almost instinctively (rather, by *connaturality*). This allows us to enjoy both the good achieved and forego those others which need to be sacrificed for the sake of greater ones. The latter point is important because it is less evident. St. Augustine summarized it as follows: “in the case of what is loved, either there is no labor, or the labor also is loved” (*in eo quod amatur, aut non laboratur aut labor amatur*).⁴ Thus we return to the gospel quotation from the beginning of this introduction: everything begins with what we genuinely love. Everything else falls into place.

Aspiring to achieve a perfect balance would be wishful thinking. Formation is a process and there is always room for improvement. It will lead

4 St. Augustine, *On the goodness of widowhood*, XXI, 26.

to delving deeper into the meaning of one's vocation, to achieve self-dominion and make it a serene and cheerful reality on a day-to-day basis.

3. Psychology and Formation

St. Paul shows a Hebrew approach in his exhortation to the Thessalonians: "May your spirit (*pneuma*) and soul (*psyche*) and body (*soma*) be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess 5:23).⁵ This triple distinction is unique in St. Paul's letters. Many early Fathers of the Church, especially in the East, used the same approach.

We are probably more familiar with the twofold distinction of body and soul that arises from Aristotle's hylomorphic theory (matter and form), which became generally accepted in medieval scholasticism. St. Paul also used this distinction several times (cf. 1 Cor 5:3; 7:34; 2 Cor 7:1). Both approaches have their advantages and limitations in explaining human nature, that always remains unfathomable. In any case, both approaches uphold the unity of the person at all times: the unity of the person is not simply about adding two principles that ultimately remain distinct, like water and oil.

In my opinion, however, the three-fold division makes it easier to understand the person's affective dimension. Indeed, the split between body and soul makes it difficult to fit in feelings, passions and emotions. They have a physical foundation (in the brain's activity), but they are also part of the non-material, transcendent reality of man, made in the image of God. Clinical depression would be a good example of this: it is not an illness of the body, but we cannot say that it is a spiritual illness either. The three-fold division better defines the domain of affectivity: it belongs in the *psyche* (soul, mind), and is the subject matter of psychology. When deranged, it is the domain of psychiatry.

If we are to help others as formators, we need to take into account all three dimensions: everybody has a spirit called to enjoy God for all eternity. It is nourished by prayer, sacraments and relationships, especially when charity is their foundation. Everyone has a body that needs sleep, food

5 Cf. P. Iovino, *La prima lettera ai Tessalonicesi*, Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, Bologna 1992, pp. 284–287.

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and exercise. And everyone has a psyche subject to mood swings, defined by thinking and feeling in a particular way, conditioned by life experiences, etc. The three dimensions are in constant interplay: no matter how good one's dispositions may be, poor sleep will make it harder to pray, and will make one short tempered, irritable, etc. Likewise, low moods are often associated with physical discomfort (headaches, loss of appetite, tiredness), and it makes it harder to "connect" with God in prayer.

Some knowledge of psychology is very helpful in the task of formation. For example, knowing the main features of the various life stages will help to address matters in the best way for each age range, and to set goals in accordance with the individual's abilities. Similarly, knowing the different types of personalities will help to provide specific advice to each individual person on what traits to improve, or how they can use their strong points in the task of formation.

On the other hand, psychological problems may be confused with a lack of virtue or with sins. For example, narcissism and pride are two different concepts, just as egocentrism and selfishness, shyness and lack of interest in other people, obsession and thinking about oneself, poorly integrated sexuality and impurity, conflict with the authority figure and disobedience, impulsiveness and anger, perfectionism and lack of abandonment, attention deficit and lack of disorganization, inactivity secondary to depression and laziness.⁶ The first term of each pair mentioned above may contain a pathological element, a personality disorder, previous traumatic experiences, cognitive errors, poor social skills, etc., and not just poor interior life.

In these cases it would not be enough to provide advice of an ascetical nature (to grow in fortitude, toughness, temperance) or to foster the interior life (prayer, mortification, a sense of divine filiation), because it would not hit the target. It could even be harmful, because it would be a distraction from the real problem, foster guilt or a sense of worthlessness, or encourage an overextension of the will. In the end it would probably be ineffective and exhausting.

Yet, it is not a matter of pretending to be a psychologist in the task of formation. It is rather a matter of realizing that a crucial aspect of this task

6 Cf. C. Chiclana Actis, "Formación y evaluación psicológica del candidato a sacerdocio," *Scripta Theologica* 51 (2019) 467–504.

is the human dimension, which remains within the boundaries of psychology and has its own dynamics and laws. We should be familiar with these dynamics and laws to be able to help adequately. Similarly, it is not necessary to be a physician to recommend paracetamol to someone with a headache, some extra rest to someone who is not sleeping well, or to suggest an urgent medical consultation to someone with chest pain. St. Josemaría Escrivá would explain this responsiveness by saying that a formator should have the *psychology of a mother*, who can sense the state of mind of her son, recognize that he had problems at school when he comes home, notice that he had a fight with his girlfriend, etc.

To a certain extent this knowledge comes from intuition, and some people may have it more developed than others. But it also requires specific training, because it is part of the professional skills expected of a formator. This book aims to assist the *formation of formators* in the psychological aspects of the person and how to apply that knowledge in their task.

4. About This Book

Over the past few years I have had the opportunity to teach formators, parents, teachers, priests, seminarians, etc., about the development of affectivity. I was struck by the fact that there was almost no need to adapt the contents to the needs of the different cohorts. They all had the same basic concerns and the feeling that knowledge of psychological dynamics was useful for their task. Many acknowledged that it helped them to know themselves better, and this enhanced the task of formation.

In preparing these classes I have drawn upon my professional background as a psychiatrist, a theologian, and a priest. I have also drawn from my experiences in giving Christian formation to people of all ages, especially the young, which is something I have done both as a layman and as a priest.

The contents of this book are courses I have taught, expanded upon and committed to writing. Therefore, the style is didactic, interrogatory, direct and practical, with many anecdotes drawn from real life to illustrate various points. I refer to several psychological schools without offering systematic descriptions, because they can be found elsewhere.⁷ Each chapter

7 Cf. among others, M.A. Monge Sánchez (ed). *Medicina pastoral. Cuestiones*

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of the book corresponds to a one-hour lecture. For this reason I had to make a selection of the various arguments: I have picked those I consider to be important for a formator and cannot be found elsewhere. On the other hand I have not emphasized other basic and more important topics—though neither have I neglected them—because the reader will probably be familiar with them: the priority of grace, some doctrinal points, the dynamic between human and supernatural virtues, etc. There is an ample bibliography at the end of the book for those interested in further reading on these and other topics.

Since I am a priest, my starting point will be Christian anthropology, which acknowledges man's supernatural end, his tendency towards the good, and the difficulty of recognizing it and putting it into practice, due to man's wounded nature. Man must correspond to God's grace to reach sanctity, and the interaction between these two realities is expressed by St. Thomas Aquinas in two phrases: "grace presupposes nature,"⁸ and "grace does not destroy nature but perfects it."⁹

This book offers suggestions to help develop a healthy and focused personality. We can think of plants that need rain to grow strong. In the same way, God's ordinary grace may act as "rain" upon the soul. But if a plant is crooked, a different kind of technique is required to straighten it up. God can certainly do that spontaneously, just as he can cure a physical illness. But it would be something out of the ordinary, even a miracle, and we cannot demand it of God; usually he counts on the person to go to the doctor to return to health.

The book is divided into four sections. The first contains a general description of personality and affectivity, a definition of both concepts and some ideas to foster a mature development. The second describes the various stages of the life cycle, from the cradle to old age. An attempt is made to illustrate how the acquisitions and defects of each stage have an impact

de biología, antropología, medicina, sexología, psicología y psiquiatría, Eunsa, Pamplona 2004; J. Cabanyes, M.A. Monge (eds.), *La salud mental y sus cuidados*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2011; W. Vial, *Madurez humana y espiritual*, Palabra, Madrid 2019.

8 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 2, art. 2, ad. 1.

9 *Ibidem*, I, q. 1, a. 8, ad. 2.

on future development. The third focuses on a specific aspect of affectivity, the sexual dimension. It will propose some strategies to contribute effectively to the holistic good of the person. It will highlight the difficulties of living chastely in 21st century life. The section ends with some thoughts on the vocation to apostolic celibacy and its consequences from a psychological point of view. The fourth and final section covers several psychiatric conditions, and suggests various prevention strategies and ways to support those who have these conditions. A final chapter—in fact an epilogue—has been included in response to the requests of a number of people who attended my courses. It describes the psychological capabilities required for someone involved in formation.

At this stage I would like to thank the many people who have helped me in the writing of this book. First, Juan Ignacio Peláez, who was in the very first course I gave. His patient insistence encouraged me to sit down and write this book. Fr. Alfredo Ruiz de Gámiz has reviewed every single chapter and provided excellent suggestions based on his ample priestly experience. I am twice in debt to Dr. Marisol Salcedo, clinical psychologist, who was involved in my initial training in psychiatry many years ago, and who later reminded me of many forgotten concepts, and corrected some inaccuracies that had made their way into the book. Finally, the contributors to the book *Loving and Teaching Others to Love*¹⁰ will find many of their own ideas somewhere in this book: Bishop Jose Maria Yanguas (theological aspects of affectivity), Fr. Paul O’Callaghan (the dynamics of delayed gratification), Fr. Wenceslao Vial (psychopathology), Dr. Carlos Chiclana (comprehensive approach to out-of-control sexual behavior), Fr. Maurizio Faggioni (friendship) and Bishop Massimo Camisasca (the spiritual paternity of celibate people). I strongly recommend reading their work to understand their respective topics better.

Holy Mary, Mother of Fair Love, pray for us!

10 F. Insa, D. Parker (eds.), *Loving and Teaching Others to Love. The formation of affectivity in priestly life*, Independently published 2021.