

CONFORTI AFTER CONFORTI.

Going deeper. A spiritual-educational proposal

(Formation Conference 2020 -Fr. Gilbert Mbula)

Introduction

From 1931 to Vatican Council II

The conciliar and post-conciliar period up to the 1990s

From the eve of the third millennium to today

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The purpose of the conference on initial formation was to take up the contents of the *Testament Letter* and those of the first *Constitutions* and place the Founder's person at the center by considering historical, spiritual, pedagogical, and educational aspects. The title of this presentation, "Conforti after Conforti," expresses the rationale behind this work, namely, to show how the spirituality of Msgr. Conforti has been deepened and then proposed, till today. It is not difficult for those who dedicate themselves to realize that the material available is part of a long tradition at the level of the Congregation and its ecclesial collaboration. We feel that talking about our Founder, and his missionary project is always an opportunity for growth, a *kairos* not to be missed. At the same time, especially considering the formation journey of the whole Family, this project becomes an appeal from God to each of us, a moment to renew our "yes" more positively and joyfully.

"Conforti after Conforti" is, in my opinion, a wide-ranging theme and acts almost like a hinge between the historical context and the spiritual aspect presented by the agenda of the conference. It is not entirely easy to refer accurately to the totality of the historical elements and sufficiently deepen the attributes of this Holy man's spirituality and Pastor of two flocks. The intention is to underline the spirituality and the person of our Founder as they are studied in detail and suggested in the area of formation, particularly in initial formation.

It is already 125 years since the foundation of the Institute and almost 90 years since our Founder's death. We are therefore talking about an extended period marked by historical, cultural, and ecclesial changes. Looking in particular to "spirituality," we cannot speak about it incompletely. Perhaps it was already evident at the time of Conforti. Even more so today, the awareness reached at the Xaverian conference of 2006 that "Spirituality" is an all-all-embracing term, almost synonymous with "identity." It enlightens every aspect of life, not only the way of praying and relating to God.¹

¹ Cf. XAVERIAN MISSIONARIES, *Xaverian Spirituality Meeting*, Tavernerio 2006, 11

Furthermore, the legacy represented by the studies and research done on the life and writings of Conforti (from the *Testament Letter to the normative texts* that we remember today with so much joy) are all proofs of the holiness of Conforti. In fact, the canonization of Conforti, (October 23rd, 2011) namely the recognition by the Church of his exemplary life, has had a very significant impact on the whole Congregation, for each of us, for our friends and benefactors, and for all the people who find in him a point of reference. His life, his pastoral, charismatic, and educational efforts were all oriented towards holiness. Thus, he wrote at the time of the approval of the Constitutions in 1921: "*We have good reason to rejoice and thank the Lord for this decision since it is clear evidence of the holiness and timeliness of the Institute to which we have given our name. At the same time, I draw your attention to the serious and solemn commitment we undertake in the eye of God and the Church as a result of this approval.*"(LT 1)

For reasons of time and space, we cannot dwell on every moment of the "post-Conforti" period concerning the area of formation of the Congregation. Still, we draw attention to a three-fold division, taking Vatican II as a fundamental point of reference:

- From 1931 to the Second Vatican Council (with the contribution of Giovanni Gazza, Circular Letter No 49);²
- The Conciliar and post-Conciliar period up to the 1990s (with contributions from the VIII General Chapter of 1966,³ and Fr. Amato Dagnino as formator);
- From the eve of the third millennium to today: intercultural journey and awareness of ongoing formation (with contributions from various conferences and reflections according to the different areas of work of the Congregation).⁴

² For further information, cf. Giovanni GAZZA, *Direttive per la scelta e la formazione di buone vocazioni - Lettera Circolare n. 49 - Parma 1955*, In SEGRETARIATO GENERALE DELLA FORMAZIONE, *Lettere Circolari - Vol. 2*, Roma, Missionari Saveriani, 1999, 214-285.

³ Cf. PIA SOCIETÀ SAN FRANCISCO SAVERIO PER LE MISSIONI ESTERE, *Atti ufficiali dell'ottavo Capitolo Generale "speciale" - 26 agosto-25 ottobre 1966*, Parma, ISME, 1966.

⁴ The challenges and problems that arise are manifold. We cannot delude ourselves thinking that, after the time of the basic formation, the young Xaverian is a "finished product", complete, a ripe fruit from all points of view, and an efficient person. If this were the case, a failure or an error would create such a discomfort in the person as to cause him to lose confidence in himself and would block the missionary commitment and personal growth in the following of Christ. Let us not forget that there are other problems related to the very life journey and to the different tasks in carrying out mission: tiredness due to the multiplicity of commitments, lack of support from the confreres, discontent, discouragement, insecurity for the future, the fear of loneliness that can undermine celibacy, stress, lack of self-confidence, activism that leads to feeling like simple "bureaucrats" ... in short, an identity crisis. Sometimes a spirit of individualism and of laziness emerges, but also a too high image of oneself; all things that stop unity and collaboration in mission. Plus, nowadays everything changes at a blazing pace. Because of all this, ongoing formation is required so to keep pace. We Xaverians too, little by little, are coming to the awareness that the time has passed when it was thought that initial formation was sufficient to be effective in one's profession, throughout the whole life process. In this rapidly changing world, the knowledge gathered over the years of basic formation, in fact, is no longer enough to meet the needs of mission and the entire existence of the person. Life itself will be a very effective school, perhaps even the only one, as we often have heard. It is life that teaches us to mature in the

Positive traits and challenges have marked each of these three moments. However, the spirituality of Conforti has come to us like a tree that has grown and continues to grow with the grace of God. It is not a purely human construction. You cannot "build" a tree. You can only plant and cure it and wait for it to sprout in due time. Nonetheless, its growth can be encouraged. In this sense, we must thank all the Xaverians who, before us, have cultivated this gift of God received through Conforti and continue to do so to this day.

From 1931 to the Second Vatican Council

Conforti is all in his letters, in his writings, in his action. You can indeed explain his thoughts, explain his actions, and make his circumstances known. This, in our opinion, has been the work carried out after him, through the contribution of all the Xaverians, both in the area of formation and pastoral activity. Besides illustrating and explaining, there have perhaps been contingent interpretations in this historical period, but with the sole purpose of realizing his greatest charismatic inspiration, *making the world a single family in Christ*. The development over the years has been that of a single spirit, a single spirituality, and a single charism. All in all, we see that Msgr. Conforti did not have a particular formation method, a specific program based on pedagogical theories such as those modern times present to us. But one thing is certain: *his formative process was based on the Gospel and on the tradition of the Institutes, Orders, and Congregations of his time. His pedagogy was that of the Saints*. He thought that when a young man was spiritually nourished with the principles of the Gospel and lived the theological, cardinal, and moral virtues, as the Gospel teaches us, he would be adequately prepared for a healthy realization of a religious and missionary life commitment. The Founder was encouraging personal responsibility towards a suitable preparation, making full use of each person's skills, but leaving to each person the merit of his efforts and the satisfaction of his victories.⁵

After the Founder's death, on November 5th, 1931, the General Chapter (the second, after that of 1929, presided over by Conforti himself) was convened to elect the successor. Fr. Amatore Dagnino was chosen as the new Superior General and thus began a period of "*consolidation*". After the Founder's death, many thought it was necessary to promote a reflection and a spiritual renewal. Not everyone felt the same about the latest openings, the teachings, the Founder's life, and the need to know his soul better and integrate it into daily life. Nevertheless, Fr. Amatore Dagnino proved himself a devoted son of Conforti and promoted his knowledge. To confirm this, we remember the publications of "The Father's Word" in 1937 and the first biography of Guido Maria Conforti in 1935. The Founder's canonization started, with the diocesan process opening on March 18th, 1941. In short, the effort of spiritual deepening carried out by Fr.

ability to dialogue, to negotiate, to organize, to plan. However, do we really believe it? (*Pensieri miei durante la settimana vissuta con chi hanno fatto i 50 giorni a Tavernerio – settembre 2019*).

⁵ Cf. Giovanni BONARDI, *Metodo educativo del servo di Dio Guido Maria Conforti*, In AA.VV, *I Missionari Saveriani nel primo centenario della nascita del loro Fondatore Guido Maria Conforti*, Parma, ISME, 1965, 51-56.

Amatore Dagnino was truly remarkable. There is a great love for the Founder and a continuous endeavor to revive his teachings and spirit in him. He was able to transfuse a spirituality according to the spirit of Conforti, affecting apostolic activity. After Conforti, the first Superior General never forgot the Missions and preached zeal for the salvation of souls as a characteristic of the missionary, but at the same time insisted on the necessity of a solid spiritual life, considering it appropriate to insist on inner formation.⁶

In the years after World War II, there was a vocational *boom* that lasted for about twenty years. Prayer and the search for vocations were recommended. It was also necessary, though, to consolidate a formation program endowed with sufficiently clear guidelines. Beyond the concept of religious life shared differently, this period of "consolidation" was experienced as a time of maturity amid personal initiatives and constant reference to the community. This has affected the rhythm of formation and has helped rediscover Conforti's method and educational attention based on dialogue, personal freedom, and responsibility.⁷ With these keys, we can read and deepen the first guidelines for formation and vocations discernment that emerge from the mentioned *Circular Letter* of Father Gazza. We want to list some principles that accompany the spirit of this long letter, which mainly deals with **the selection of vocations, formators, and formation:**

- So that our sacrifices not be fruitless, but rather be one hundred percent, **we must be united** in our work on the objectives to be achieved and on the directives to be followed. (Cf. introduction)
- The selection of vocations, and recruitment insists on quality: faced with the temptation of numbers, look at quality, as well. In other words, we must ask God for a good number of Xaverians, but of holy Xaverians. This leads to a healthy discernment and without human bias.
- With prayer, our lives, and relationships, we must all commit ourselves and to support vocations and the formation programs' quality.
- Among the principles in accompaniment and formation, it is necessary to promote freedom, sincerity, openness, dialogue, and the spirit of initiative.
- Ecclesial and institutional indications (normative documents) must not be neglected when evaluating and making needed decisions. Besides, good quality evaluation is the result of teamwork. *There must not be a single referee when dealing with a vocation.*
- The initial stages of accompaniment and formation are delicate. Therefore, we must not forget that *one is not born as a mature person but becomes one through a slow transformation process that affects our entire being.* Nonetheless, persistent reservations and doubts must be carefully examined.

⁶ Cf. Augusto LUCA, *The period of Conforti's first successor: 1932-1944*. XAVERIAN MISSIONARIES, *Xaverian Spirituality Meeting*, Tavernerio 2006, Roma, MS, 2006, 117-118.

⁷ Cf. LUCA, *The period of Conforti's first successor*, 120.

- Those called to the service of formation strive to educate the candidates towards a *generous piety and apostolic character*. Ultimately, they are the models on the journey to perfection, putting together *doctrine and praxis*.
- In carrying on formation, keep in mind that our Society's purpose is to sanctify its members through the profession of the vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and mission... *We entered the Congregation to sanctify ourselves:*⁸ *the straightest and safest way is that contained in our Constitutions and our traditions. There are many articles in the Constitutions of fundamental importance that we must practice, i.e. controlling ourselves and getting help when needed.*
- The formators, to accomplish their task with charity and paternal care, will *lovingly search what best suits each candidate's needs*. They will not use the same yardstick for all; trust the youth so that they will trust you in return; have patience and know how to maintain a healthy optimism even when darkness surrounds them; learn to understand all and receive them with care and attention.
- The formator must develop in himself a great art: that of "knowing how to enable them to do for themselves." He's not alone in educating. Everything must begin from him: the direction and the guarantee of success require that everyone collaborates.
- Since those days, the need for a complete, integral Xaverian formation, which takes into account the different dimensions: **physical, ethical, Christian, religious, priestly, and missionary**, has been considered. According to Fr. Gazza, all these elements describe the Xaverian character's particular face, which finds its inspiration in our Founder's person, the perfect model of our integral and complete personality.⁹ Educating the character of a man means accomplishing an enormously great work. Let us remember at this point, the harmonious development of the virtues referred to by St. Guido Maria Conforti when he said: *"The Xaverian formator, without changing the character of his students, must try to fashion in them a holy and joyful style, laid-back, polite, loyal and robust, an enemy of all deceit and make-believe, always ready to labor and face difficulties, whenever the glory of God and the good of souls requires it.* (Constitutions 1921, Art. 178) Thus, sincerity, will power, idealism, and conviviality mark common life, empathy, and the gift of self which must be sought through the ministry of formation.

The heart of the Circular Letter, a true *Ratio formationis*, can be summarized in the contemplation of Jesus, the light and strength of our life. Fr. Gazza ends by urging us to let "Jesus be the mold of our personality, the Model, the Guide, the Teacher, the Educator, the Animator, the Companion, the Friend of our times and our endeavors. If we listen to him, we will accomplish our task perfectly: we will solve all our educational, religious, and apostolic problems." May Jesus accompany

⁸ As the Founder wrote it years earlier in the first Constitutions (cf. Art. 1), p. Gazza insists on sanctification as the primary goal to be achieved, certainly with the help of Providence, but also with a personal disposition.

⁹ Cf. GAZZA, *Direttive per la scelta e la formazione di buone vocazioni*, 246.

us everywhere... and always draw inspiration from Him, in such a way that our external behavior will become the manifestation of the interior life of Christ within us."¹⁰

The Conciliar and post-Conciliar period up to the '90s

Let's move forward and share briefly the second moment to which we have referred: The Conciliar and post-Conciliar period up to the '90s, moved along through the contributions of the VIII General Chapter of 1966 and of Fr. Amato Dagnino as formator. The rapid changes taking place around the '60s and the Second Vatican Council led our Institute, like the others, to revise how we lived the missionary vocation and, consequently, re-formulate the educational components in an updated and fresh way. Among the pronouncements, deliberations, and reports to the special Chapter of 1966, are those dedicated to the life and formation of the Xaverians. I think it is important to note what emerges from the reports on formation.¹¹ I wish to highlight some aspects of this and then focus in particular, on the contribution of Father Amato Dagnino.

The Conciliar period was one of reflection, acknowledging the challenges also present in the field of formation, the need for change, and updating. In general, the '60s and '70s have been, from many points of view, difficult years. The disruption was due to the demands for greater autonomy and personal freedom, the search for new socio-political configurations, and the revolt of young people against previous generations' moral and social standards. The new ferments brought by the Second Vatican Council aimed to give a new face to the Church and new energy to all its works and structures. Even the Xaverians had serious reasons to worry and to look forward to the future with concern. Nevertheless, they tried to be faithful to the Founder, striving at the same time to give suitable answers to the challenges of the moment. About the vows, for example, it was said:

"We know, historically speaking, that our Venerable Founder wanted his sons to be first missionaries and then religious so as to be more missionary. And this "mission consecration" must remain our characteristic: we are missionaries, but at the same time religious. Because consecration will defend us from the dangers of the world in which we **live and in which we will live**. It will help us to make apostolic work our way of contemplation for our way to holiness. This pastoral emphasis is one of those most clearly expressed by the Second Vatican Council and is one of those most felt by our young

¹⁰ Cf. GAZZA, *Direttive per la scelta e la formazione di buone vocazioni*, 272

¹¹ We need to consider all the work, undertaken in this same period, of the re-elaboration of the Constitutions that has been completed and approved in 1983. The Institute has rewritten them while maintaining the foundational inspiration, the charism and Mons. Conforti's own spiritual and missionary insights.

confreres. Then it is a question of presenting, to our youth, our holy vows in this new light."¹²

Another concern emerged from the reports and the "special" chapter. It concerns the topic of "Community dialogue" that highlights an educational approach focused on a common search, in a climate and tone proper of a Family, yet with precise and demanding norms. It was a period that rediscovered the figure of Conforti, although joyfully adapted to some modern nuances. The urgent demand of charity, as a love-gift for others and *pastoral urgency*, were strongly felt, remembering the common goal of apostolic perfection desired for all by our Holy Father Founder. The same principles expressed by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council helped to push for greater freedom of initiative, with a more explicit and wholly charitable and pastoral formation.¹³ In the statements coming out of that chapter, fidelity to Conforti and, above all, the awareness of the need to guarantee each Xaverian a preparation corresponding to his particular vocation was clear. This preparation cannot be limited to the academic or methodological field. It should, above all, be a spiritual preparation that enables one to achieve the end, namely the *glory of God* and one's *personal sanctification through consecration and apostolic work*. Today, too, we are called to be open to the call of the Church of the Council and deepen the spirit and examples of our Founder in the educational areas and make a bold proposal to those who prepare themselves for missionary life.

Following the council's formulation, if we are to talk about models of education and formation, we ought to mention the contribution of Father Amato Dagnino, his direct educational experience in the '60s - '80s, and especially his publications on the spiritual doctrine of Msgr. Guido Maria Conforti. His role deserves to be seen as *the spirit of tradition lived-in present-day realities*.¹⁴ From his writings and statements, we understand vocation as an act of love that echoes the love of the One who called.¹⁵ Besides, we note, and this is even more interesting, the approach of all stages of formation starting from Life's essential principles. Follower of the Council and faithful to the teaching and educational action of Conforti, Fr. Amato Dagnino presented formation stances as a call towards perfection. Called to outdo oneself, the Xaverian enters an endless educational dynamic. He must cultivate a more charismatic, more communal, and more contemplative life continually.¹⁶ Naturally, at the center of formation, is the action of the Spirit. But the main actors engaged in responding and collaborating in the journey towards

¹² Virginio PUGNOLI, *Dalla relazione sulla "vita e formazione dei Saveriani"*, In PIA SOCIETÀ SAN FRANCISCO SAVERIO PER LE MISSIONI ESTERE, *Atti ufficiali dell'ottavo Capitolo Generale "speciale"*, 88-89.

¹³ Cf. PUGNOLI, *Dalla relazione sulla "vita e formazione dei Saveriani"*, 89-91. Si veda anche la relazione del padre Dante MAININI allo stesso Capitolo, *sulla formazione apostolica*, 132-144; e quella del padre Amato DAGNINO, *sulla formazione spirituale*, 92-109.

¹⁴ Cf. Amato DAGNINO, *Dottrina spirituale di Mons. Guido M. Conforti*, Milano, Edizioni Paoline, 1966.

¹⁵ Cf. Amato DAGNINO, *Il cantico della fede*, Bologna, EMI, 1991, 139.

¹⁶ Cf. Amato DAGNINO, *Ditelo nella luce. Spiritualità dell'apostolo*, Milano, Edizioni Paoline, 1987; ID, *Itinerario di vita spirituale*, Milano, Edizioni Paoline, 1992.

holiness are both the candidate, in the stage of initial formation, and every Xaverian in the various stages of life and apostolic activities. (Ongoing Formation)

Before detecting challenges still present today, we can recall with Dagnino the need to "torture" our conscience and not make peace with incoherence. From this depends the success of formation because formation requires love; and, to love is the same as to give of oneself, that is to love in a free, disinterested, selfless way.¹⁷

From the eve of the third millennium to today

Today, as pointed out earlier, the Xaverian formation journey, the deepening, and the proposal of the Charism of Conforti are marked by multiculturalism and interculturality. Suppose we are to talk about a challenge that is still present. In that case, this is precisely that of realizing the dream of Conforti *to make the world a single family in Christ*, done by welcoming and assuming the implications presented by the multicultural and intercultural dimensions. Sometimes we, as Xaverians, talk a lot about *multiculturalism*, yet we don't ask ourselves to what extent we live *interculturality*. We are afraid to talk about it and prefer to box ourselves within small nationalisms. Multiculturalism does not guarantee interculturality. We must recognize that this latter is the only way to witness the fraternity, which alone can form a new humanity, a new Family.

We are moving forward, walking courageously. Just consider the meetings and topics of recent years. They represent an adjustment vis a vis today's world situation and a new understanding of the charism and the figure of Conforti. Think, for example, about the setting of our formation houses around the world, especially those of theology; the meetings between formators and the sharing of materials; the involvement of the General Direction to promote quality formation that meets the current needs of the mission *ad gentes* faithful to Conforti.

In addition to the ongoing formation initiatives, we can consider the Conferences of recent years - on spirituality, mission, economy, formation, etc. - engaging brothers from diverse cultures and experiences. During this Jubilee year's celebrations, we will make a spiritual reading of the *Testament Letter* of our Founder. It will undoubtedly be a Christological, ecclesiological, missionary, and Trinitarian reading. It will thus be able to enlighten us, in our formation work and our missionary endeavors so that they may be more intercultural, in the logic of the charism of Conforti.

The in-depth study of the person of Conforti requires all of us to live a "symphonic" interculturality. In other words, each one of us must, day after day, fine-tuned on that "LA"

¹⁷ Cf. Amato DAGNINO, *Signore dammi da bere*, Brescia, CSAM, 2002, 122.

which is our point of reference: Jesus Christ. And this is the meaning of Christ Centeredness so dear to Conforti and the whole Xaverian Family.

Msgr. Comfort used to dialogue with his missionaries. In addition to the fact that in the Mother House, students and superiors lived together, there was mutual knowledge made possible by regular formation sessions.¹⁸ Constant changes take place, but we must never lose sight of certain formation principles if we want to remain faithful to Conforti:

Ongoing dialogue: Formation is an open construction site, but certainly, it is not a solo journey. We need constant assessment and an openness to dialogue to be able to grow free and responsible. Since the human person is not angelic, he can neither by himself arrive to or instantly understand and contemplate the Truth. It gets there a little bit at a time and with much effort.¹⁹ Dialogue is a service and a work of mercy essential to create areas of security and educational serenity that, in the end, are salvation.

The centrality of the person: Relationships are crucial, but personal responsibility is vital in the area of formation. To this end, everyone must manage his freedom of choice and assume the necessary obligations for greater collaboration. Following Conforti's model, our formation program must know how to challenge each individual, giving him the opportunity and ability to accept and reflect. Being called to love, as Fr. Amato Dagnino said, is an experience of conscience.²⁰ Our vocation, the dream of Conforti to make the world a single family, is an encounter with the other and corresponds with the task of free responsibility where we acquire an awareness of ourselves, our relationship with the world, and the endless call of God.

Totality: To become an authentic and transformative experience, our participation in the Xaverian project for the building up of a single Family must be free from illusions. We cannot claim to participate in the Xaverian project only in certain phases or at certain moments. From our total response, from our complete involvement in the Xaverian life, we can measure our willingness to move from a childish to an adult faith. Our connection to Conforti's project is, first and foremost, a bond of faith. It is a journey that requires assimilating the explicit and objective contents of the charism. From these contents, which have become constant in our Personal Projects of Life and Community Projects of Life, we can experience God; to desire, want, and genuinely love everything He can accomplish in us.

P. Gilbert Mbula, SX
Rome, April 2020

¹⁸ Cf. LUCA, *The period of Conforti's first successor*, 122

¹⁹ Cf. DAGNINO, *Cantico della fede*, 150

²⁰ Cfr. DAGNINO, *Signore dammi da bere*, 114-116.