Regarding Emotions, Part 2
by Dr. Inge V. del Rosario, PsyA

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!

Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows who violently sweep your house empty
of its furniture, still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out for some new delight.
The dark thoughts, the shame, the malice,
Meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
Because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.
(Rumi, The Guest House)

How do we meet difficult emotions such as shame and sorrow? In the words of the Sufi poet Rumi, how do we learn to “meet them at the door laughing and invite them in?” How do we move towards being grateful for the coming of malice and meanness in ourselves? How do we begin to develop an emotional agility to meet the constant ebb and flow, the changing and unfolding of our internal landscape of feeling?

Our first challenge lies in moving away from the shame of having feelings. Some emotions, such as anger, fear and sadness seem more shame-laden than others, such as joy, excitement and delight. Not only do we feel shame, that is, inadequate or not good enough, but we may also feel ashamed around having such negatively regarded emotions. We may somehow feel we are bad or wrong in our feeling angry, sad or afraid. We may be ashamed around feeling shame. We are called to gently take a step back from how we feel about our feelings, not to judge or censure ourselves for feeling what is innate, what “just is,” but to simply notice and be mindful of our feelings. In a way, we simultaneously feel and observe that we are feeling and what we are experiencing as we feel.

Learning to distinguish one feeling from another is a second challenge. When we are mindful that emotions exist on a continuum, we become more attuned to discerning nuances and gaining a broader emotional vocabulary. For example, the emotion of anger can range from mild irritation, to being frustrated, to feeling mad, to being furious and enraged. The affect of fear begins with the feeling of uneasiness and can evolve into nervousness, restlessness, apprehension, panic and terror. The feeling of sorrow can range from feeling disappointed and blue, to being distressed and desolate, to the more powerful grief and hopelessness. Being able to name the distinct shade of emotion we feel enables in us a sense of agency and empowerment around our experiences.

A third challenge involves becoming more conscious of our capacity to feel more than one feeling at a time. Our being able to feel a multitude of feelings, differently nuanced, one perhaps more intense or pronounced than the other, one underneath or fueling another, manifests the wealth of the emotional life. A mother may feel angry at her son for breaking curfew; she is also fearful for his safety. A widower may feel deep grief with the death of his wife; he may also experience guilt and regret at not caring enough for her, be despairing and lonely at being left behind, and even feel anger at her for leaving him. Usually, we do not just experience a single distinct emotion. If we listen sensitively and are attuned enough, we can notice layer upon layer of emotion emerging within, speaking to us with each unfolding, towards a more profound and richer awareness of ourselves and our relationships with others, with God and with our world.

Inge is a psychoanalyst and the Coordinator of Accompaniment and Psychotherapy Services at Emmaus Center.

“Formation in a Complex World” is a series of brief articles featuring various perspectives on formation and psycho-spiritual integration. For more information please log on to www.emmausphil.com
Psychological Assessment in Formation
by Francisca Gloria C. Bustamante

Assessment is one of the challenging responsibilities of vocation and formation directors. Psychological evaluation has three primary goals: a) determine if the applicant or candidate is free from major psychopathological disturbance; b) evaluate whether the person’s psychological make-up and disposition is fit for religious life or priesthood, taking into account the candidate’s experience of living and working in the religious congregation or diocese, and; c) assess the reasons and motivations for the candidate’s entrance to the order or seminary.¹

Apart from screening candidates, assessment also aids in the formation process. Every formative effort involves human beings, therefore, it includes an element of personalization. The results of the evaluation will help formulate formative interventions for each candidate as well as the community undergoing going formation. Formative assessment is executed not simply to exclude candidates from ministry but to identify where the person needs help for healing before active ministry can proceed. On-going assessment of the candidate to religious life and priesthood is to help both the candidate and the formation team to discern well the call to priesthood or religious life. The continuous evaluation of those who have long been ordained and the fully professed is part of permanent formation. This is to determine what will be most helpful to the priest or religious as he or she lives out the commitment through the various transitions in adult life.

Helpful Dispositions of Those Initiating the Vocational Assessment Process:

1. Community and team approach. Those in charge of vocation promotion and formation need to work together as a team to determine the specific goals of formation and to develop the necessary assessment tools to aid in their on-going assessment of the candidates. As part of the external forum, they need to develop their behavioral assessment tool to be used in their on-going formative evaluation of the candidate. They also need to develop the skills to conduct effective formative interviews (during individual colloquium) that are regularly done with the candidates. While vocation is primarily a spiritual task, the church also stresses that formation today is an interdisciplinary task. The church expects an interdisciplinary, mutual and on-going dialogue between the formators and the expert psychologists.² It is essential that these expert psychologists understand and appreciate Catholic anthropology as well as the socio-cultural context of the candidate or formand.

2. Self-examination and commitment. Formators must take an honest look at their own beliefs about the candidate and their commitment to the candidate’s formation. The formation personnel must examine their own concepts of human development as they relate to formation for priesthood and religious life. They must also be very clear on the extent of the commitment they can realistically make to facilitate the candidate’s growth. Once this commitment has been established and the formation process proceeds, the formation team will also need to regularly evaluate their vocational assessment tools and ascertain if their structures and methods are formative or not.

3. Respect for the candidate, the priest or the religious. As seminaries and formation institutes engage in assessment, they are to maintain a proper balance between respecting the person’s right to privacy and ensuring the rights of the church to properly serve God’s people. The Code of Canon (1983) and the Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in the Admission and Formation of the Candidates for Priesthood (2008) provide helpful guidelines on how to respect the rights to privacy of the person. The experts in psychology involved in formative assessment need to be guided by the code of ethics of their profession.

² Guidelines for the Use of Psychology on the Admission and Formation of Candidates for the Priesthood (2008)

Francisca is a Senior Associate at Emmaus Center.