



Reflections on ESDAC Formation in Italy

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Clare Chinyama is a CLC member from Zambia. She attended the ESDAC Formation in Rome in April 2017

ESDAC means Exercises for Spiritual Discernment on Apostolate in Common. It consists of facilitators who use the discernment process inspired by St Ignatius of Loyola to reach different groups of people. The exercises are for everyone: Those from various social backgrounds including youth, couples, and communities who seek to deepen the communion that exists between them. ESDAC can be tailored to suit a given group's needs as they discern the call of the Lord and the need to respond to it favourably.

When I got the invitation for the ESDAC formation, the Zambia National Executive Committee decided that since I was already a member of the local formation team, it would be good that I attend the formation course. I too felt the need and inspiration to be part of the formation programme.

Inspiring moments from the formation

Prayer and the Eucharist

The ESDAC group celebrating the Eucharist at the Rooms of St. Ignatius, Collegio del Gesù, Roma



During the formation period, I came to value most the attention allocated to prayer in the programme. Personal prayer time was allocated to allow for introspection and reflection. The personal and open sharing in smaller groups were very touching. I think it was important that we had time to meet in smaller groups before the plenary sessions.

I found it striking that as participants we were encouraged to use our imagination to enter into every situation of our lives and to have conversations with God the Father or the Son. The Holy Eucharist was the centre and heart of our exercises, celebrations and formation!

Speaking, Listening, Learning

I thought the use of an Eagle's feather during our sharings was a great technique. The method is derived from a tradition of Native Americans: The one with the feather in their hand is the one who speaks.

They will not be interrupted and are allowed speak as long as they keep the feather in their hand. Even when one goes silent for a moment, the group will continue to be quiet for as long as the feather has not been placed down. In the case of a heated debate, the feather can be very useful. The bottom line is respect for the person speaking or making their sharing. In other words, everyone's point of view is important and valuable.

Our group sharings were done in a spirit of contemplative listening. First, we would share the fruit of our prayer time as well as reflection. Then in the second turn, the group had the opportunity to ask questions or react

to one's sharing. I found the hands-on approach to the formation interesting and educative. It was learning by doing. Most of the formation was practical and thus relevant as what has been learned can almost immediately be applied.

The gems of the communal discernment process

For me, what is important is that communal discernment has to be done as an act of faith. Each member recognises and respects that the Holy Spirit is in everyone. The communal discernment takes into consideration the fact that, in the end, the Holy Spirit will show us the way that we need to follow. It follows then that if we are to be led by the Holy Spirit, we must be conscious of the different choices available, and we must be free from all that inhibits these options.

Another gem was that the members of the community who are doing the discernment process have to pray for light and the purification of their intentions throughout the process, i.e. before, during and after.

The discerning group needs adequate information on the subject matter be-

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fore embarking on the discernment. This entails some prior research of the necessary information. All the pros and cons of each possible decision to be made will be weighed.

I also learnt that being a leader in my family and community means that I have to discern the will of God in my life continually. I need to constantly reflect on where the Lord is leading me/ us as a family or as a group.

Graces from the learning experience

One of the blessings I received is the realisation that the Lord is moved with whatever is going on in my life or our lives no matter how trivial. Jesus is always there with me and feels the pain whenever I am troubled (John 11:34-35).

I was also inspired about the importance of openness to the Lord to be grateful for His everlasting love and mercy. His love for me, propels him to search for me and welcome me back when I lose my way in life. (Luke 15)

With time, it became apparent that our group had bonded well. We shared at a deep level, had so much joy and



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fun together. For a team coming from 19 different countries, such bonding, joy and fun could only have been a gift of God's grace to us during the formation.

Another moment of grace for me was the visits to various Ignatian Churches and holy sites of Rome. I cannot explain the joy I experienced when we went to the "Chiesa del Gesu" which I believe is the mother church of the Society of Jesus; "La Storta" the little chapel of St. Ignatius which recalls the vision of Christ with the cross; the Basilicas of St Peter and St Paul. Praying at the tombs and feet of holy men and women such as the Apostle Paul, Saint Pope John Paul II, St Ignatius, Fr. Arrupe and many others were very satisfying moments that I will carry in my heart for a long time.

What CLC might learn from my experience

It is necessary for the CLC leadership always to realise that the power to make decisions lies with the group. The group can use different leadership models, but they must never forget that the group should always be engaged in the discernment process.

Our CLC groups could learn to take note and pay attention to the movements and stages of growth within the group. ESDAC encourages the idea that every person is a master of their experiences and CLC has to remain a discerning and apostolic body.

Challenges for communal discernment

There are many challenges to communal discernment. Among them is availability. Communal discernment cannot take place in a vacuum. It needs people to be available. It is very challenging if members do not listen to each other. CLC members have to learn to listen to each other regardless of who is talking. When a community has some preconceived opinions about people and situations, it becomes difficult to be open to the Holy Spirit who leads the process of discernment.

I am glad that I attended the ESDAC formation course. It was not just formation, but it was also a pilgrimage of sorts. Being on a pilgrimage with the Lord was good; reflecting on God's love and going back to the places where I felt touched by his hand, made me feel privileged and loved by the Lord.

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Visiting La Storta