GROWING WISE:
PROVERBS 2: 1-11 AS A FORMATIVE PARADIGM FOR JESUIT FORMATION[1]

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Abstract. This article offers a theological reading of Proverbs 2:1-11 as a sapiential text on the formation of the human person in the religious life and explores its implications for Jesuit formation. Through attention to the literary and theological movement of the passage, the article identifies four formative movements: the active search for Wisdom, its reception as a divine gift, its ethical expression, and its interior integration. These movements provide a biblical lens for examining three risks in Jesuit formation: overprotection, careerism, and sterile intellectualism. The article argues that in Proverbs 2:1-11, Wisdom is a gift that transforms the heart and becomes a lifelong journey of conversion toward justice, discernment, and mission.

Keywords: Proverbs 2:1-11, Wisdom Literature, biblical theology, discernment, Jesuit formation

Introduction

How does one grow wise? This question has interrogated humanity for ages. In ancient Eastern cultures, the search for Wisdom embodied an ideal for living prudently and

1 This article was originally drafted mainly in Portuguese and translated into English with the assistance of *DeepL*. Revisions to grammar, style, and formatting refinements (footnote styling) were made using *Grammarly* and *Gemini*. The use of these AI and language tools was limited to linguistic and structural refinement; all theological arguments and exegetical analyses are entirely the author's responsibility.

successfully.[2] However, nowadays we can easily reduce Wisdom to a mere accumulation of technical skills or to the number of degrees someone holds. Biblical revelation confronts this understanding. The prophets in the Bible, for example, often condemn self-sufficient Wisdom that strays from God's Word. (cf. Isa 5:21; Jer 8:8–9; 9:23–24). For them, genuine Wisdom can come only through God and the divine Spirit.[3]

In the Wisdom Literature of the Bible, the Book of Proverbs aims to guide young people from immaturity to Wisdom.[4] Compared with other sections of the Hebrew Bible, Proverbs stands as provocative humanistic literature, emphasizing the human quest for knowledge and the moral demands of daily life.[5] It challenges the heart's immaturity by presenting the moral demands of daily life as the very ground on which knowledge is forged. Within this pedagogical framework, Proverbs 2:1–11 emerges as an itinerary that mobilizes the disciple to abandon passivity in favor of an active and relentless search for Wisdom.

This itinerary should not be abstract when we talk about religious formation. This goes beyond merely an academic idea, especially for me, who is currently in formation as a Jesuit. It

2 Since ancient times, wisdom literature has appeared in the form of compilations of maxims that convey principles of living, from the Egyptian Wisdom of Ptah-hotep (c. 2500 BCE) to the Hebrew texts of Job, Proverbs, and the Wisdom of Solomon. See Brand Blanshard, "Wisdom," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 9, 2nd ed., edited by Donald M. Borchert (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006), 793-794.

3 André Barucq and Pierre Grelot, *"Sabiduría,"* in *Vocabulario de Teología Bíblica*, 6th edition, edited by Xavier Léon-Dufour, (Barcelona: Herder, 1981), 717.

4 Bernadus Dirgaprimawan, *The Inexperienced Person and the Journey to Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs* (Rome: GBPress, 2022), 8–9.

5 Samuel E. Balentine, "Proverbs," in *The Oxford Handbook of Wisdom and the Bible*, edited by Will Kynes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 511.

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has become the very texture of the years I am living, permeating my daily life and, currently, my theological studies. In this paper, I abandon the distance of a clinical observer to inhabit the text as one who wrestles with the same risks I intend to criticize in this text. From this vantage point, I interrogate Proverbs 2:1–11 as a critical lens through which to describe and disrupt our current formative structures. By placing biblical pedagogy and the Jesuit formation side by side, this article seeks to echo the sapiential Jesuit roots while confronting some drifts that may pull someone away from them.

I view these drifts through the lens of a spiritual and institutional crisis that requires rethinking many processes in light of contemporary demands. The Society of Jesus, like many other congregations, faces significant formative challenges, a decline in vocations, and significant pressure to renew formation processes to meet the demands of the time.[6] With this in mind, this paper proposes understanding formation as a path of life in which Wisdom finally converts the heart.

Jesuit Formation: Structure and Risks

Jesuit formation is a long journey structured into five stages: novitiate, first studies, regency, theological studies, and tertianship.[7] Each stage carries its own intentionality, leading the Jesuit to progress in "letters and virtues," as Saint Ignatius desired.[8] This progress happens through an integration of

6 Society of Jesus, *De Statu Societatis Iesu* (Rome: General Curia of the Society of Jesus, 2023), 133–135.

7 Although Jesuit formation follows a structured itinerary culminating in the solemn profession of final vows, it does not thereby conclude. The Society of Jesus offers and encourages a "Permanent Formation" for its members, understood as a lifelong and continuous process that constitutes an integral dimension of both personal and apostolic development.

8 Inácio de Loyola, *Carta à Comunidade de Coimbra*, in *Cartas*, ed. António José Coelho, S.J. (Braga: Editorial A.O., 2006), 120-121.

four dimensions: spiritual depth nourished by the Spiritual Exercises; solid intellectual formation; community life understood as mission itself; and active apostolic engagement with the realities of the world.[9]

As a lifelong path, this formation also carries its risks. I have chosen three of them to analyze here. They are not selected arbitrarily. I draw them from a continued magisterial concern of Pope Francis, who, even before the conclave that elected him as Pope, warned that "when the Church does not go out of herself to evangelize, she becomes self-referential and then sick." He also emphasized that there are "two images of Church: the evangelizing Church that comes out of herself, or the worldly Church that lives in herself, of herself, for herself."[10] Although the word "overprotection," which I will use here, does not appear in that intervention, its logic does. A formation that never sends the *formand* out produces exactly the self-referential Church and leaders Bergoglio feared.

In *Evangelii Gaudium,* Pope Francis speaks about "spiritual worldliness." He identifies the roots of that in two specific distortions: a gnostic fascination with ideas detached from life, and a self-sufficiency that trusts only in its own powers.[11] Both

9 Ignatius of Loyola, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms* (Anand, India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1996), n. 64–71, 340–342, 516–522.

10 Vatican Radio, "Bergoglio's Intervention: A Diagnosis of the Problems of the Church," *Ecumenism in Canada*, March 27, 2013, https://ecumenism.net/2013/03/bergoglio-intervention.htm, quoted in Idelfonso Camacho, SJ, "Either an Evangelizing Church or a Worldly Church," La Civiltà Cattolica, https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/either-an-evangelizing-church-or-a-worldly-church/ (Accessed May 2026).

11 Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortations, November 24, 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, n. 93-94.

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categories provide the magisterial foundation for the risks examined here. While the gnostic fascination fuels a "sterile intellectualism," self-sufficiency fuels "careerism." These two risks, alongside the logic of "overprotection," exemplify a formation that has turned inward.

This inward turn often begins with a distortion of an institution's first instinct: the desire to provide a safe environment for growth. Overprotection arises when care and protection, which are genuine formative values, are divorced from the sapiential requirement of risk. When this happens, the shield becomes a form of protectionism that infantilizes the person, depriving him of the experiences needed to develop discernment and apostolic autonomy. Already in the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius insists that those in formation be guided so that they may learn to "face the challenge of moving across the whole world and dealing with all sorts of peoples."[12] A formation that insists on keeping the *formand* inside the protective bubble of the formation house, shielded from struggle, dissension, or failure, may complete every stage of formation without ever having been genuinely sent. We must acknowledge that a person who has never been sent cannot learn what only sending can teach.

Yet, even when a Jesuit is sent into the world of "letters and ministry," the danger of turning inward does not vanish, but it can simply change form. If overprotection stunts growth by shielding the *formand* from external friction, careerism (clericalism is under it) corrupts that growth from within. It is perhaps the most insidious of risks because it rarely presents itself as an open and healthy ambition. Often, it masks itself as "dedication to work" or "academic and apostolic zeal." A subtle professionalization of the vocation takes place, and the Jesuit

12 Ignatius of Loyola, *Constitutions*, n. 414.

may reorganize his life around accumulating status, forgetting that the final goal is always to "help souls." Careerism can also be seen as the idolatry of the credentials and titles one may earn. It represents a second "premature exit" from the sapiential journey of formation. Studies can become a ladder to personal prestige, and, in this distortion, titles and positions are valued more than the service they are meant to sustain.

The betrayal of the sapiential journey does not end with the pursuit of status. If careerism uses knowledge as a ladder for the ego, sterile intellectualism treats it as a fortress of isolation. Then another risk emerges when studies become an end in themselves, detached from spiritual depth and the demands of the apostolic mission. The Society of Jesus insists, since its origin, that its aim is always to "help souls," and the study is very necessary for that purpose, but never sufficient on its own.[13] In one of his letters, Ignatius warns against "slackness, tepidity, and lethargy in studies."[14] This warning runs in both directions: against laziness, and against learning that has lost its purpose.

The most concrete form of this risk is the *formand* who accumulates theological or any other erudition without ever allowing it to disturb him. One may articulate the "option for the poor" without ever having a real encounter with the poor or speak about inculturation while not being truly unsettled by another culture, for example. The Jesuit tradition has never been anti-intellectual — quite the opposite. But the Society of Jesus has always insisted that the mind is formed for mission; when it is not, the mind can turn only to the mirror.

13 Ignatius of Loyola, *Constitutions*, n. 307.

14 Inácio de Loyola, *Carta aos Padres e Irmãos de Coimbra*, in Cartas, 122–124.

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The Formative Progression of Proverbs 2:1–11

The literary architecture of Proverbs 2 is a pedagogical framework designed to capture the whole person and can offer a counter-model to the drifts mentioned. The entire chapter consists of a single, elaborate conditional "if/then" that unfolds across all 22 verses, a number corresponding to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet that suggests completeness.[15] This structure reinforces that the search for Wisdom must leave no dimension of human life untouched. Within the exordium of verses 1–11, this itinerary functions as a disruptive force, specifically crafted to move the heart from passivity into active engagement.

The text reads as follows:[16]

[1]My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you,

[2]making your ear attentive to Wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding;

[3]if you indeed cry out for insight, and raise your voice for understanding;

[4]if you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures —

[5]then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.

[6]For the Lord gives Wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;

[7]he stores up sound Wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly,

15 Bernd U. Schipper, *The Hermeneutics of Torah: Proverbs 2, Deuteronomy, and the Composition of the Book of Proverbs* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 39.

16 *New Revised Standard Version Bible: Catholic Edition*, copyright © 1989, 1993 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA.

[8]guarding the paths of justice and preserving the way of his faithful ones.

[9]Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path;

[10]for Wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;

[11]prudence will watch over you; and understanding will guard you.

Michael Fox reveals the profound symmetry governing this passage, highlighting how the disciple's active search triggers a divine response that, in turn, reshapes the soul's interior architecture: If *you attend to my teachings (vv. 1–4)*, then *you will attain true piety (v. 5),* because *it is God who gives Wisdom (v. 6)*, and this *will protect you (vv. 7–8).* Then *you will know the right behavior (v. 9)*, because *you will receive Wisdom (v. 10)*, and this *will protect you (v. 11).* This double *if/then* movement is the formative progression that this paper follows.

Active Search (vv. 1–4)

The sapiential itinerary begins with the intimate address "my son," "my child" (בֵּן), revealing the relational context in which Wisdom is transmitted, evoking the father-son bond.[17] The first verbs, "accept" (לָקַח)[18] and "treasure up" (צָפַן), suggest reception and retention in a relationship. By verses 3–4, the rhythm shifts from passive to active search, calling, raising

17 Hebrew terms reproduced here with their vocalization as displayed in the Hebrew text of Proverbs Sefaria and are not transliterated. Lexical meanings are verified against the Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (BDB), accessed through Sefaria.

18 Francis Brown, S.R.Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), accessed through Sefaria, https://www.sefaria.org/BDB.

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one's voice, seeking, and searching.[19] Here, we see Wisdom as something not readily available or attainable; this active search requires effort and taking risks. To mine for silver is to go underground, into the dark, with no guarantee of finding anything. Also, the search for buried treasure assumes that what you need is hidden, that the surface will not give it to you, so that you might dig, even in the wrong places. These metaphors in verse 4 are instructive and evoke raw exposure.

Overprotective formation quietly sabotages these conditions, especially because it rarely announces itself as overprotection. Often it presents itself as care. Yet, when the formative path is made so safe that the journey itself becomes unnecessary, the process has failed. When we shield a *formand* from pastoral failure, or from contact with the real challenges and real people of the world, for example, he is not being "protected;" he is being kept from the very friction through which Wisdom takes shape.

Wisdom as Gift (vv. 5–6)

In verse 5, the sapiential itinerary shatters the illusion of self-sufficiency. The human "if" of the search finally meets the decisive "then" of divine promise. After four verses describing active human search, the text speaks of what God does: "For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding." The causal particle "for" (v.6) clarifies that verse 6 grounds verse 5. It establishes a non-negotiable interaction: formation is neither a purely human project nor a passive waiting. Formation is called to be a sacred space where the "sweat" of the search meets the gratuity of the divine gift, and this gift is an entry into a relationship.

19 Schipper, *Hermeneutics of Torah*, 45–48.

This relationship rests on two pillars: the "fear of the Lord" (וְדַעַת אֱלֹהִים) and the "knowledge of God" (דַּעַת אֱלֹהִים). In the Hebrew mind, the "fear of the Lord" does not mean terror but faithful devotion and love for God expressed in obedience to the divine commandments.[20] The "knowledge of God," as seen in verse 5, points to an inner, experiential knowing that comes from relationship.[21] Looking at this architecture of verse 5, and at the apparent dichotomy between human effort and divine initiative, Dave Bland emphasizes that the theocentric ("fear of God") and anthropocentric ("knowledge of God") dimensions do not collide. They function as complementary poles, synthesized through the formation of moral character, ultimately leading to harmony between human and divine wills.[22]

This "logic of the gift" in verses 5-6 confronts the very foundations of careerism, which I have called the idolatry of the credential. When Wisdom is received and reframed as a gift from God rather than as a personal achievement, and the goal is a relationship with God rather than the accumulation of credentials, the careerist mentality loses its foundation. As Bland observes, while the formative itinerary demands active human initiation, God provides the spiritual resources needed for its completion.[23] For that reason, one cannot grasp or control what is received as a gift from God; one can only seek (vv. 1–4) and receive (vv. 5–6). This understanding protects formation from becoming a competitive system in which effort

20 Gordon J. Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Psalms and Wisdom Literature* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 110.

21 Schipper, *Hermeneutics of Torah*, 45–48.

22 Dave Bland, "The Formation of Character in the Book of Proverbs," *Restoration Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1998): 226-227.

23 Bland, "The Formation of Character," 227.

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automatically yields status, or in which each stage becomes simply a credential to be earned.

Ethical Wisdom (vv. 7–9)

Verse 7 uncovers a profound reciprocity between the seeker and the Lord through a resonant grammatical echo. The same verb used for the person "treasuring up" commandments (וַיִּצְפֹּן) now mirrors God's own action: God stores up sound Wisdom for the upright, the correct, the right one (לַיְשָׁרִים).[24] It is no mere linguistic coincidence. Again, this highlights the collaboration between human responsibility and God, or, as Bland says, between "anthropocentric focus" and "theocentric foundation."[25] The act of receiving corresponds to God's act of storing. In that sense, Wisdom is, from the beginning, a mutual event. The term (תּוּשִׁיָּה), "sound wisdom," "success," or "resourcefulness," denotes practical Wisdom, the ability to create effective strategies in real-world situations.[26] By promising to "guard the paths of justice" and "preserve the way of his faithful ones," God extends this ethical horizon to the "upright" (חָסִידָיו), already named in verse 7. The ethical dimension here is that Wisdom is a gift reserved for those whose lives are anchored in moral integrity. Verse 8 confirms that God is not a distant observer of this integrity; He is a companion who walks the path alongside the faithful, guarding the very justice they seek to embody.

For Jesuit formation, historically defined by academic rigor, this biblical standard confronts our intellectual idols with a

24 The root צָפַן is the dictionary citation form (as it appears in BDB). The verb forms that actually occur in the text differ by verse: verse 1 תִּצְפֹּן (second person, "you treasure/store," referring to the disciple), and verse 7 has יִצְפֹּן (third person, "he stores," referring to God).

25 Bland, "The Formation of Character," 228.

26 Fox, "The Pedagogy of Proverbs 2," 239.

truth that cannot be softened: God stores Wisdom for the upright, not for the brilliant. Verses 7–9 point out that intellectual excellence is sterile when disconnected from moral conversion. If a formative model neglects to integrate intellect and integrity, it fails to prepare those genuinely called to serve; it produces "specialists" who inhabit a residence of ideas rather than "men for others"[27] who inhabit the mission. In the Regency stage, this movement is very important. It is the time when the abstractions and theories of the "First Studies" must survive the friction of the apostolic field.

Integration (vv. 10–11)

In verse 9, the sapiential itinerary returns to the "then" of consequence, of the previous movements, but with a shift: the verb "understand" (תָּעַד) now takes ethical categories, such as "righteousness," "justice," "equity," "every good path," and not religious categories as before, such as "the fear of the Lord," "the knowledge of the Lord." The movement has been from piety to ethics and from the interior reception of a gift to its external expression in action.

The theological foundation for this shift is found in verse 10: "wisdom will come (בּוֹא) into your heart (לֵב), and knowledge will be pleasant (נָעַם) to your soul (נֶפֶשׁ)."[28] The movement inward is decisive because Wisdom is no longer something known externally but a quality of the person. As Bland underscores, this represents the transition from passive memorization to writing instruction "on the tablet of the

27 Pedro Arrupe, "'Men for Others: Training Agents of Change for the Promotion of Justice,' address to the International Congress of Jesuit Alumni of Europe, Valencia, Spain," July 31, 1973, *Institute for Advanced Jesuit Studies, Portal to Jesuit Studies*, https://jesuitportal.bc.edu/research/documents/1973_arrupemenforothers/ (accessed September 3, 2026).

28 Schipper, *Hermeneutics of Torah*, 51–53.

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heart."[29] Consequently, as verse 11 promises, "prudence (מְזִמָּה) and understanding (תְּבוּן) become internalized guardians. The discipline no longer depends on external policing, constant surveillance, or even protective institutional shields, because a mature moral character now guides it from within.

This movement presents the most interrogative and demanding criterion of the entire formative process. It shatters the illusion that completing a program equals being formed. The biblical text insists that formation that produces compliance without interiority or erudition without desire has failed its mission. Regardless of the stages completed or the degrees earned, if Wisdom has not entered the heart, the process remains a mere technical training.

When we apply this criterion to the previously identified risks, the diagnosis is clear. In contrast to overprotection, the integrated Jesuit no longer relies on the "aquarium" of institutional shields or the comfort zone of a formation house's walls. He has developed inner discernment that enables him to navigate danger and failure. Verse 10 provides the ultimate "ego-test." If knowledge has become "pleasant to the soul," the *formand* has stopped collecting credentials to worship his own prestige and has begun to be internally transfigured by what he learns, going against careerism. Continuing, the text does not argue against the intellect. What the text does is confront its coldness, or, as I have been calling it here, sterile intellectualism. An intellectual formation that produces sophisticated discourse but no delight in the soul has, by that very measure, failed to reach the heart.

29 Bland, "The Formation of Character," 231.

Proverbs and Jesuit Formation: A Sapiential Dialogue

We must move beyond the notion that the wisdom-based integration described in Proverbs is a private or isolated achievement. Although the biblical text addresses the individual, the Jesuit tradition confronts the *formand* with the demand that this inner transformation enliven the body of the Society of Jesus for the mission. The Wisdom that enters the heart is an apostolic imperative and cannot be seen as a personal trophy. In a Jesuit understanding of formation, if it does not "go out into the world"–embodying Arrupe's ideal of being "men for others"–it fails in its fundamental purpose. This practical Wisdom (חָכְמָה) allows us to convert theoretical knowledge into an inner guide for encountering our neighbor, ensuring that our individual integrity sustains the Society as a community of discernment in mission.

The four movements- search, reception, ethical Wisdom, and integration- can correspond to the major stages of Jesuit formation. However, we cannot see them as a mechanical checklist. Rather, it is a living rhythm where each movement of Proverbs names a grace we must seek and a distortion we must fear. For that reason, these movements reveal that our formation is much more than a program to be completed.

The first movement, the *search stage* (vv. 1–4), corresponds to the Novitiate. Everything in the Novitiate begins with learning to listen to God through prayer, the Spiritual Exercises, community life, and experiments that expose the novice to the real world.[30] The metaphors of verses 1–4 are instructive here: one does not find silver or hidden treasure by remaining in safe spaces. The verbs "seek, search, and cry out" depict Wisdom as

30 Society of Jesus, "General Congregation 35, Decree 2: 'A Fire That Kindles Other Fires: Rediscovering Our Charism,'" *Institute for Advanced Jesuit Studies*, 2008, https://jesuitportal.bc.edu/research/documents/2008_decree2gc35/ (accessed October 26, 2025), n. 4.

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risk-taking engagement. When formation shields the *formand* from conflict, pastoral messiness, or the demands of genuine community, it runs counter to what Proverbs commends. The *formand* who never faces conflict does not develop the art of apostolic dialogue, and the one never exposed to pastoral failure does not develop practical Wisdom. If the novice's search remains within the "protective bubble" of the institution, he risks an exit into permanent childhood. To avoid this, the search must evolve into the second movement: the vulnerable reception of knowledge as a gift from God, which defines the period of First Studies.

As the Jesuit enters First Studies, he may face the idolatry of the credential. If he confuses the "collar for the call," he turns Wisdom, which Proverbs defines as a gift from God (v.5-6), into a trophy won by merit. The credentials earned in First Studies are not the end of the journey. They prepare for the third movement, where the "brilliant" *formand* must become the "upright" regent.

The Regency stage resonates in the transition to ethical Wisdom (vv. 7–9). It is the moment when the abstractions of early studies leave the realm of ideas to encounter "pastoral messiness" and concrete human needs. The biblical text offers a warning our tradition cannot ignore: God reserves true sound Wisdom (תֻּשִׁיָּה) for the "upright," not necessarily the most "brilliant" intellectually. During the Regency period, this means that academic excellence, once acquired, loses its meaning when disconnected from a profound moral and pastoral conversion. A Jesuit may articulate complex philosophical and theological concepts, but if he lacks integrity in his daily dealings with people, he has not yet received the Wisdom that God "stores up" for his faithful ones. Here, study ceases to be a sterile intellectual exercise and becomes truly formative when

tested by commitment to others' pain and hope. Having faced this ethical testing in the "friction" of the apostolic field, the Jesuit does not return to Theology to collect more data. He can enter the fourth movement, where knowledge ceases to be textbook reference and becomes "pleasant to the soul."

The final arc, theology studies, priestly ordination (for scholastics), and the integration stage (vv. 10–11) mark the culmination of this sapiential journey. At this stage, we seek a mature synthesis in which Wisdom no longer needs to be retrieved from an external manual, having been internalized as an inner guide. This is why Tertianship comes at the end of formation, after ordination and initial ministry. Ignatius understood something Proverbs 2:10 promises: Wisdom enters the heart through experience. Notably, this echoes how Jesuits often call Tertianship the "school of the heart."

What this sapiential reading suggests is a truth that structural analyses of formation tend to miss: the three risks – overprotection, careerism, and sterile intellectualism – are not failures of intention. They distort genuinely good things. Care is good, but when it removes risk to ensure safety, it ceases to be care and can become a tool of control. Ambition is good when it seeks the *magis*,[31] however, when measured by the "idolatry of credentials," it loses the fundamental question of what Wisdom is for. The love of learning is good, but when it produces sophistication without conversion, it fails to be formative.

We must emphasize that the biblical text does not condemn these goods. What Proverbs 2:1-11 teaches is that they must be received in their proper order: searched for, given, embodied,

31 The Latin term magis ("more," "the greater") is a key concept in Ignatian spirituality, expressing the Jesuit disposition toward seeking the greater glory of God (*ad maiorem Dei gloriam*) and the greater service of others.

and integrated. Short-circuiting this order is precisely how formation loses itself. When we fail at that, a lifelong path becomes a hollow structure that resembles formation but lacks the converted heart Proverbs demands.

Conclusion

Proverbs 2:1–11 does not offer a comfortable theory of formation. The text traces a disruptive movement–from the effort of the search to the surprise of the gift, and from embodiment to final integration. None of these steps can be skipped without a profound cost to the soul. There are risks–overprotection, careerism, and sterile intellectualism–that can be both structural flaws and premature exits from the formative journey. These risks also sabotage the journey: overprotection strangles the search before it can face the friction of reality; careerism corrupts the gift by enthroning the ego; and sterile intellectualism insulates the mind, ensuring knowledge never makes the difficult journey to the heart.

In this paper, I have placed Wisdom as a category for theological reflection on formation. In doing so, it questions the contemporary preoccupation with professional competencies, outcomes, and measurable skills, which are also important. However, the sapiential tradition destabilizes this framework with an uncomfortable question: competent at what, exactly, and for whom? This contrast points to a deeper tension within ecclesial formation itself. As Dave Bland notes in his analysis of Proverbs, during a time of severe socio-historical transition in which Israel lost its primary institutions of identity (the temple, the monarchy, and the land), Wisdom functioned as a "transitional philosophy."[32] Without traditional institutional structures to rely on, Israel's survival and identity depended

32 Bland, "The Formation of Character," 222-223.

on decentralized formation, shifting from external institutions to consolidation of moral character at the individual and domestic levels.[33]

These historical shifts mirror the current formative challenge. When external ecclesial and religious structures face dismantling or crisis, a vocation cannot survive on professionalized credentials only. What matters more is the density and depth of the person's interior life, which runs counter to overprotected life, careerism, and sterile intellectualism. Consequently, Proverbs 2:1-11 does not respond with a checklist of skills. It answers in terms of ontological conversion; that means, the kind of person the *formand* becomes: someone in whose Wisdom has become interior, whose knowledge brings genuine joy, and whose prudence guides from within.

This sapiential integration, however, is not something to be kept in protective isolation. The true test of this correspondence lies in the tension of real communities and the apostolic situations that no paradigm can fully anticipate. A formative proposal that cannot withstand contact with reality is not yet Wisdom; it may be only the beginning of the search.

Then, I turn to the same question that opened this text: how does one grow wise? Not by completing a technical program, but by allowing the itinerary of the Spirit to reach the place where it was always meant to go: in the vulnerability of the heart. By naming the heart in verse 10 as the destination of this spiritual journey, Proverbs 2:1-11 places the core of formation where biblical revelation has always demanded: in the person's radical and relational transfiguration.

33 Bland, "The Formation of Character," 223-224.

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