

THE INITIAL STAGES OF FORMATION

I. Introduction

IT HAS been useful, and indeed necessary, to have examined in some detail those passages in the Gospels which describe the phases in the call of the disciples, and to have analysed, in particular, those texts which illuminate the nature of the life which Christ's call involves. Their significance is paramount for our understanding of the constitutive elements of first formation in the religious life, which must needs have its source and origin in the experiences of Jesus's disciples. It is the Council which has insisted that religious life is likewise the fruit of the divine action in the hearts of those whom the Father has freely chosen. On them he has bestowed that 'precious gift' which is 'given only to some, so that they may live in virginity or celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom' (*Lumen Gentium*, 42): and thus in union with Christ as he spends himself for the people to whom his Father has sent him.

Before developing further these evangelical implications for initial religious formation, we feel called upon to ponder at some length certain basic truths which are often left unsaid, or at least not sufficiently understood or rightly stressed.

In the accounts given in the Sacred Scriptures of the divine call and its effects in shaping the lives and personalities of those summoned by God 'according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his own will' (Eph 1,11), one fact emerges with unambiguous emphasis. This is the divine sovereign freedom of the Holy Spirit, 'who breathes where he wills'. He calls whom he wishes; and he retains the initiative in dealing with those whom he has called, throughout the entire span of their lives. Not only does he enter into a person's life; he continues to work in him with infinite constancy and care. He attracts and invites incessantly, endeavouring to call forth from the heart of the one called a succession of responses in the freedom and spontaneity of love which the individual alone can and is constrained to give.

God is truly the potter at the wheel, who patiently tries to mould the clay and give it the shape he has envisaged for it. But our God knows the clay of which we are made; he is always prepared to start afresh, even when we fail to respond to the movement of his hands; and he unceasingly calls us back when we have escaped from him.

Nothing could be clearer. God is the One who is truly in charge of formation. No one else has the power to create and give life. This is an attribute which is exclusive to God; it is his prerogative alone. It is he who communicates his life-giving Spirit; and this very Spirit of God, which dwells in the heart, urges the person to ask and move in accordance with his promptings.

This is the basic principle of all life. It is therefore also the fundamental law in formation to a life. Attentiveness to God and docility to his life-giving action are the essentials, and must always be given the first priority: 'Your eyes beheld my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them' (Ps 139,10).

The contribution to be made by others, who certainly have an important role to play in formation, must always be in keeping with this first principle. Revelation itself shows that in this process of growth, God often expects of other human beings that they collaborate in this delicate and profound work of his. We have seen, for example, the part played by Eli in helping the young Samuel to be attentive to and recognize the persistent voice of God who was calling him (cf 1 Sam 3,1-18). The New Testament, in its turn, in presenting to us the strong and affectionate personality of John the Baptist, shows him preparing the ways of the Lord, alerting people to the coming of the Messiah, speaking to his disciples of the One who, though not yet openly recognized, is already in their midst, and then pointing him out to them when he passes by (cf Jn 1,10-23.29-36). It is the same with Andrew and Philip (40-42; 45-46). Their role, however, stems from and is totally dependent on that of God, and is of value only in so far as it fosters the contact between the person called and the One who alone has the right to call and the power to give life through his creative action.

Clearly then, the fundamental and guiding principle for those involved in the work of formation is that they be constantly attentive to what God himself is doing in the person who is being fashioned and moulded by him; and that, as his humble servants, they collaborate lovingly with him, fostering with delicacy and sensitivity what he is trying to do. Thus we can say that any contribution one

makes in the field of formation will be of value, only in so far as it is a service rendered to the Spirit acting in the one he has called, who is helped by such accompaniment to become aware of God's action, and is encouraged to be docile to his promptings.

This guiding principle of formation obviously implies the necessity, on the part of God's fellow-workers (cf 1 Cor 3,9ff), of being familiar with his ways of dealing with people. It means being sensitive to the distinctive traits of his action in those he is inviting to a particular form of evangelical life: one which is rooted in and stems from the call to make a fundamental choice for Christ, loved as 'the one necessity'. Again we must turn to the Gospels and focus our attention on the experience of those who were first called to be companions of Jesus.

It is surely axiomatic that if we look and ponder on what Christ effected in the hearts of those whom he thus called to himself, we can come to a true understanding of what he, the Risen Christ present in our midst, continues to do today in the lives of those whom he draws and invites to follow him unconditionally, in the same form of life. Contemplation of the gospel-accounts impress upon us the process of spiritual growth in the hearts of the disciples: first, as they were being led to a true awareness of the call itself, and afterwards, the way in which they were introduced, step by step, into the life that they were being called upon to live.

Consequently, if we wish to discover for ourselves how to collaborate with him in the process of formation, we must ask ourselves the following questions:

1. How did Christ deal with those whom he approached in order gradually to draw them to himself? What dispositions was he fostering in them? What did they experience under his influence and tutelage?
2. How did Christ act with the disciples, during this growth in their attachment to him, so that at a given moment, they left all things to follow him, and began to live with him and learn from him? What was their precise experience at this moment of choice?

The answers to these questions will teach us how we can best help those whom God is calling in similar fashion today: how they can best respond to him in these two initial and successive stages — the pre-novitiate period, and the novitiate itself.