

Review of life : A healing moment

AMONG THE community practices abandoned during the changes which followed Vatican II was the chapter of faults. In some cases, efforts were made to replace this with what is known as the review of life. Yet what had been a fruitful experience in a weekend retreat or a meeting of superiors did not bear like fruit when used in the local community. Whether it was due to inexperience or to a misunderstanding of the method, the review of life, in turn, was abandoned.

However, its successful use among lay apostolic groups prompts us to examine it afresh. It is basically an exercise used to examine everyday life, to discover what the Lord is saying to us through it. It presupposes an atmosphere of sincere faith, in which the participants can share and experience mutual inspiration in fidelity to the Spirit. Clearly, it demands openness, so that each can receive what the Spirit is saying through the interventions of the others. Confidentiality is thus the key-note; and the sharing engenders and deepens love within the group, by respecting the other and seeking to understand his situation, his preoccupations and his efforts.

Twelve would appear to be the maximum number for fruitful sharing. They should be mature people who are genuinely seeking to analyse their situation in the light of Christ. They take a life-happening with moral implications, something from their daily experience as workers, students, parents, friends, citizens and so on. They examine this as children of God, illumined by faith, hope and love, in an effort to become more effective instruments in the building of the Kingdom.

The review of life is not a personal or collective examination of conscience. On the other hand, it should make the participants sensitive to what impedes God's work, to discover, in the 'little moments' of every day, material for reflection on what helps or hinders man on his way to God. Ordinarily, self-knowledge is a slow process: we have at hand countless self-serving excuses to justify ourselves for the very things we readily criticize in others. The review of life should assist us in knowing ourselves better; it should be a source of strength to overcome the non-response to grace so common in us all. The knowledge that others are also seeking a deepening of their christian awareness fosters a sense of responsibility to those who share this experience.

How does a review of life work? Each member should briefly present a recent life-happening located in time and place. It is fundamental that the group learn to recognize life-happenings; that is, ordinary daily occurrences, not 'way out' ones that happen rarely. This enables the members to see themselves as they are; but no presentation should be about the person speaking nor a member of the group. After each one has presented a life-happening, the group chooses one of them for analysis. The choice should be made according to the nature of the movement to which the group belongs,

or be related to its specific interests. In the beginning, it is often necessary to help the group to stay on the point. The presentation of the life-happening is not an end in itself, but a spring-board to discover what attitudes contributed to the happening, and then to see how members of the group live these attitudes to a greater or lesser degree. One of these attitudes is selected for study. The group then reflects on evidences of this attitude in their environment. Here some or all the members may wish to express their personal living out of this attitude. No one is obliged to acknowledge the particular attitude as his own, nor is anyone accused of having the attitude.

After each has made his presentation, the group chooses one of the happenings for analysis. Details of this may be added, in order that various attitudes may be discovered within the happening: fear, selfishness, indifference, a lack of responsibility, and so on. The group then chooses which attitude to study. Let us say that it decides to look at the lack of sensitivity or indifference to others. First we try to discover how this attitude is manifested in our environment, and how widespread it is. General comments from the group will lead naturally to the acknowledgment of how one has lived the attitude personally. We learn to see ourselves in the weaknesses of others. And our knowledge of Christ and his expectations of us is enlarged and enriched by the simple and sincere sharing of those present. The group then looks at the causes of the attitude. This aspect should not be passed over lightly, even though at first sight a cause may seem self-evident. If we are serious about wanting to overcome a particular attitude, we need to know what caused it.

The next step is to consider the consequences of a particular attitude, and to judge it in the light of human ethics. They discover that even on a natural level, certain attitudes are counter-productive or actually harmful. At this point the group considers the attitude in the light of the gospel. Here the question may be asked, 'What would Christ say about this?' Here some may wish to read passages from the New Testament that touch on the topic under discussion. This phase should not be hurried; there should be ample time for anyone to share the insights gained from the revision itself or the scripture that is read. After this, the group may quietly reflect on what resolution would be suitable and appropriate personally and collectively. If a group resolution is taken, it should be made very clear what is expected of the individual.

A real value of the review of life for any christian, is that it confirms the unity of our lives. Since the Incarnation, there can be no dichotomy between what is sacred and what is secular. Christ assumed our human condition, and gave it a wholeness we need to acknowledge. Since then, everything that we do either helps or hinders us on our way to the Father. With the regular practice of review of life, we acquire facility in judging everything in the light of faith. Our 'worldly' tasks are no longer isolated from our spiritual endeavours. In the most routine and ordinary circumstances of our lives we have the 'stuff' of our holiness, if only we learn to recognize and appreciate it.

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