

REFLECTIONS ON PRIESTLY FORMATION I

Difficulties with Feelings

Jean-Michel Laurent

This article is the first of three in which Jean-Michel Laurent reflects on the training of priests within the Roman Catholic Church today. Fr Laurent draws on many years of experience of being responsible for such training, especially in an African context. He is a member of the Missionaries of Africa congregation, often known in Britain as the 'White Fathers'. His particular role has been to offer spiritual direction to candidates for the priesthood, and so he is in a good position to evaluate that appropriation of spirituality which is essential for anyone who is preparing to undertake a full-time ministry within the Christian Church. In this first article, his focus is the challenge his candidates have often found in being able to express adequately the affective side of their personalities.

THE WORK OF ACCOMPANYING young men who desire to become priests is a difficult and beautiful one. It is difficult to know when to speak and when to keep silent, when to confront and when to wait. It is difficult to be a role model and so to be challenged every time one of our actions is not really in agreement with the values we profess, difficult to gain the trust of candidates who often live in fear of being discontinued from their studies. But it is beautiful to see people opening up, confronting some of their fears and wounds, growing in trust, learning to get in touch with what is in their hearts, growing in awareness of themselves, taking their lives in their own hands to make an offering to the God whose call they are learning to discern. It is beautiful to be introduced into the sanctuary of their inner life, to see the goodwill, the desire to grow and to get to know the person of Jesus, the desire to be witness to some of the marvels that God works in

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people. It is a privileged position to be witness, facilitator, guide, at times counsellor and confidant, warning them against what leads towards lesser life or awakening them to what contributes to human growth and greater union with God.

The practice of spiritual direction has taught me the rightness of the gospel saying: 'Do not judge and so that you may not be judged' (Matthew 7:1). Judgment belongs to God, and rightly so. From the outside, it is impossible to know why a certain person behaves in a certain way, what his or her motivations and goals are. It is impossible to know what hurt or festering wound may be guiding his or her behaviour, impossible to evaluate how far that person is a culprit or a victim. I have been the witness of growth and opening up to the action of the Holy Spirit; but, unhappily enough, I have also seen people moving in what looked like the wrong direction, refusing to change and grow. I have seen the terrible ravages that human beings can cause to themselves and to others.

If spiritual direction teaches us not to judge but to welcome people as they are, still, some actions are totally unacceptable—and especially so when they come from those, such as priests or religious, who, by vocation, should be the channels of God's love. Often I meet victims, people who have been hurt; and their pain is all the deeper when the hurts come from people they used to trust: father, mother, teacher or priest. The media, not without some anticlerical prejudice, have made us far more aware than formerly that the behaviour of some priests is far from being what it should be.

The most severe problems of the clergy are well known. The numerous scandals about paedophilic priests and brothers have done enormous harm to the Church. Audits of dioceses and Church-run institutions have repeatedly revealed funds disappearing or being misappropriated by the priest or religious in charge. A report was prepared by two major superiors of female religious congregations concerning sexual harassment of sisters by priests. It was leaked to the press and created serious commotion. But quite a few priests were not even ready to acknowledge that the problem existed. They preferred to blame the sisters for revealing the situation.

The conduct of some clergy causes serious scandal, but there are more far-reaching problems than the extreme behaviour of a minority,

as this comment on the condition of the clergy in the United States reveals:

It is mainly in the sphere of relations with others that these insufficiently formed Catholic priests manifest their deficiency of psychological development. Their relations will usually remain rather shallow and formal and often unsatisfactory both for themselves and for the other person They have very few true friends One meets in them evident signs of passivity, an exaggerated docility and a tendency to look for their own identity more in their role as priest than in their own personality They do not have much confidence in themselves, debase themselves and often refrain from using their capacities to the full It is surprising to discover in these men a general lack of aptitude at expressing their personal religious experience at a deep level.¹

Who has not known some priests like this, going through ceremonies with little conviction, showing no sign of empathy with what they are supposed to celebrate? Their hearts are not in what they are doing. Priests should be expert at relationships, expert communicators, expert at showing their brothers and sisters the love of the Father to whom they have consecrated their lives, for the very simple reason that God is love, communion and communication. How is it that they can show 'a general lack of aptitude' in the very area where they should be experts?

Popular wisdom warns us not to point out the defects of others with a dirty finger. In the lives of all religious there is some discrepancy between behaviour and values professed. None of us is completely coherent. We all struggle to bring some order to our lives. We are aware that some of our actions are not in line with the values of the gospel, with the life we have embraced. Still, we try to live our commitment, while acknowledging our inability to live up to the ideal professed. Defects, idiosyncrasies, the peculiarities of individual tempers exist in all communities, together with a good dose of sin, to speak plainly. This is nothing special, nothing surprising. Weakness is human.

But at times, it looks as if the very structure of a person's life is not compatible with the gospel any more: transitory weakness is one thing;

¹ Eugene Kennedy and Vincent Heckler, *The Catholic Priests in the United States: Psychological Investigations*, quoted in William Barry and William Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 123.

a sinful mode of life is another. Some priests seem to have stopped striving towards what should be our common goal: the imitation of Christ, a life of prayer, service, compassion and love of neighbour. One can only wonder where they get the inspiration for their lifestyles when one sees abuse of power, refusal to serve, lack of compassion, ambition, wordliness and, in the worst cases, a total lack of concern for the basic commands of God. Statistics are not really important; even a few are already too many, and such people do exist. How far back in their lives do we have to go to trace the origin of such problems? Writing about the sudden departure of a young friar, the theologian Clodovis Boff reacted strongly and asked whether there was there something wrong with the formation given to young priests and religious. I believe there is.²

Whenever human beings are involved, mistakes will always be more than a mere possibility. They do happen. Educating young adults, trying to share with them the ideal which gives meaning to priestly life, is a beautiful work, but not an easy one. Formators should incarnate the ideal that they are proposing to the young, but they are marked by sin, and partially blind to themselves and to others. They are also faced with the mystery of human beings, unable to see what is happening, or not happening, in the minds and hearts of the candidates. Candidates come with all kinds of motivations, some valid, others invalid, some conscious, others not. It is unavoidable that, in this messy situation, some mistakes will be made, by seminary staff and by seminarians. Either can genuinely misread the signs, and a person that God does not call ends up being ordained. This is unavoidable.

On the other hand, there is a serious danger in some places, at some times, that insufficient attention is being paid to the process of forming future priests. There can be lack of professionalism on the side of the formators, and lack of investment in studies, preparation and staffing. The Holy Spirit will guide and help, but that does not take away from us the need to do all that is in our power to collaborate. The Holy Spirit will not automatically solve all the psychological, spiritual or human problems that our candidates are carrying. No discernment will be properly made unless formators and those in formation attentively look for the signs given by God, perceive them and act on them. But it can

² See Clodovis Boff, 'Considérations indignées', *Vies Consacrées*, 6 (Nov.–Dec. 1999), 377–395.

happen that either they do not pay attention or that their listening is not attuned to God's talking. A sister once remarked: 'Catholic priests are very well formed ... from the head upwards!' If God talks to the heart when the person is focusing on the head, there is little chance that a dialogue will take place.

These few pages propose the following thesis: the failure of some priests to live up to their ideal priestly formation comes partly from defects in the formation process, which does not pay enough attention to the affective life—to the realm of feelings and emotions. This has drastically negative consequences for the prayer life of both youth in formation and adult priests. And it puts at risk the process of discernment of priestly or religious vocations, both by staff members and by candidates, because one of the ways in which God communicates with human beings is being short-circuited.

I am not attempting to give a comprehensive account of the formation process in seminaries here, but concentrating on one aspect of it, and one aspect only. My approach is thus consciously one-sided. Many other factors that are not touched on here play important roles in discernment. These pages are not the result of a systematic inquiry in seminaries or of a scientific study. They are based on personal experience and on my practice of spiritual direction with people from Africa and elsewhere.

Nevertheless I believe that I am touching here one of the roots of priestly malaise. Priestly formation does not give enough space to the human, psychological and spiritual dimensions of the person. Priestly formation gives our young men a solid knowledge: they are vastly more knowledgeable than the majority of Christians, who have never reached



university. But what kind of knowledge are we talking about? There are huge gaps in priestly formation—gaps which are all the more dangerous because priests are usually not aware of their presence. When I speak of ‘priests’ it is obvious that I am not talking about all of us. I do not know the percentage of priests concerned but I believe what follows applies to a substantial number of people who have gone through the whole process of priestly or religious formation.

Awareness Is Difficult

As I was preparing this article, I happened to come across the following statement: ‘My experience, however, is that ... while there is, of course, great variance among African cultures on this matter, I have generally found that African men ... are in touch with their feelings’.³ I find this statement surprising since my experience would lead me to exactly the opposite conclusion: people have difficulty being and becoming more aware of their feelings, whatever their culture, sex or age, and the young African men who start their philosophy in our centre are no exception. Their first session of spiritual direction usually offers no difficulty. The candidate will speak of his family, its composition, the different places where he studied, how he came into contact with the congregation, and so on. After that comes ... silence. Most of them have nothing to say and do not know how to speak of themselves.

This silence can have different origins: fear of formators is usually fairly strong in all candidates, especially at the beginning. There are also some dishonest candidates who do not want to reveal too much. Without falling into the trap of suspecting everybody, formators in major seminaries must keep this possibility at the back of their minds. When the selection of the candidates is well made such rotten apples should be the exception, but inevitably there will be a few. But there is another reason for the silence that is far more widespread: these young men are not aware of what they feel. Usually, this goes unnoticed and does not cause any difficulty except when such awareness is demanded of them. For example, a candidate had a serious clash with a fellow student. I happened to be around and to notice. In spiritual direction, I

³ Terry Charlton, preface, in *Dynamics of the Spiritual Exercises: African Perspectives*, edited by Christian Kiti (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2005), 12.

asked what happened. The candidate explained. Then came the question:

‘How did you feel when you were insulted?’

Silence.

‘How did you feel?’

‘I felt bad, I did not feel good at all.’ Or, ‘I felt really rotten’. Silence.

‘OK. You express yourself in a negative way, you say what you were not. Can you express yourself in a positive way and tell me what it was you felt?’

Silence.

‘When you say that you felt bad, what do you mean? It is a generic term. It does not really explain what you felt. If I am angry, I surely do not feel good. But when I am hurt, it does not feel good either; neither when I am jealous, afraid, despised or sad. So when you say it did not feel good, what do you mean? Which of the preceding words would fit in with what you felt?’

Very often the answer is: ‘I do not know’. I believe the problem is not that the candidates have difficulty in expressing themselves in a foreign language. It is a question of awareness. Frank Houdeck writes:

I assume that people seeking spiritual direction have a modicum of verbal skills. Not only are they aware of the full range of individual experience through self-reflection but also they have sufficient communication skills to share and articulate this experience with other human beings.⁴

But according to my experience, the situation in major seminaries is rather drastically different from what Fr Houdeck describes. In the first place, our candidates might not want spiritual direction, but they have no choice. They have to accept it, more or less willingly, as part of the formation programme. Their communication skills and self-consciousness are fragmentary at best. Some of our candidates have strictly nothing to say about themselves and their inner states. They live, go to mass, study, enjoy a football game, know what they like and

⁴ Frank Houdeck, *Guided by the Spirit: A Jesuit Perspective on Spiritual Direction* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1996), 3. See also 16–17.

do not like, but pay little or no attention at all to their hearts, to their emotional life, to all those affects upon which a discernment can be based.

It has been repeatedly said that one of the longest journeys a human being has to make is from the head to the heart. As Francis Kelly Nemeck and Marie Theresa Coombs write:

In its biblical sense, heart denotes the whole person, with particular accent on one's inmost affective being. In the heart dwell feelings and emotions, desires and passions.⁵

Of those desires, Janet Ruffing says: 'I am convinced that many Christians never entertain their desires long enough to know what they really want'.⁶ Likewise Thomas Green asks 'is it easy to recognize and "name" one's affects?' He answers:

This is especially difficult for people who have been raised to repress or suppress their real feelings having directed at least a few people from several ... cultures, I have come to believe that it is not easy for *any* of us human beings to be truly in touch with our own real feelings.⁷

The young men I am talking about are mostly 'raw', fresh from secondary school, and my experience has been that they are definitely not 'in touch with ... their real feelings'. I do not mean that they are incapable of entering deeper into their own hearts. On the contrary, given guidance, encouragement and honesty, and also enough intellectual giftedness on their own side, great changes can happen in a couple of years. Being young or old, African or not, does not seem really to be relevant to the question of awareness of oneself. I believe the difficulty is not linked to culture or ethnic group, but is of a general nature. Many older men, and quite a few women, whatever their culture of origin, do remain very much 'in the head'.

⁵ Francis Kelly Nemeck and Marie Theresa Coombs, *The Way of Spiritual Direction* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1985), 68.

⁶ Janet K. Ruffing, *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2000), 12.

⁷ Thomas Green, *Weeds among the Wheat: Discernment: Where Prayer and Action Meet* (Notre Dame, IL: Ave Maria, 1984), 197.

I once directed a sister who had reached retirement age. She discovered during the retreat that, for the whole of her life, she had been guided by fears and anxieties that she had never recognised.

Another sister once narrated with a smile a traumatic event from some thirty years before. I was not sure if her tranquillity and lack of emotional upsurge meant that the trauma had been worked upon and integrated. I proposed that she spend some time on what she felt about it. She was in tears the whole of the next day. These two examples show clearly that it is not easy for anyone to come to terms with the heart and its content. But steps towards greater awareness can be taken at any point in the journey of life. Often they are due to the efforts and honesty of the person in question, but they are also gifts granted by God at the time when the person is in need or is best able to receive them.

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Although I am stressing awareness of feelings here, awareness of one's thoughts cannot be taken for granted. Unless self-consciousness is actively encouraged and cultivated, some aspects of the thought process influencing the behaviour of a person may remain obscure. The whole question of the motivations of a person who wants to adopt the religious life needs to be carefully explored. Seminarians often simply assume that God is calling them because they have the desire to become priests. The questioning of this assumption usually meets with fierce opposition. In order to check the quality and depth of the indifference of a candidate making such a decision, the director of the Spiritual Exercises can ask that person to pray for the opposite of what he wants: for example asking to be given the grace to quit the seminary when the desire to stay is very clear. This exercise usually meets with very strong inner resistance.

In the Exercises (Exx 175–178) there are three ways to make a good decision, one extraordinary (a special grace one cannot be sure of receiving) and two more usual. Of the latter, one is based on awareness of affects and the other based on awareness of the pros and cons of the decision (using the thinking process). When both of these forms of awareness are lacking, I would assume a sound discernment has little chance of taking place.

Reasons Why Affects Are Not Recognised

According to Jules Toner, 'There are a number of reasons why it is so difficult for the ordinary person to become perceptively aware of his or her own inner experiences and then to understand them'. In the first place there are 'the blinding and distorting effects of our own sinfulness and the deceptions of the evil spirit', then the 'natural bent of our attention', the fact that our attention span is limited, and 'the complexity and mobility of our psychic experience'.⁸

Here are a few more from my own experience, without any pretence at order or classification. In the case of our candidates, one reason is that they lack the vocabulary. After a few sessions of spiritual direction, I usually give them a list of some thirty words—thirty adjectives describing basic inner states, such as sad, hurt, angry, annoyed, happy, surprised, jealous, enraged, peaceful, etc. When something has happened in the candidates' lives and they do not readily identify the feeling, I ask them to peruse the list and find the word closest to what they feel. From the circumstances of what took place and the way they have been describing their reaction, it is at times fairly clear to me which word fits in the situation. But it is not clear to them. They will look at the list, pick out a word tentatively and wait to see if I agree with their choice, as if I am supposed to tell them what they are feeling! A candidate once took twenty painstaking minutes before finding out that what he felt in front of the sick people he met in hospital was compassion. From the way he had been describing how his heart was touched by some of the misery he had seen, there was really nothing else which would have fitted the bill!

Encouraging our candidates to read good novels, especially those devoting pages to the description of mental and affective states is sometimes useful. Someone who has gone through the pages of *Crime and Punishment* should have fewer problems afterwards in identifying some of his inner states. The fact is that most of our candidates have had little or no access to such literature. Add to this that local languages reflect the needs and practices of their speakers, which may not include anything comparable to the self-reflection demanded by spiritual direction. The vocabulary for expressing concepts and

⁸ Jules Toner, *A Commentary on St Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1991), 41.



The Missionaries of Africa seminary at Arusha, Tanzania

emotions exists, but is sometimes limited and anyway, at least according to Bishop Sarpong of Ghana, 'Africans are often just not very knowledgeable about the subtleties of their own mother tongues'.⁹ This definitely holds true for modern young men who have spent most of their time in minor seminaries or secondary schools.

Feelings can have different origins, and it is often not clear what is what. In the evening after a party with friends, I feel low, sad or downcast. What is the origin of what I feel? Maybe I have been indulging in some self-centred attitude, trying to be the soul of the party and attracting attention to my little self. Maybe I have had a little too much to drink and to eat and the feeling is purely physical. Maybe a reflection was made, too close to the truth, which hurt me; or else, I might be developing a bout of malaria. There is no way to know at first. Most people will not pay any attention to the way they feel; they take a pill and go to bed.

In Christian history, feelings have been given bad press. According to some of the Church Fathers, it was reason, the ability to think, which made us human, created in God's image (which also made men, who

⁹ Quoted in Charlton, preface, in *Dynamics of the Spiritual Exercises*, 12.

were thought to be less emotional, more human than women). Feelings linked us to the rest of creation and reminded us of our earthly origin, whereas we were connected to God through the intellect. Was it Augustine who found it abnormal that he cried at the loss of a loved one? If people are told, 'Sisters should never feel jealousy towards a fellow sister', or 'Anger is a capital sin', it will be difficult for such feelings to come to awareness and be accepted. To admit them is tantamount to admitting sin.

Some feelings or desires¹⁰ have also been regarded particularly negatively in certain cultures. The present general attitude in East Africa would make it very difficult for anyone to accept a homosexual tendency. A young man feeling its first stirrings would automatically use all his energy to convince himself and others that they did not exist. All cultures have stereotypes: men do not cry; men are courageous and are not afraid. Feelings that are contrary to such preconceived ideas have little chance of ever being recognised or accepted.

And disclosure of one's feelings can be dangerous. When I admit that a certain remark or attitude has hurt me, or that I felt inadequate or afraid, I give leverage to my brother or sister who knows what to say to hurt, or to awaken some reaction in me. To avoid such situations, some cultures condition their members never to show their true colours, never to manifest any of the feelings of the heart. Admitting to myself that I have a certain feeling is one thing: admitting it to others is something else. When I reveal what is truly in my heart, how will the other person react?

Feelings can contradict what the person concerned has been trained to believe is normal in certain circumstances. Accepting them would mean accepting abnormality. How, for example, does someone cope with feeling relief or even happiness at the death of his or her father or mother? There might be understandable reasons for such feelings: mum might have been irremediably sick, or terribly oppressive and demanding. Dad might have sexually abused his daughter, but she would still be under enormous pressure not to admit the actual feelings of her heart. At times, confronting ourselves and the reality of what we feel can be horribly self-damaging.

¹⁰ Feelings and desires are obviously not the same. But both come from the heart of the person, unlike thinking, which comes from the head.

Some people confuse feelings with thinking about feelings. To the question, 'What do you really feel?', they answer, 'I will think about it', instead of listening to their hearts and their guts. 'Jesus helps me to endure all trials and sicknesses', a novice once wrote in an essay. When I asked him, 'innocently', if he had ever been sick, his answer was negative. 'Why then, do you write that Jesus helps you to endure in time of sickness?' 'That is what I truly believe!' It was all in his head, and he might have been very surprised at his own reaction when the trial came.

We have the impression that we are in better control of ideas than of feelings. When I read and think, I feel as though I am controlling the whole process. Feelings are not like ideas. They come and go as they please and it is often not obvious why they are there at all. We are not in control, and so feelings are far more dangerous than ideas. As Thomas Green writes:

I have become convinced that the greatest obstacle to real discernment (and to genuine growth in prayer) is not the intangible nature of God, but ... our own lack of self-knowledge—even our *unwillingness* to know ourselves as we truly are. Almost all of us wear masks, not only when facing others but even when looking in the mirror.¹¹

Jean-Michel Laurent MAfr. is a Belgian-born Missionary of Africa. After studying theology he was sent to Tanzania, where he was ordained deacon in 1979 and worked in rural parishes until 1991. After further study he became formator of the novitiate at Kasama, Zambia, and subsequently at Arusha, Tanzania. Since 1994 he has been giving preached or directed retreats, mostly to priests and sisters, and he has now been appointed as a formator in Bukavu, Congo.

¹¹ Green, *Weeds among the Wheat*, 22.