

# REFLECTIONS ON PRIESTLY FORMATION II

## Feelings and the Spiritual Life

*Jean-Michel Laurent*

*In the April 2009 edition of The Way, Fr Jean-Michel Laurent, a Missionary of Africa, reflected on the challenge that many of the candidates for the priesthood whom he has directed find in expressing the affective side of their personalities. In this second of three articles, he offers an understanding of the role that feelings should play in this kind of ongoing vocational discernment, as well as in any attempt to come to a better appreciation of the work of God in the life of an individual.*

### **The Meaning of What We Feel**

GOD IS FATHER OF US ALL (Ephesians 4:6) and 'desires everyone to be saved' (1 Timothy 2:4). If this is true, God must have included in creation, from the start and for all of God's children (not only the Christians or the Catholics), some means of guidance, some way of giving advice or indications of what God thinks of the direction of their lives. Such a guidance system is installed from birth in all of us, an automatic, natural discernment programme to let us know (if we care to listen) what to take and what to leave. God speaks to us all in the same very natural way: through our feelings.

We have little or no problem with our physical sensations and with most of our bodily desires and experiences. We easily understand them. If I feel hungry, my body is just telling me to find something to eat. When I feel pain, I know that I am sick or injured. Fear tells me I have perceived something as dangerous in my surroundings.

The importance of physical feelings is well illustrated by the example of people suffering from leprosy. Pain is not welcome, and we avoid it at all

*The Way*, 48/3 (July 2009), 13–26

costs, but it is a useful feeling. People with leprosy, not feeling pain any more because of damage to their nervous systems, may not realise when they are hurting themselves. They burn, cut or otherwise injure themselves without realising it. We have all seen pictures of the fingerless hands of such people. This is not a direct consequence of their sickness but of the fact that they do not feel. Slowly, through repeated accidental injuries, they end up with stumps instead of hands. Fear is useful. How long would a fearless antelope last in lion country?

The same process happens with 'higher' feelings, if we may call them so. Feelings are messengers, warning us, telling us to pay attention to what is affecting us. In this way all feelings whatsoever need to be accepted, allowed to have their place in the heart; we need to be aware of them so as to heed what they have to say. All feelings are acceptable, but what we decide to do with them is not. *Feelings are excellent messengers but usually bad guides.*

Whatever feeling arises in the heart should be wholly welcome; but whatever we decide to do, whatever way we chose to follow should be subjected to close scrutiny. 'In fact, one of the surest signs of interior maturity I have found is a healthy mistrust of even our best motivations.'<sup>1</sup> Feelings are supposed to be felt, to be welcomed, but they are not supposed to lead us into action without a good discernment. My behaviour should not be based on the feeling itself but on the message it conveys. I can feel as much as I want as long as I do not allow my feelings to guide my actions without thinking, without taking a step backwards and asking myself: 'From the message I hear, what should be the path to follow?'

This is especially true for unpleasant feelings, but it also applies to the pleasant ones. To have a soft drink on a hot afternoon might be very pleasant, but the 'higher command' of reason should remain awake and warn the diabetic: 'pleasant but not OK for you!' The craving for a cool beer might be very strong on a summer evening, the body manifesting its thirst or simply its desire for the drink, but common sense should be stronger when someone is thinking of driving.

If a young priest is shocked to discover that he has been spending the last ten minutes of his meditation imagining himself in a romantic

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Green, *Weeds among the Wheat: Discernment: Where Prayer and Action Meet* (Notre Dame, IL: Ave Maria, 1984), 135.

relationship with the beautiful daughter of the parish's cook, he will probably wipe those thoughts out of his mind and do his best to consider them as a temporary temptation. If the same scenario happens regularly, it might dawn on him that there is something a bit deeper than a fleeting romantic attraction. He might be falling in love. His desires and the affective state of his heart (and God through them) are just informing him: something is happening in you. This is neutral, but he had better pay attention. His first reaction will probably be to deny the growing attraction and bury the feelings under layers of repression. This will not make them disappear. Once he recognises that he is seriously affected, he has a range of different choices.

- He can 'supernaturalise', pray hard and hope the attraction will disappear.
- He can do nothing, keep on talking to the girl, enjoying her company and attention, chatting with her whenever he has the chance, in the sure knowledge that he will remain firm in his vocation.
- He can try to get the girl into bed as soon as he finds an opportunity.
- He can declare his love and apply for laicisation.
- He can recognise the situation, look at it objectively, and open his heart to the parish priest or his spiritual director and ask for guidance.
- He can admit to himself that the attraction is serious and that he has little chance of easily getting over it. If he wishes to maintain his commitment as a celibate, he might explain the situation to his direct superior and ask for a transfer.

The feeling informs the young priest that he is affected. It conveys the serious and precious information that something is happening in his heart. Our society would tell him to follow the attraction he feels: 'Obey your thirst!' or 'Obey your desire!' But his 'higher command', his reason or his conscience, tells him to take a step backward before making a decision and consider: 'Where is God's will for me?' It is known through the Ten Commandments, through the guidance of the Church, but also through his deepest desire, which was manifested

when he took on a lifelong commitment. In obeying the attraction he feels now, he might actually be unfaithful to his deeper desires.

So I have control over my reaction to how I feel and that is where my moral responsibility is engaged. Even if retreatants speak of hating their father or mother, that is acceptable. There is no problem with feeling violent hatred, racism, jealousy or the desire for revenge, as long as they do not act upon those feelings.

### ***Feelings Are Neutral***

Some feelings, such as anger, jealousy, hate and quite a few others, have had a bad press in 'spiritual circles'. Even the 'good' feelings have been looked upon with suspicion, as it has been deemed more perfect to fulfil our duty without feeling good about it, without affirmation. We were supposed to gain more merit in that way. If we had good feelings about what we had done, or received congratulations, we had been rewarded here on earth and hence God's reward would be reduced. A duty fulfilled with great happiness was less meritorious than a boring, tedious one. It was a strange God who surrounded us with plenty of sources of happiness but wanted us to deprive ourselves of those gifts in order to please him!

Instead of speaking of 'good' and 'bad' feelings, with all the moral implications of these two adjectives, it might be better to speak of pleasant and unpleasant ones. It is now generally accepted that feelings should be given no moral connotation, no label 'good' or 'bad'. They are morally neutral. I do not decide how I am feeling and so I am not really responsible for it. There is no 'bad' feeling, whatever it may be; but happiness, anger, jealousy, pride and peace definitely do not feel the same. Some we welcome wholeheartedly, others we tend to ignore or reject. I believe that we perceive feelings according to the message they convey to us and that that is the reason why they feel different.

Let us suppose I am riding a bicycle on a metalled road, in the cool of the evening. The road is good, with no potholes, the bicycle well oiled. I hear the light sound of the tyre on the asphalt, feel the breeze on my face and pedal effortlessly, with the impression that I would be able to go on for thousands of kilometres. This is the equivalent of peace and happiness. But if at every turn of the pedals, I hear an ominous clanking, squeaking sound, I should look for the nearest mechanic to



© Erik Hersman

overhaul my bike as soon as possible. This is the equivalent of anger or hurt.

Feelings are just messengers informing us of our inner states. Happiness, joy, peace, God's nearness, elation and other pleasant feelings inform us that everything is well oiled, that the machine is in good working order and that we can keep going. Anger, sadness, depression, jealousy and other unpleasant feelings inform us of the bad news: there is something which does not work properly somewhere. We need to stop and look for some help. We tend to shun these feelings, but they are actually more important than the pleasant ones. I can keep on living for years without taking notice of the fact that I am in good health. But if I am suffering from cancer, the earlier I feel the signs, the better. Our unpleasant feelings have the disagreeable task of letting us know that there is something wrong. It is important to notice them, accept them and ask them what exactly the message is that they convey, so that we can take appropriate action.

### ***Unpleasant Feelings and Their Meaning***

What could that 'something wrong' be? It depends on the level at which we are operating, and this is not always obvious. Bodily sensations can convey the message that some organ of the body itself is

experiencing trouble. It has developed a malfunction or weakness. At the level of the heart (as opposed to the physical level), there are several main causes of unpleasant feelings: a wound or injury, some form of wrong thinking, of wrong behaviour (sin), or of wrong positioning in relation to God.

Pain and sadness of the heart are fairly easy to understand. They just convey the message that we have been hurt. There is a wound, an injury somewhere. Still, we need to 'see' the wound, to understand what has happened. Even hatred towards a mother or a father might simply come from a deep unaccepted injury. Accept the injury and most probably the feeling will recede.

Fear can convey the message either that we have perceived something as dangerous in our surroundings or that our thinking needs to be amended. If a person experiences fear of God, have a look at that person's theology. Most probably he or she has been fed in infancy notions of a punishing, judging, avenging god. The fear itself should warn that person to watch out for something that is causing it in his or her theology.<sup>2</sup>

It is known that sinful attitudes (even venial sins such as lack of serious preparation for prayer in making the Spiritual Exercises) can lead to desolation. But sin can go a lot deeper. Jules Toner interprets the 'mortal sin' of Ignatius (Exx 314) as 'capital sin'.

These are primarily sources or tendencies giving rise to sinful acts, to sins in the proper and ordinary meaning of the word. These acts may be either grave or light sins .... The description could include sinners who, little by little ... drift away from God and grow uninterested in Him.<sup>3</sup>

I believe we all suffer from this kind of sin, a deeply ingrained conviction, a central, pivotal wrong position taken in front of God which is not ours by any right. Although all sins are ways of putting

<sup>2</sup> Only when something has entered our thoughts, when we have understood it, can we fear it. In years gone by, a peasant was walking along the road when he met some government officials in a car. They had just seen a lion a bit further up the road. They greeted the man and told him: 'There is a lion!' The man answered their greeting politely and continued his way. They called him back and repeated: 'Man, there is a lion, a few kilometres away!' The man paid no attention. Then one of the officials said: 'Kuna simba hapo karibu!' The peasant jumped, turned back and hurried in the opposite direction. He felt no fear as long as the warning was issued in a language he did not understand. The link between the thought entering the mind and the feeling is here obvious.

<sup>3</sup> Jules Toner, *A Commentary on St Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1991), 52–53.

ourselves in the centre of things and relegating God to the periphery, they vary in their gravity.

Sinfulness is obviously a wrong positioning of ourselves in relation to God. The centre is not my position but God's. If I absolutely and resolutely want all conversations to stop when I enter a room, so that everybody becomes aware that I have arrived, others will notice my attitude. Possibly it will escape my own attention. It is the same for the parish priest who insists upon keeping control of every facet of pastoral life, and for the person who insists upon being the boss and having everything organized in one way and not another. There are hundreds of different variations, and all of them will give rise to some form of unpleasant feeling, usually anger, jealousy or pride. If we recognise anger rising in us at the slightest contradiction, we should ask ourselves: what does that anger mean about us?

If pleasant and unpleasant feelings have the function of informing us about the state of our affective landscape, there is good reason to notice and accept all of them, whatever their nature. But once again, this is not good reason to act on them. There should be a clear distinction (however difficult to maintain in practice) between accepting, becoming aware of and acting on what we feel.

### ***Some Difficulties***

Several objections to this approach come to mind.

#### *Feelings and Impulses*

First, psychology has affirmed the fact that feelings are morally neutral, neither good nor bad. But many people still speak as though there were 'weeds and wheat'.

The feelings are crucial: they are the raw material of our experience of God. But they must be judged, rationally evaluated to distinguish the weeds from the wheat.<sup>4</sup>

A bit further on, we read: 'it is the intellect which judges the source and validity of these feelings'.<sup>5</sup> It looks here as though some are good and ought to be followed while others are bad and need to be refused.

<sup>4</sup> Green, *Weeds among the Wheat*, 99.

<sup>5</sup> Green, *Weeds among the Wheat*, 100.

I believe part of the problem is due to the fact that the distinction between a feeling itself and the impulse to follow it is often not made sufficiently clear. It does exist, but the two are so closely interwoven that it is not easy to distinguish one from the other. Explaining the ordinary meaning of the word 'consolation', Jules Toner says that it,

... refers primarily to a conscious affective state, a feeling or a cluster of feelings of peace .... The word is then extended to an activity of the person.<sup>6</sup>

Here the distinction between the feeling itself and the behaviour towards which it impels the person is made. But earlier we read: 'All the motions of which Ignatius speaks are conscious acts or feelings' (41). In this sentence, feeling and act are put on a par.

The young priest mentioned above has time to recognise his affective state, the attraction of his heart towards a beautiful woman. He has time to reflect before deciding how he will act. He feels, but his affects do not necessarily decide the road he will follow. With anger there is usually not much time between the affective surge and the active reaction. The two are so intimately linked that we may already have reacted before we have had time to realise that we were affected. But some people still manage to control their anger.

The feeling itself is good or neutral, even when disagreeable. It must be accepted. The act is not morally neutral and needs to be carefully considered. The feeling is God's gift. The way I go is my responsibility.

***The feeling is  
God's gift.  
The way I go  
is my  
responsibility***

The influence of the good or evil spirit is not in the feeling itself but in the inclination to act. I believe all the rules of Ignatius make perfect sense when one applies them not to the feeling but to the trend towards which the feeling seems to be pushing us 'naturally'. The problem arises when we take feelings as guides and not as what they are: mere messengers.

The role of guidance is not theirs. As simple messengers, they can all be happily accepted, welcomed and examined so as to discern what course of action one feels drawn by the Spirit to follow, after careful reflection.

<sup>6</sup> Toner, *A Commentary*, 84.



*The Origins of Feelings*

Another difficulty has to do with the origin of feelings or emotions. In the text of Ignatius, it seems clear that feelings are ascribed different origins: the good or bad spirits. Thomas Green says: 'Desolation is never from God',<sup>7</sup> and, a bit later, 'What we have been saying implies that desolation is the work of the evil spirit, that it is never a sign of God's voice'.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, Toner speaks of 'desolation caused by the evil spirit', but also 'that caused by divine light in the passive nights of the soul'.<sup>9</sup> It looks as though experts do not completely agree on the subject. Some forms of desolation could come from God according to Toner, but not according to Green.

In the case of a person moving away from God, from mortal sin into mortal sin, God will 'rouse the sting of conscience and fill them with remorse' (Exx 314). This state might not involve desolation, but it would definitely qualify as an unpleasant feeling whose origin would be in God, telling the person that the road chosen is not the right one. If a person were to see clearly an inordinate attachment and decide wilfully not to sever it, I would expect a period of desolation to ensue, whose origin would be the same.

Feelings are part of our state as creatures and thus it is difficult to give them another origin than the Creator. If they are messengers, a natural way chosen by God for communicating with humans, it follows that, pleasant or unpleasant, they are all manifestations of God's care. If an unpleasant feeling attracts my attention to something that needs care, it is unlikely that the feeling's origin will be an evil spirit. An evil spirit would not attract my attention to my hurts in order to get them healed, or to my sin so that I can move away from it.

The distinction made above between feeling and reaction may give some indication of the way to solve this difficulty also. If all natural states of the heart come from the Creator, the direction in which we are supposed to go has to be carefully discerned. If feeling and the impulse to act are lumped together as one entity, we may find ourselves ascribing to God an impulse to commit sin. Anger might be God's gift, indicating the way to some deeply rooted sinfulness, but the impulse to

<sup>7</sup> Green, *Weeds among the Wheat*, 105.

<sup>8</sup> Green, *Weeds among the Wheat*, 107.

<sup>9</sup> Toner, *A Commentary*, 78.

shout and hit is not the direction that God wants me to follow. The temptation to leave prayer when in desolation comes from the bad spirit and the decision to keep on praying comes from the Holy Spirit, but both occur in the same state of desolation.

*The Relevance of Feelings for Discernment*

What has been said so far implies that all feelings need to be given our attention, as they are all ways that God chooses to communicate with us through creation. However, Jules Toner insists that not all feelings are important *for discernment*. For him, one has to distinguish between spiritual and non-spiritual states of desolation or consolation. He takes care to insert the word 'spiritual' whenever he thinks it should appear to make the meaning of Ignatius clear. It is not just any unpleasant feeling that qualifies as spiritual desolation in the Ignatian sense, or any pleasant one as spiritual consolation.

To be spiritual, therefore, that is, to be a work of the Holy Spirit, the joy and peace of consolation have to be integral parts of a faith experience ....<sup>10</sup>

A lifting up of the heart at the sight of a beautiful sunset, a movement of protective love towards the baby in one's arms, and many other daily movements in the soul are lived without religious reference. But what I have been describing above concerns both spiritual and non-spiritual states; it is thus wider in scope than the distinction made by Jules Toner.

It is true that feelings do vary in relevance, and some are not important *for discernment*. In directed retreats, the directee often brings material which does not seem particularly relevant to the unfolding of the spiritual experience. Lots of movements in the soul are just natural or of little relevance, at least at first sight. They do not seem to give a particularly important indication of the action of the Spirit or for discovering God's will.

Awareness (or unconsciousness) of some bodily sensations is of little importance. It does not matter if I do not immediately become aware of hunger, especially when the fridge is next door. I do not need to know about my good health, but I do need to be aware as soon as possible if I am seriously ill. Not all feelings, not all sensations going

<sup>10</sup> Toner, *A Commentary*, 110.

through the heart, have great messages to convey. Being unable to discover the message of some movement in the soul will often not prevent a person from living happily. At other times, however, the movement in the heart needs to be seen as early as possible, as in the example of the young priest. So there are levels of relevance.

It is already difficult enough for people to become aware of their inner states without making the enterprise even more arduous by asking them to distinguish between spiritual and non-spiritual ones. In the example of the young priest, when does a purely natural attraction start to have a spiritual dimension? When will his decision to live a celibate life at the service of the Kingdom come under attack because of a growing desire to change direction? If he ends up leaving the priesthood in order to marry the girl, it is obvious that his faith has been altered. He may not be able to trace with precision the different steps of this evolution, leading him away from his commitment, but it is clear that a change in direction has taken place. Especially in the early stages of spiritual life, it is difficult to recognise times and places when one is being affected. An affect one is aware of may have an important spiritual aspect that one has not yet noticed. Faith, hope and love might be under attack, even though one has not yet recognised the fact.

Finally, people who are intent upon finding God's will have an interest in paying attention to all the indications that God might be



© Daniel Keding

giving them—whether natural or spiritual, affects or thoughts, indications for an important discernment or just signposts, little encouragements along the way. When a young woman decides to exercise because she finds herself too fat, this is a purely secular decision. But God wants us to take care of the gifts of creation and what gift is greater than my own body? The decision of the young lady, although not at all spiritual, is in accordance with God's will. Does God not rejoice to see us taking care of ourselves? To take care of the gift is a way of thanking the donor.

A heavy smoker realises that he is coughing in the morning and goes to see the doctor. There is nothing spiritual in this behaviour and the person might be a convinced atheist. But, in a natural way, is he not paying attention to his Creator who is warning him, through his coughing and wheezing, that he is destroying his health? When the doctor (who also happens to be an atheist) decides not to antagonize the patient by pointing out that his way of life is at the origin of his troubles and chooses to prescribe some drug to lessen the coughing, his purely profane prescription is moving away from the will of God, who wants life to be preserved. It is tainted by the selfish desire to keep the client and his money.

When the youngest son in the parable (Luke 15) decided to go back to his father, his reason for moving in the right direction can be seen as completely selfish: he wanted to eat. But that did not prevent his father from welcoming him and bestowing his love on him. Some actions have little relevance one way or another, but other completely secular decisions are either building our humanity according to God's plan, or moving towards the diminution or destruction of life.

So, even when a decision seems to have no relevance whatsoever to spirituality, this does not mean that it is spiritually neutral. Most, if not all, of them will either enhance and foster life (our own or that of others), or move in the other direction. In this sense, do not all decisions have a spiritual dimension? Does the level at which we are listening really matter if we end up paying attention to some of the ways in which God communicates with us? It might be through bodily sensations, or at the psychological or the spiritual level. For those who believe in God, paying attention to the signs that are given means paying attention to the person giving those signs,

Some people (even those who are in positions enabling them to take useful action) refuse to believe that the warming up of the atmosphere is happening at all, or that humans are its cause. Many signs are already visible and there seems to be general agreement among scientists the phenomenon cannot any longer be denied. Through natural laws, God is warning us that we are destroying the very environment in which we live, cutting off the branch on which we are sitting. Christians should not need a Kibeho or a Medjugorje to pay attention. Scientists and their discoveries provide a clear natural warning. God creates natural laws. When humans transgress what is clearly wanted by God, their action is sinful, rejecting God's love as it is manifested in creation. This cannot be spiritually sound. Here refusal to listen to a well-grounded warning from scientists is equivalent to a refusal to listen to God.

### ***God's Guidance***

During a formation session lasting several months, one of the participants shared the following story.

Last week, I decided to go for a walk. I was tired after all the lectures and different activities of the programme. I had worked hard and really needed a break. I took a picnic and went out for the day. But my heart remained heavy and I did not enjoy the day as much as I had enjoyed previous outings. Wondering why, I looked back and asked myself questions: where did this unease come from? I had spent a good amount of time in prayer in the morning. I had worked hard on the previous days. I was breaking no rule and had informed the director of the session of my plan. Then I realised that, on the day when I had decided to go for a walk, a one-day session on Romanesque architecture had been proposed in the house. I was interested, but did not pay attention as my mind was made up to take a day out in the countryside. I had not paid attention to a deeper desire of my heart and believe God was attracting my attention to this. I had chosen something more superficial, less faithful to my deeper self. When I saw this, the unease disappeared.

This was the story. There was a kind of desolation felt by the person, an unpleasant feeling, or at least a lessening of the pleasure he was expecting from his walk. This is a purely human, profane experience. In the story, there is no relationship to God mentioned except for the fact that the person interpreted his experience as God-given. But God is

interested in guiding us in ways of life, and even in pointing out to us the occasions when we have chosen a way of lesser development, a way which would give less fruit than another.

If the coughing patient paying a visit to his doctor happened to be a priest, has his bad habit no impact on his spiritual life? Is it a purely lay affair which will not interfere with his prayer life? With such an addiction, I believe some form of desolation should be expected, some form of unease somewhere deep down in the heart of the person if he were to pay attention. God cannot leave us on a way of death, even a slow one, without manifesting disagreement in one way or another. But the priest would first have to realise that he is affected. Even if he were to perceive some dryness, some lessened interest in prayer or some unease, he might never relate it to his bad habit. But realising God's warning would be a salutary jolt! Spiritual or not, I believe we have an interest in paying attention to such experiences. Feelings at all levels have their origin in God through creation; we should thus pay attention to all of them, and in this way listening to God's natural way of guiding us.

*Jean-Michel Laurent M.Afr.*, 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.