

REFLECTIONS ON PRIESTLY FORMATION III

The Two Discernments

Jean-Michel Laurent

Pope Benedict XVI has called for 2009–10 to be observed as a ‘Year for Priests’. To mark this, The Way has been running a series of articles in which Jean-Michel Laurent reflects on the training of candidates for the Roman Catholic priesthood today. He draws particularly on his long experience as a formator of Missionaries of Africa in that continent. He looked at the difficulties many novices had in expressing feelings in our April 2009 issue, and in July 2009 at how they could be helped to use their feelings in vocational discernment. Here, in a final article, he considers the balance between the ways in which the candidate himself and the one with overall responsibility for his training employ their knowledge of discernment to judge the wisdom of letting a man proceed to ordination.

WHEN YOUNG MEN JOIN A SEMINARY they begin a long journey: the curriculum takes a minimum of six or seven years, and often more. Quite a few are convinced from the start that God is calling them. They have the desire to become priests and that seems reason enough to them to enter formation. A double discernment is necessary. The Church has appointed formators and teachers, usually priests, entrusted with the task of ascertaining whether the candidate presents the human, intellectual, moral and spiritual qualities necessary for the way of life he wants to embrace. On the other side, the young man himself has to make sure his desire really comes from God, that it is not motivated by some inordinate or purely human impulse.

The first discernment is based mostly on what can be seen from the outside. Formators, even spiritual directors, do not know the heart

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The seminary at Bukavu, Congo

of the person and can never see or hear from the inside. At this level, the only person who can perceive God's call is the candidate himself. I find it very presumptuous when some parish priest or well-intentioned sister tells a young person: 'I am sure you have a vocation, all the signs are there!' Even when all the signs are positive and no impediment is visible from the outside, this does not mean that God is necessarily calling someone to religious life! A call is perceived in the depths of the heart where only the individual himself and God's Spirit have access. St Ignatius tells spiritual directors to be very careful at the time of the election and to leave the Holy Spirit to deal with the retreatant. The director should in no way interfere with this process. We have to respect this fact: only the candidate can perceive what God tells him in the depths of his heart. For a good discernment at this level, the candidate will have to pay attention to the indications that God gives him. When the person is not really in touch with his thoughts and affects, it is quite clear such a discernment will be very difficult to make.

The Discernment of the Formator

Although the formator does not read the heart of the candidate, and although the responsibility of discernment from within lies with the individual, some discernment is possible from the outside. Formators will base their assessment on objective criteria such as the candidate's intellectual abilities, his commitment to prayer, to his studies and to pastoral work, his ability to live in community (if this is taken into account by the congregation), his health and so on. Some subjective criteria (feelings, the formator's intuition) can come into play also, but they have to be carefully handled.

The relationship between formators and candidates is tricky since, at least in the eyes of the candidate, the formator has the power of life and death over him: at any moment during the formation process, a team of formators can decide that a certain candidate should go home. This is the most dreaded turn of events for these young men. 'What will people say at home?' 'What will happen to me afterwards if I am dismissed?' They fear it all the more when they believe they have few other options. Even when a candidate behaves in ways totally incompatible with the life of a seminarian, nobody will report it to seminary staff, in order not to spoil his 'chances' of studying, or out of fear of retaliation. Candidates will tend to shine in front of the formators, showing all their good qualities and avoiding confrontation in order to gain the favours of their elders. At times, even asking questions during lectures can be a way to shine (and refraining from questioning a way to please). The position of candidates in formation houses is not comfortable. It is not easy to gain their confidence and convince them to be open and trustful, in the knowledge that this is ultimately to their advantage when a serious discernment is made.

The very physical arrangement of the seminary can make this first discernment difficult. Often staff and candidates do not live in the same buildings or share the same food. If the formator is mostly a teacher, understandably concerned with the preparation of his lectures, he may have little contact with candidates outside the classroom, where students get to know lecturers much better than vice versa. When the number of students is large, the discernment of the staff may be based not so much on a real knowledge of the person as on his respect for regulations. The quiet, obedient, respectful candidate who might actually be hiding his real motivation will stand a better chance

than the boisterous, open, joyful character who does not hide his feelings and, occasionally, his opposition to authority. In such circumstances, it is possible that the candidate who remains is not the one called by God, but the candidate who is asked to go! One can question the value of the discernments made in some seminaries where there are teachers who do not even know the names of all their candidates. The door is wide open for young men who would have been refused if anyone had known what they were really like. But, unhappily enough, they are carefully hidden in the crowd and only show their real face after all danger of dismissal is over, once they are ordained or have made final profession.

The better our personal knowledge of the candidates, the better will be our chances of noticing the signs of hidden defects or impediments, and also of traumatisms, hidden psychological problems and relational difficulties of all kinds. As mentioned it is to the advantage of our candidates that we operate a sound discernment. They will not be happy in a way of life to which God did not call them in the first place. They need to realise this and learn to present themselves in as objective a way as they can, so that the discernment of the staff can be well made. We have a better chance of reading a complete map than one half-eaten by termites! When they have a good objective knowledge of a candidate, formators are more likely to notice the signs given by God that lead away from, or towards, a vocation to priesthood or religious life.

Candidates seem to fall, more or less, into three categories: the good, the bad and the ugly little duck—the middle-of-the-road fellow who can go either way. He may become a good, convinced priest or he may turn out to be a real liability for his diocese or his congregation. With very good candidates, the discernment of the formator is easy, as there are no valid reasons for stopping them. With those who show few promising signs, decisions are not too difficult to take either. We face a more serious challenge with the middle group.

A first discernment is made during the 'Come and See' programme, when potential candidates are invited to the seminary for a few weeks after they finish school, taking part in pastoral activities and lectures. Three criteria will guide the selection at this level:

- They need to have the necessary marks for acceptance at university. This is a requirement of the institute where our young men follow their studies.
- They should not be HIV positive or show signs of other sexually transmitted diseases.
- They should present signs of adequate psychological, physical, spiritual and mental health.

While they are at the centre, we look for dedication to whatever the potential candidates are supposed to be doing. Occasional lapses and mistakes are overlooked as long as the overall trend is one of commitment and seriousness.

Once a candidate has spent a couple of years in the formation programme, the formators have to give a positive recommendation in order for him to be accepted to the next step. For this, we need to know the person, which requires a sufficient level of self-revelation on his side. We cannot give our recommendation in a case of serious doubt. If all three formators find that they do not really know the person when the time comes to write his final evaluation, although we have lived with him for over two years, this is a warning sign: something is amiss. In such a case it may be better if the person is not accepted to continue his formation.

What other criteria do we have for accepting or refusing a candidate? Criteria are not absolute. The opinion of formators will vary according to their vision and experience. Here a principle discussed in an earlier article comes into play: that feelings are good messengers but usually bad guides. I believe that no candidate should be sent away on the strength of feelings alone, without objective reasons; otherwise the door is open to favouritism, racism, blackmail and other unpleasant human realities. I hope a couple of examples will suffice.

1. In international communities it happens more and more that staff and candidates come from different countries. If a formator has prejudices against people of a certain ethnic group (something against which we should all be wary, since we imbibe such prejudices with our mother's milk and they exist in all cultures), there is a great danger that they will guide his view and his decision; and the less the formator is aware of his prejudices, the greater the danger.

2. A silly practical joke was once played on the rector of a seminary. The two seminarians involved were too noisy setting it up and they were caught red-handed. The rector was furious. He wanted to dismiss not only the two culprits but also the other team members who had been aware of the preparation of the joke. During Mass the morning after the event he was extremely tense and one could see he needed all his energy to control himself. It was clear to anyone that his reaction was excessive. Anger was simply sending him a message that he would have had great interest in understanding. What was the sensitive spot touched by the careless hand of the two culprits? It may have been an exaggerated idea of his importance and dignity as rector, hurt pride, or just rage at not having things the way he wanted them. Whatever the source of his anger, it was *not* the practical joke itself. But the rector was convinced of the opposite. Instead of looking at his own heart and finding out what was wrong with his reaction, he looked outside and blamed the students. They were at fault for the childish joke they wanted to play, but they were not responsible for the anger directed at them. A decision made to dismiss them in such circumstances would have been very wrong.

If a feeling is informing me about my inner state, it should not play a direct role in my decision concerning the candidate, even if the latter did 'touch a wound' and reactivate the source of a certain affect in me. If a formator has had a clash with a candidate, or realises that he does not like the candidate, he has no right to let his likes and dislikes interfere in the process of discerning God's will concerning this particular person. When staff live at close quarters with candidates, each with his own character, it is unavoidable that clashes will occur. If a candidate makes some hurtful remark, his formator has to be sufficiently aware of the state of his heart so that the hurt he feels after the incident does not influence his discernment about that person. Whenever a formator challenges a candidate, interacts with him or mentions something, that action can be either right or sinful, according to the formator's motivation.

In the case of the rector mentioned above, if he had called the students in and told them off, this would have been justified because of their childishness; but it would still have been sinful because of his anger. It would not have been sinful to pronounce exactly the same words after he had recovered his calm and tried to find the origin of his

anger within himself. I believe a formator has no right to react to a candidate while under the influence of any feeling, either pleasant or unpleasant. The fact that he likes a candidate does not mean that this candidate is called by God to become a priest, and vice versa: his dislike equally means nothing about a possible vocation. My feelings are informing me about myself, not about others.

Psychology warns us that the danger of transference—of transferring feelings about one person on to another—is always present between human beings living together. Candidates can transfer fatherly images on to me as their formator, and they can also remind me of people with whom I have had disagreements in the past so that I transfer on to them some of my negative reactions to those people.

There is nothing worse in seminaries than the 'blue-eyed boy' of Father So-and-so. The elder has become satisfied that the young man has a vocation and stops questioning the conviction of his heart. He gets completely under the control of his feelings and evidence contrary to his established opinion is refused or denied. This attitude blocks the process of discernment. When other formators question the soundness of his judgment, he may accuse them of blindness or worse. Usually, such favourites will not last through the later years of formation as the preferential treatment they receive ends up producing negative fruit in character or behaviour.



Ceremony for the Renewal of the Declaration of Intent

If we do not want to expel candidates for the wrong reasons, it is important that formators become aware of their affects and that they learn not to be guided by them. Candidates are regularly expelled from seminaries because they got angry with the rector, or were impolite to a formator. It is very possible that many of these cases gave a valid basis for dismissal. Still, I would maintain that the dismissal was wrong if the formators acted under the influence of what they felt; it would only be right if, after questioning themselves and recovering their serenity of mind and heart, they thought it was the course of action that God wanted them to follow.

**Feelings
should not
guide our
discernment**

But things are never simple. Feelings should not guide our discernment, but there are still occasions when they have a place. At times, a certain unease can manifest itself in contacts with a candidate. Is it my problem or his? I try to find out its source in myself; I ask where it originates in my heart but find no answer. I have no particular antipathy for the person; I want to help him. I am at peace; but the impression remains. The origin of this affect might prove impossible to find out. Because of subtle body language that I might not even be able to objectivise, thoughts have crossed my mind: 'This fellow is not honest'. I accept the thought as a possible hypothesis and keep on listening, watching out for details from which such a thought might arise, such as the candidate avoiding my eye (a sign which might be culturally related), watching out also for details which might disprove the hypothesis. If I am the only formator who has such an impression, I do not trust it. When it is shared by at least one other staff member, I take it seriously. Often such intuitions manifest themselves in spiritual direction, and later developments prove their validity. In other words, I tend to trust such intuitions, especially when they last, although I am always looking for contrary evidence. Such a feeling should not directly guide action, but the message it conveys can have some impact on the decision that needs to be taken.

The Formation of the Formators

Often formators are appointed to seminaries because they have a degree in a certain subject. They are mainly teachers. By the simple fact of their ordination, it is assumed that they will be able to be spiritual directors and to accomplish the necessary vocational discernment of the seminarians. But nothing is further from the truth.

Spiritual direction is an art. It requires that the person has enough natural abilities to practise it (and here being in touch with the self is an important element), and also that he be given the necessary training.

St Teresa of Avila suffered at the hands of priests who did not understand her and guided her in the wrong way:

The beginner needs counsel so as to see what helps him most. For this reason a master is necessary providing he has experience. If he doesn't, he can be greatly mistaken and lead a soul without understanding it nor allowing it to understand itself Since they do not understand spiritual things, these masters afflict soul and body and obstruct progress.¹

And Jesus warned would-be guides that they could turn out to be 'blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.' (Matthew 15:14) There are many dangers.

First, if the formator is not sufficiently in contact with his inner life, he can act out of disordinate attachment, not realising the motivation behind his decision. If a novice master has unrecognised homosexual feelings, he may be attracted towards young men willing to enter into special (non-sexual) friendship with him and reject those who refuse. A rector who has a high sense of his own dignity might esteem unfit for the priesthood the witty young man who dared to poke some well-deserved fun at his inflated ego. One of the qualities most needed for formation work is honesty with oneself, combined with a good deal of self-knowledge. These should be a prerequisite for anybody who wants to engage in the business of guiding others.

An emotionally blind spiritual director has little chance of perceiving in others what he has not perceived in himself or, even worse, what he does not want to confront in himself. He cannot give what he does not have. How will he help people becoming more self-aware when he is not conscious of the need for self-awareness? How will a spiritual director who has bottled up all the woundedness of his heart help others do a job that he has not been able to do on himself? How will he guide others in the ways of prayer when he does not know

¹ St Theresa of Avila, *Autobiography*, chapter 14, in *The Collected Works of St Teresa of Avila*, volume 1, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodríguez (Bangalore: AVP Publications, 1982), 94.

them well? A spiritual director without sufficient self-knowledge is really a blind guide with all the dangers that this entails. Many formators have never been given the time and opportunity to work on themselves. They have studied, and then they have lurched from Charybdis into Scylla, from one seminary straight into another. They have never confronted themselves outside the seminary. They do not have much life experience, and have not been helped to reflect and learn from the little they have.

Secondly, communication has its laws and its pitfalls, and so does spiritual direction. Both have to be learnt. It does not take a great scholar to guide a person through an eight-day retreat. One only needs a minimum knowledge of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius. One starts with the Principle and Foundation, followed by the First Week on sin, followed by the Call of the King and the Second Week of contemplation of the life of Jesus. It is rather easy to think of texts from the scriptures to fit into this simple pattern. But it takes some experience and sensitivity to feel what lead or sign needs to be followed and what can be left out, what is important and what is not, where the retreatant's scars and wounds are, what comes from the very heart of the person and what is more superficial. One needs more

experience to know when to insist on points of resistance, and to warn when good intentions might lead in the wrong way.

I was given three years of studies and formation before joining the novitiate team. Looking back at my few attempts at spiritual direction when I was in pastoral work, before those three years, I realise now I did not have a clue what it was all about: I had very little idea what the basis of discernment was. I did not know to what people were supposed to pay attention in



order to prepare themselves for an election. Even during my first attempts at spiritual direction after my studies, I can now spot many mistakes, times when I did not pick up the lead, when I allowed myself to be waylaid. As with all crafts, this one has to be learnt. Some people might be naturally gifted, but still they need to learn the skills and laws of the trade.

Some directors take their title literally and *direct* others, telling them what to do and what to leave. They do not help their directees to become responsible, grown-up children of a loving Father, but encourage them to remain immature. They ignore the counsel of Ignatius: 'the director of the Exercises, as a balance at equilibrium, without leaning to one side or the other, should permit the Creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature directly with his creator and Lord' (Exx 15). Others have heard of the *agere contra* and apply it consistently and in all circumstances, pushing the directee to move against all natural likes and dislikes, using as an overall strategy what is supposed to be only a tactic applied to disordinate attachments. Yet others will propose one way only to all who come to them for direction, forgetting Annotation 18, which calls for adaptation.

The Holy Spirit helps those confronted with decisions to a necessary discernment. The Spirit can speak directly to their hearts and give them light. To assist the Spirit in this task takes more than goodwill. If one does not want to be more of an obstacle than a help, one needs to have studied and to have experience of the Spirit's ways. One can learn about discernment by being guided by others. One of the requirements for giving the thirty-day retreat is to have done it oneself. In courses aiming at forming the formators, they are given the chance to guide others while under supervision themselves. This is no superfluous luxury, but should be seen as an obligation for everyone engaged in this type of ministry. One learns from contact with experts. I found it highly surprising that in the Roman university I attended, which was offering degrees in psychology and spirituality, among other subjects, accompaniment was required of the students in psychology, but nothing was offered to those in spirituality, even when they requested it.

It is also surprising that a course on discernment does not figure on the list of the necessary requirements before ordination. This might

help young men who are confronted with a life commitment to make the right decision. It might also give them some background in how to counsel others when their help is needed.

The Discernment of the Candidate

When seminary staff notice no impediment and a candidate presents the necessary qualities, even then the young man should not necessarily proceed towards ordination. The most difficult and challenging task remains: his own discernment. He has to find a personal answer to the question: is it God's call, God's way for me, or should I change direction? In theory the objective criteria of discernment have been addressed by both staff and candidate. But there remain the subjective ones: the subtle variations of mood, feelings and emotions, the ups and downs of affective life, all the consolations and desolations.

Ignatius proposes three ways to arrive at a decision. Experts differ in how they understand the relationships between these different approaches and their reliability for discerning God's will.

- First, God may make God's will known to the person in such a way that doubt is not possible. Opinions differ as to how frequently this occurs. Some candidates would like formators to believe that they have had such an experience: God is calling them, there is no shadow of a doubt. But too much certainty is usually a warning sign. It means that the person is not indifferent, not open to alternatives. God respects human freedom and does not coerce us. God will not compel someone to follow a certain road by forcing him to an undue clarity. St Paul might be quoted as an exception to this rule, but he was a person totally dedicated to God and to accomplishing God's will as far as he knew it. This is usually not the state of the candidates flocking into the seminaries. For all practical purposes, this first way may safely be discarded as far as normal seminarians are concerned because they are not ready for such an experience. Even if one of them has had this experience, it is safe to say that further discernment is still necessary. If the original enlightenment itself bears God's imprint and cannot be faked by the contrary spirit, the consequences or decisions drawn from it still have to be subjected to careful discernment

for the good reason that they do not share in the certainty of God's original action in the soul.

- The second way of discerning God's will consists in noticing the different motions of the heart, the alternation of consoling and desolating feelings that agitate the soul as it envisions one alternative, then another.
- The third and last way is to use the familiar list of pros and cons upon which one takes the time to ponder, pray and meditate.

For important decisions, it is generally agreed that it is better not to rely on either the second or the third on its own, but to use them both in conjunction. The election process relies, thus, on both thinking and feeling, awareness of both aspects being basic for a sound discernment. Even if a candidate is sufficiently aware of his thinking, his vocational discernment also relies heavily on awareness of his affective landscape.

But how is the candidate ever going to come to a sound discernment if he is not aware enough? Seminary staff will make a discernment from without, if they get enough knowledge of what is really happening in the life of the candidate. In seminaries where over a hundred students live together, a lot can escape their attention.² But the discernment from within will prove almost impossible. When a youth is convinced that he has a vocation, nothing disturbs that conviction. At the level of the head he may even be confident that he is indifferent and open to all alternatives. Only the actual experience of being asked to leave the seminary (when it does happen) will show him what the value of that indifference was. God speaks and gives indications, warning about the lack of indifference or about a wrong decision. But if the person does not pay attention to his deep unease at the thought of celibacy, to dryness in his prayer and to other signs of desolation, his conviction of his vocation will remain unchallenged till the final commitment. There are many things that may hide even from a person of goodwill that he has taken the wrong path: enthusiasm, peer pressure, superficial sources of happiness such as dress, food and travel, and the practice of devotional prayer leaving little space for

² It has happened that a deacon was ready to be ordained when quite a few people knew he had wife and children in his village of origin.

silence and a deeper encounter with the Lord. It is possible that some candidates for religious life are actually being disobedient to God in the very act of vowing obedience. They are not fulfilling God's will; it is not God who calls them to religious life but their own desire.

The same problem will also mar the confirmation process, making it as difficult as the original discernment. Confirmation is necessary for decisions taken in the second or third way because all the deviousness of the human heart and of its inordinate attachments can come into play when one tries to discern between God's will and one's own. The Spirit can confirm the election by suggesting additional arguments in favour of the decision taken or by granting deep peace and happiness. Many authors would maintain that the confirmation of any election has to be made in this, second way, by looking for affective signs that the decision taken is the right one. But again, how are people insufficiently aware of their inner states to notice those signs?

Even for one who accepts the opinion of Jules Toner that the third way is sufficient for taking decisions concerning one's way of life,³ awareness of affects remains particularly important for another reason. In order to reach a sound discernment, a person must be in a state of indifference, looking only for God's greater glory and nothing else. This indifference is not a state of the mind but of the heart. One does not think indifferently but feel indifferent. People have no problem in thinking themselves completely free to make their decision. But their normal reaction is to feel unhappy when they are asked to pray for the opposite of what they want. Then all their resistances come to the surface. How can the attachment to one's desire manifest itself at the level of the thinking? In all honesty, the person believes that he or she desires only God's will. It is very easy to neglect or refute arguments against one's position when one is convinced. But there is usually a clear affective sign of emotional attachment: anger at anybody or anything that goes against one's desire, or some other affective sign such as sadness, fear or depression. Young men who are asked to leave the seminary will very seldom do so in peace.

Vowed religious who misbehave or who leave their community after some time can give different reasons for their action. It is possible

³ Jules Toner, *Discerning God's Will: Ignatius of Loyola's Teaching on Christian Decision Making* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1991), 269–273.

that they have been unfaithful, or that the congregation has placed a load on them that they were not able to bear. But it is also possible that they were never called by God in the first place. If they were not helped to pay attention to their affective life, if they were not encouraged to become more aware of both their thoughts and their feelings, how could they have made a proper discernment? They were not listening for God's voice nor looking for indications from God in the right places!

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