A NOTE ON RELIGIOUS MATURITY

By JAMES WALSH

THE DECREE *Perfectae Caritatis* contains several statements which will be of particular interest to Catholics working in the fields of psychology and sociology. It is said, for instance, that 'the manner of life, of prayer and of work should be suited to the actual physical and psychological conditions of the religious, and also . . . to the needs of the apostolate, cultural standards and social and economic circumstances'; that, in living a virginal life, religious 'will not neglect the natural means which make for mental and bodily health'; that they should not be admitted to the profession of the vow of chastity 'before they have attained the necessary psychological and emotional maturity'; and that obedience does not 'lower the dignity of the human person, but brings it to maturity'.

The references to maturity will probably attract most attention, both within religious life and outside it, because of their immediate bearing on that peculiarly modern phenomenon in the Church today which is known as the crisis of authority. If there is a single criticism being levelled at religious from within the Church it is that of immaturity. The very structure of religious life, it is said, makes for immaturity, the stunting of the growth of the individual personality: the ideal of poverty, in an affluent society, has degenerated into infantile dependence of subject on superior; the traditionally negative approach to the vow of virginity unfits the religious for any fruitful contact with the world where his apostolate should be exercised; whilst obedience is nothing more than a convenient religious sublimation of the victorian principle, 'children should be seen and not heard'.

The way in which the Church has chosen to answer these criticisms, and the theological reassurance she has given to her religious, coincides with a new dimension that Catholic sociologists are beginning to apply to their own science.

> If we accept the implications of the theology of Christ incarnate in his Church here and now, we cannot dismiss

> sociology as being like any other discipline precisely because it is concerned with human beings and the communities they create for themselves to incorporate, effectively or otherwise, their beliefs, and to support their values. Thus sociology, being man's attempt to understand the changing communities of which human society consists, gives us in consequence further insight into God's continuing act of creation and his unfolding plan for the redemption of the many communities of which the people of God is composed.[1]

It must, however, be stressed that the Council, in using such terms as 'emotional maturity', 'mental health', 'social circumstances', had no intention of employing them in a professional or technical sense. The Council's pastoral role must be taken to predominate in what it says to religious, as to any other community within the people of God; so that, unless it can be positively established otherwise, it must be taken for granted that these phrases are used in their current common and non-technical sense. On the other hand, the Council Fathers, in the course of their discussions, showed themselves acutely aware of current problems. They recognized that what is true of society in general will be true, *mutatis mutandis*, of the Church also.

The Council was also informed of the various experiments and research which have been taking place in recent years amongst religious in various parts of the world, particularly in Europe and the United States: psychiatric treatment for specific 'religious' neuroses, sociological surveys which try to account for pattern-variation in religious vocations, and psychological and psychometric testing of candidates for religious life, especially in those institutes devoted to apostolic activity. Yet it may confidently be said that none of the directives of the Decree refer to these experiments, either positively or negatively. When the Council speaks, for example, of the necessary psychological and emotional maturity for profession, it gives no directives as to how this can be discovered, when it takes place, or how it is to be attained. Similarly, when the Decree, in the context of virginity, speaks of the natural means which make for mental and bodily health, this is simply a recognition that grace builds on nature; that 'this precious gift of grace, given for the sake of the kingdom of heaven', can impose strain and tension fraught

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[1] J. D. Halloran and Joan Brothers, *The Uses of Sociology* (London, 1966), p 89.

with the possibilities of neurosis and mental break-down.

There can, however, be no doubt that the whole tenor of the Decree imposes on religious institutes the necessity of acquiring a new expertise, particularly in the fields of what may be called pastoral psychology and sociology. If the effective apostolic action of religious depends partly on 'their ability to discern wisely in the light of faith, trends and situations in the world of today', then we must acknowledge that 'a future relationship between theology and sociology must not be one of distinct, even opposing disciplines . . . nor even the tentative flirtation envisaged by some christian writers, but the studies indissolubly wedded in the pursuit of understanding the nature of the Church in the world';[1] even as we are already recognizing that spiritual directors and psychiatrists have much to say to each other on the question of counselling.

Amongst the several problems posed by the Decree which have psychological and sociological implications, the most urgent would certainly appear to be that of psychological maturity. It is a problem which affects, in turn, the selection of candidates, noviciate training, admission to vows, both temporary and perpetual, and the harmonious integration of young religious into a community whose ages often range across sixty and seventy years. The apostolic commitments of most religious orders are expanding, whilst the number of vocations is diminishing; at the same time, 'leakage' of religious in their middle and late twenties is certainly increasing. Most sociologists and psychologists would agree with Professor J. B. Mays:

> That youth as a period of social and psychological development presents serious problems in all western european societies, and that these are, in origin though probably not in degree, similar to those encountered in american society. They arise primarily from the uncertainty of adults regarding the role that young people should be given in the life of the community.[2]

Professor Mays observes that middle and upper class children are protected during their adolescence from many of the stresses of modern life, as against the working-class children who are

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[1] Halloran and Brothers *Loc. cit.* p 90.

[2] J. B. Mays, 'Teen-age culture in contemporary Britain and Europe', in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol 358, (November 1961), pp 30–31. Professor Mays is head of the department of social science in the University of Liverpool, England.

especially subjected to stresses and temptations during their adolescent working years.[1] Normally speaking, it can be said that the homes from which religious vocations to the active apostolate are drawn will provide the equivalent circumstances of middle class: the circumstances of those to whom some of the attributes of maturity have been granted. But the same environment will also manifest the contrary tendency – of extending the period of dependency in other directions to a later age. Mays opines that the adolescent period of the teenage covers roughly a decade, and that, to many minds, this is unduly prolonged.

Some religious superiors would extend this period of adolescent development, in which a person's organic and intellectual growth runs ahead of personal growth, even further. They would say that the normal candidate for religious life is not sufficiently mature to take religious vows at the end of the normal noviciate. They would say that adolescence begins about twelve, because adult problems are often forced on the attention of the young at this age; and that it is prolonged to the age of twenty-six or later. Because the world, and the Church in the world, is changing all the time and in so many ways, the adolescent cannot adjust himself: if only things would 'stay put' for a while, he could measure himself against them and find himself in the process. But, as it is, it takes him an extremely long time to mature and to cohere as a person. So it is that there are many cases of young religious leaving the religious life in their middle or late twenties, not because of rebellion or dissatisfaction, but because they decide 'it is not for me'. It would appear that these young religious suddenly discover themselves, and in the process become increasingly convinced that 'religious life is not for me': for the 'me' that now exists for the first time. In such a situation, it is not possible for them to consider the vows they have taken as binding for life: it is almost as if another person had taken them. If this diagnosis is correct, the conclusion would be that such individuals are in fact morally incapable of taking on a life-long commitment at the age of nineteen to twenty-one.

There is another factor which may help to delay maturity. Religious, on the whole, are recruited from grammar schools or high schools. Leaving school, at least this type of school, used to be the great time of choice and decision about a career; but now, for so many, such a decision is limited to what form of higher education

[1] *Loc. cit.* p 30–31.

is to be chosen. In the recent experience of many religious superiors, those who come to a noviciate at the age of twenty-two or twenty-three, after taking a course at university or starting some other profession, either leave in a few weeks or persevere. It is those who enter straight from school who are liable to leave anything up to ten years later. The older entrants are capable of making a decision and sticking to it; the younger are not.

Another factor which apparently prolongs adolescence is the confusion that exists in the minds of young people between group and community. The teenage group tends to develop those personal defence mechanisms which often become neuroses in religious communities, and impede true community interchange.[1]

The tentative conclusion would be, that, as long as the pattern of modern society remains – greater economic security and increased welfare coupled with the general psychological climate of anxiety under the shadow of the bomb and total war, it would be well to seek and encourage vocations amongst an older age group: in the universities and comparable institutions, rather than in the schools. Such an attitude would indeed be a corrective to the over-anxiety many religious institutes are manifesting because of the drop in vocations in proportion to their apostolic commitments. At the same time, we must remember that many young christians accept the sacramental duties of married life at the very age when young religious are presenting themselves for perpetual vows in religion; and they mature rapidly in the circumstances of responsibility. Without pressing this analogy too far, we ought to be equally hopeful that a similar acceleration in the rate of maturing can occur in religious life, given the proper formation.

A partial answer to the problem of maturity is, of course, temporary rather than permanent vows for some years after the noviceship, in order to enable response to vocation to develop and cohere in a way that will enrich the personality under the action of divine grace. But, as the Decree implies, the only satisfactory solution is to be found in the refashioning and adapting of religious formation in a manner 'best suited to our times'.[2] We suggest that

[1] It must be noted, however, that many young religious can, and do, succeed in clarifying this distinction for themselves. It therefore comes as a shock to them to find that very heavy emphasis is laid on close conformity to an external pattern in religious life: for this is the *sine qua non* of belonging to a teenage group, as opposed to a community.

[2] This adaptation will also extend itself to methods of selecting candidates. The pressing needs of the specifically religious apostolate have, perhaps, increased the tendency in

this formation, in the noviciate and juniorate alike, should have the following characteristics:

It should be aimed at the progressive development of the personality within the community. The novice and the young religious should be set tasks and objectives that involve his contributing to the work of a team; in this way he will learn that his own contribution matters, and at the same time his personality will develop in an outward looking way because he puts the good of the community before his own. There must be a set framework: religious life needs it, and the young religious needs it, for strong and stable growth. It will be part of the renewal of a religious institute to consider the rules and customs which dictate the external patterns of living, so as to decide what constitutes a stable framework of life in modern conditions, and what tends rather to make a herd or a group, in which the young religious may easily feel that he is 'lost in the crowd'. It is no longer sufficient to take it for granted that spiritual direction will enable the individual to adapt himself to external norms which belong to another age. During this process, the superior, or the immediate director of the young religious, will need both to assist and to test his development; trying to help him to find himself by becoming sensitive to and co-operating with the needs of others; and thereby learning to strike the right balance between the need of personal growth and the need to forget oneself for the good of the whole.

In these days, it will probably be necessary to put the young religious more and more in touch with the outside world, since he must be prepared to live close to it; it will be one more test of how he reacts: whether he is able to value personally and to live the spiritual ideals of the religious life without the help of an insulated and protected atmosphere.

It will be taken for granted that a certain number of candidates will leave during this process, either because they lack the necessary qualities, or because the qualities they possess settle down together in a blend which makes them no longer feel at home in religion. Any young religious will feel discouraged from time to time. One has to learn to distinguish the despondent mood which is uncharacteristic and can be weathered, from a more permanent or

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some institutes to accept practically all candidates who present themselves, and to hope that they will 'receive' the necessary qualities during the noviciate, including, in some cases, the 'grace of vocation'!

recurrent malaise, which is a sign, after all, that the young person does not belong in religious life. The judgment which characterizes this malaise as 'a temptation against vocation' has, perhaps, been made far too readily in the past, and has led to many tragic results.

It must be taken for granted that what is written above is tentative, and largely a matter of opinion: yet one based on a certain amount of experience,[1] and set firmly against the background of the Council's clear and firm teaching on the nature and worth of religious life, and particularly its essential ecclesial function. It is in terms of this teaching that psychological maturity in religious life must ultimately be defined: the living development of vocation, substantial fidelity in a day-to-day response to those graces which the Lord gives to the religious who has a persevering desire to achieve an increasingly intimate union with the Christ who became poor that we might become rich, and who offered himself in single-minded sacrificial love for the fulfilment of the Father's salvific will.

[1] I must acknowledge here my substantial debt to Fr John Coventry, S.J., professor of theology at Heythrop College, until recently provincial of the English Province of the Society of Jesus and president of the council of Religious Major Superiors of England and Wales; also to Fr George Croft, S.J., professor of pastoral psychology at Heythrop College.