READINESS FOR RELIGIOUS LIFE

The psychological assumptions underlying the new document on Formation.

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THE RECENT DOCUMENT from the Sacred Congregation of Religious on the formation of young candidates to the religious life offers realistic opportunities for experimentation comparable to those already at work in the renewal of religious life as a whole. All this experimentation is aimed at deepening our own understanding of the life of consecration to which we have dedicated ourselves in the Church, as well as enabling us to live out that consecration in the changed circumstances of our day. If this was seen to be necessary for those of us already formed and committed to a way of life inherited from the past, it must be even more so for the younger generation now entering with us and for those whom we hope to see in the generations to come. In fact, the very future of religious life itself, as of particular congregations, may well stand or fall by our readiness to apply the proposals put forward in the present document.

The new freedom to experiment presents us not only with opportunities but also with a challenge: we need vision to dare to explore new ways of formation, so as to discover those most suited to our own congregation; at the same time we need to see the logical consequences of the changes we are initiating as they will affect those religious already formed. The challenge is one that is however buttressed by safeguards within the document itself, where there is clearly no intention of in any way watering down the real demands entailed in the special following of Christ that has always been the crux and core of a religious vocation. At the same time, it is a challenge that can be faced realistically in the light of recent studies of human development, and particularly of the peculiar needs of contemporary adolescents from whom our future vocations will come. Underlying the document are many assumptions drawn from psychological theory, and supported by the practical experience of those in charge of young religious in recent times. It is important that these should be explored and understood, so that their

merits may be assessed by those who will have to make the specific decisions within any given congregation.

In the present article we will focus on what seem to be the three most radical proposals put before us: first, the age of admission to the novitiate, which it is suggested should be later than we have been accustomed to in the past; secondly, the introduction into the novitiate period of some type of 'formative activities' connected with the work of the congregation; and finally, the possibility of allowing some form of temporary commitment other than vows as a preparation for eventual final profession at a later stage. The theological and canonical implications of these proposals are discussed in the commentary on the instruction; our purpose here will be to examine the psychological benefits that may or may not be expected from such developments.

Each of these is offered for the serious consideration of religious superiors, from whom many of the proposals originated in the first place. There is no intention at any level of imposing them on any given congregation, or even of specifying too narrowly what form they should take. It is therefore all the more important that those responsible for making the decisions should be able to assess the purpose of the changes now allowed, and the pros and cons that need to be considered, within the context of the particular spirit and purpose of their own congregation.

A later age of entry

'. . . admission to the novitiate ought to be put off to a later age than was previously the case'. On this point at least the document is clear. But what is the age of admission that is here considered as too early, and how much later is the age now to be set? Two separate issues seem to be involved in this, each of which requires careful consideration. First, the present practice of accepting young people for pre-novitiate training from the age of fifteen or even earlier: and secondly, the question of whether to accept candidates even at the age of eighteen, when their contemporaries are beginning their professional training or going on to higher education, or whether instead to wait even longer until the candidates have themselves had one or more years of more independent life in a student or working capacity.

The practice of preparing young aspirants to the religious life in what the document calls 'apostolic schools or colleges or seminaries' has been very much under fire recently, not only because of the

low perseverance rate of such candidates even into the novitiate proper, but also for the lack of realistic opportunities for growth in maturity that such a system necessarily involves. The present document does not go to the extreme of advising against such a system, but clearly has doubts about the advisability of letting candidates proceed directly to the novitiate, without some more normal experience of real life, which 'would help the candidate to acquire that degree of human and emotional maturity by which he would be better prepared to make a real decision about entering religous life....' We need to ask whether such a system is necessarily the most suited to preparing young people to make this mature decision. And if not, would a reform of the system rather than its complete abandonment be more to the point? For this, we must examine the human and emotional needs of young people at this stage of their development, and assess how far we can help those attracted to the religious life in their early teens to grow and mature not only in their response to this vocation, but also in that personal maturity which is such an essential for the religious of today.

One of the first points to make is that religious or spiritual maturity cannot be expected before the individual concerned has already reached this stage at the human, personal level; valid religious experience and interests may indeed contribute towards this growth in maturity at the natural level, but cannot of themselves provide a sufficient basis of development as they may well have done in a more stable society of the past, particularly one in which religious and social values were more closely identified than is true of today. In fact, it is in the area of religious maturity and even religious knowledge that the document specifies that many potential candidates to the religious life are at present falling short. The first concern of those responsible for accepting these young applicants should be to assess how far this applies to any individual concerned, and how far it needs to be remedied before embarking on the formal stage of the novitiate.

What are the needs of young people in their early teens, and what is the best preparation we can give them, for life as a whole and for religious life in particular? This is a complex question, and one that varies as much from one individual to another as within different social contexts. It is made more complex by the rapid social changes that if anything seem to be accelerating within the Church as a whole and within religious congregations in particular. The main task of the adolescent process has always been the transition to an

adult role in society, and involves the development of a new sense of personal identity, growing out of the life experiences of the individual's past but always in the context of the society into which he has to insert himself.[1]

In comparison with simpler, less unstable societies than our own, transition to adulthood is not achieved without stress and strain which affect old and young alike. Psychoanalysts have interpreted this transition as bound up with the two underlying drives of sexuality and aggression, and as these may throw light on two of the critical areas within religious life today, celibacy and authority, it is important to look at these more closely.

The main changes that occur at early adolescence are associated with the onset of physical puberty, changes to which the young person has to adjust emotionally, intellectually and socially, and not only at the physical level. Acceptance of normal sexual feelings is one important aspect of this and should not be confined simply to the guilt feelings associated with the practice of masturbation; the peak incidence of this practice falls off normally after the age of fifteen for boys, particularly when they begin to be personally interested in a member of the opposite sex.

Young people need to have access to a whole range of 'models' of both sexes with whom to identify, and work out their own sex role. There is much fantasy involved in the process, which can be effectively channelled and helped forward through a wide acquaintance with good literature of all kinds, as well as the creative use of self-expression in various media. The process seems to work at three levels: from one's own to the opposite sex, from groups to individuals, and from distant to personally known figures. But unless there is genuine contact with real people, adults as well as one's own age-group, much of the process remains immature and unintegrated. This will include the experience of mixing socially with the opposite sex, in which opportunities for exploring each other's interests and reactions are an essential part of the process. This is a particularly important factor in determining the ability of future religious to live a life of consecrated virginity, and is one that can best be achieved in the setting of the ordinary family, and where possible in a co-educational context.

This 'contact' and 'exploration' of the opposite sex is by no means limited to, or even predominantly concerned with, physical exper-

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[1] See Erikson, E. H., *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (London, 1968).

ience of each other especially in the early teens, when one of the chief needs is for opportunities for discussion and conversation. This can be a time-consuming business, but it is more typical of the age-group than the pseudo-sexuality that many american psychiatrists are now ready to decry in the expectations of adult behaviour that society puts on its younger members. This has been well illustrated in the dilemma shown by Salinger's young hero in *Catcher in the Rye*. This need for mutual dialogue, as a means of working out one's own personal identity, continues into the late teens, as does the second main need of the age-group, the disassociation from adult frames of reference and the formation of personally accepted beliefs and values. For this, there may be involved a temporary rejection of the authority of those responsible for one's past and present situation, not excluding that of religious belief and practice.

Religious doubts and difficulties seem to have become accepted as a 'normal' phenomenon of adolescent development, at least among those who have had a fairly orthodox religious upbringing.[1] It is difficult to assess how far this is a result of faulty teaching in the past, and how far this can be seen as an essentially maturing process, a putting away of the things of a child. This process has been accelerated in our own generation by the doctrinal developments and liturgical changes initiated by Vatican II, and has left many adults at sea and unable to guide the questioning minds of the younger generation. One typical form of adolescent protest has even invaded our liturgical scene, in the shape of guitar Masses and folk hymns, a reflection of the unrest of the younger generation as well as an attempt to create a more meaningful form of religious worship.

Religious doubts and protests are simply one expression of the adolescent need to test out all authority figures; at this stage he needs to 'kick' against the existing structures, in order to find the limits of his own powers, often at the risk of damaging his own skin. He still needs limits, otherwise he will flounder hopelessly, but these must be realistic by the standards of the world outside, within which he has increasingly to operate. Unless some sort of reassessment takes place, the beliefs and attitudes of the individual will necessarily remain at a juvenile level, and be totally inadequate to the demands of adult living in an open society.

It could be argued that this reassessment is made doubly difficult

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[1] See Berridge, M. M. Norbert, *The Religious Development of Children* (London, 1966).

for those young people who are already under the 'authority' of their potential religious 'superiors', and that the normal process of reassessment of attitudes and beliefs might be blocked for fear of its being mistaken for a rejection of the religious vocation itself. Similarly, the 'normal' interest in the oppsite sex that is now seen as a feature of the development of the adolescent's personal identity could well be mistaken for a sign of unsuitability to the life of chastity expected of the future religious. For each of these reasons, the introduction of an interim period between the aspirantship and the novitiate proper would appear to be well called for and might even lead to the discontinuation of such pre-novitiate colleges, at least as full-time educational establishments.

This would free the religious concerned for a more pastoral and counselling role, both in schools and colleges. There is no doubt that young people – quite apart from the case of the aspirant to the religious life – need contact with and guidance from sympathetic adults, even when there is a continuing attraction to the peer group. This need of guidance continues for most young people well into the 18–25 age group of the late adolescent, especially those who are still in a dependent student status.

A recent survey of the problems of college entrants of the present decade[1] shows that in comparison with the immediate post-war generation, or even those of ten years ago, the present set of students show distinctive signs of tension and withdrawal, even though there is no evidence of greater maladaptation or immaturity. The majority report that their 'hardest battle' is with themselves, they dream more at night and wake up less refreshed in the morning. They are more inhibited, possibly over-controlled, 'playing it cool' at the intellectual level, where they claim to be as well informed (at college entry) as many of the 'experts'; but their intellectualism is self-centred, and reveals more vanity than true maturity. Even their interest in aesthetic activities is privatist and narcissistic, while their interest in the under-privileged arises as much from the sense of reality they gain from dealing with them as from what they themselves are able to give; and there is decrease of the intensity of bonds of friendship formed with others.

The crucial sense of loneliness typical of younger adolescents has by no means abated for the present generation of college students,

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[1] Heath, D. H., 'The Cool Ones', in *Journal of Religion and Health* (April 1968) pp 111–121.

and may well be a factor in the appeal of the 'hippy' way of life as a form of escape from mounting academic pressures as well as from the homogenizing impact of the mass media. The 'anti-establishment' mentality of the age-group is possibly a direct result of this limiting state of dependence, and has been found to come to an end only with the acceptance of adult responsibilities. Even the most radical members of the community, once established in marriage or full-time work, have been found to revert dramatically to the views and practices of their parents and professional superiors.

One possible criterion of readiness for religious life could well be the experience of responsibility for oneself at this level. This could develop as a deliberate part of the extended pre-novitiate period of training for those candidates attracted at an earlier age, and who would be associated more or less closely with the work of the religious congregation concerned; alternatively, the religious vocation itself might develop at a later stage as a result of contact with an individual member of the congregation in a position of joint-responsibility. The role of the professed religious would be increasingly that of spiritually guiding the younger person, towards the moment when a realistic choice to enter the novitiate could be made with 'a sufficient knowledge of the burden involved and by a free decision'.

'Formative activities' and the novitiate

A second aspect of the document closely related to this last point is the introduction into the novitiate period of some experience of the active apostolate of the congregation, presumably side by side with the already professed. The purpose of this experiment is not only to give the candidates some first-hand experience of the apostolic dimension to which they are to commit themselves, but to enable them to integrate more effectively the life of work and prayer that is the very basis of the apostolic vocation. It will also serve to introduce the novice to vital 'aspects of poverty and hard work in a real and living context'. This will be all the more necessary for those who have already had some experience of the real demands of earning their living before entering, for whom the novitiate way of life could easily appear as either artificial or cosy and secure, with the consequent risk of being rejected as unrealistic.

In other words, the whole spiritual training of the young religious is to be 'task-oriented', and directed, as the document states, 'from the very beginning and by a more direct method for the type of life

and work which will later be theirs'. It is during the novitiate that the emphasis is placed on the spiritual value of the activity, rather than on the professional experience to be gained; the more appropriate time and place for acquiring professional competence is during the extended pre-novitiate period, to be completed if necessary in the post-novitiate years. But the novitiate is to retain above all its formative purpose at the spiritual level: 'there is no substitute for it'.

A final feature to be stressed at this stage reflects the community awareness of young people today, one that is also being seen as increasingly important for religious life as a whole. The novitiate experience should be based on a group experience of living, and should be typified by 'the close relationship which ought to prevail among the novices'. But again the emphasis is on the spiritual value of the group experience, for the purpose of which the novices 'accord spiritual help to each other with a genuine simplicity and charity'. If numbers are too small for the novices themselves to be able to provide this experience, it is suggested that they should even be amalgamated within an existing community, 'capable of furthering and supporting the formation of this small group'.

An alternative to 'Temporary Vows'

Finally the question has been raised as to whether the person is even now ready to commit himself by way of vows, even of a temporary nature. Young people today are not lacking, as the document accepts, in idealism and generosity, but they are possibly more aware than any previous generation of their evolving personalities and their inability to predict their degree of commitment in the future. The very notion of a 'temporary vow' seems to some of them at least as a contradiction in terms, while they fully realize the serious nature of final commitment as entailed in permanent profession at a later stage.

The willingness of the Sacred Congregation to allow some form of 'temporary commitment . . . related in some way to the life patterned on the three evangelical counsels', shows a readiness to accept the reality of the situation in which young religious find themselves today, without side-tracking the disadvantages. Young people in all walks of life seem to need a prolonged period of what has been called a 'psychological moratorium', and the relevance of this to the present document has been examined elsewhere.[1] But at the same

[1] Berridge, Dorothy, S. H. C. J., 'Late Vocations: The Concept of a Psychological Moratorium', in *The Month* (May 1969), pp 292–299.

time, we must take care not to extend this period of delay in commitment beyond what is necessary; there is as much danger in prolonging the period of non-commitment as there is in forcing one prematurely.

The members of the congregation to which the younger person has dedicated himself in this way must be ready to accept him genuinely and validly as a fellow-religious. If so they will be able to continue not only the on-going formation of the younger generation within the context of their own commitment and experience of religious life, but they will also find themselves enriched and renewed by their association with the enthusiasm and insights that typify the age-group, not least those whom the holy Spirit has led into this way of life.