


A NOTE ON FORMATION-PERSONNEL

By JOHN HARRIOTT

 ONE THING to be said in favour of traditional religious life is that it was easy to run. The detailed system of rules, customs and observances together with rigorous obedience to authority backed up not only by human sanctions but by the somewhat uncritical interpretation of the superior's commands as the voice of God – such a system was, from one point of view, a dictator's delight. Within that context, it was easy to select and train recruits at the level of outward observance, and in all honesty it must be admitted that frequently the training went no deeper. It was also easy to select instructors. The instructor was first and foremost required to have a close knowledge of rules and constitutions, to exemplify their strict observance in his own life, and to convey something of the spirit as well as the letter. Of course the best instructors interpreted their work in a more sophisticated fashion than this, but broadly speaking priority was given to outward conformity. Recruits were judged as suitable or not, according to their outward and formal observance of rules and customs, and constant infringement was regarded as a sign that a candidate was unsuitable, quite apart from any glaring defect of character or temperament. In practice the system may not have been quite so automatic, but there was undoubtedly a detailed training procedure as there is for cooking: after a year or two at the correct temperature the candidate was pronounced 'done'.

The new constitution on training poses new problems. It strikes a better balance between the demands of the Institute and the needs of the individual, between outward observance and inner conviction. In so doing it will require a subtler selection and training system, and raises the question of what kind of instructors are needed and how they can be trained. The document shifts the emphasis in training, rightly I believe, from conformity and passivity to adult maturity and personal responsibility. These are important concepts. We welcome them and admire them when we meet them 'in the flesh', but they are hard to analyze, define, and, still more, cultivate.

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'Maturity', especially, is an elusive concept. It is a quality which develops throughout the course of a lifetime, and is the result of personal response to a wide variety of experiences. It certainly does not come from an academic study of books on the characteristics of the mature person, and no instructor or system of instruction is going to 'infuse' maturity. All that the new proposals – temporary promises, the lengthier period of preparation before final profession, a less secluded novitiate – can hold out is a promise that those making profession will be more mature than were candidates in the past.

It would, then, be sublimely arrogant to make categorical statements in this paper as to how instructors of religious aspirants should be trained. All one can hope to do is draw attention to some of the qualities which seem desirable in instructors, and the kind of experiences which might develop such qualities. It will, inevitably, be a strictly personal view, an answer to the question: What sort of person would I wish to be instructed by if I were entering religious life under the new dispensation?

The first requirement in the instructor would seem, then, to be a profound and sensitive understanding of human nature. It is, of course, easy to say as much in the abstract, hard to define such a capability in practice. It is not just the ability to 'get along with people'. It is not just warm sympathy. It is certainly not the fish-eyed cynicism which claims to 'see through' people. It is rather the gift of recognizing in another individual their particular blend of qualities, and which of these in the particular case foster, and which hinder, the achievement of full humanity. And nothing less will do. It is one thing to judge suitability by the way a person outwardly conforms to a set routine, and established standards in dress, work, deportment and so forth. It is quite another to judge without set guidelines whether a person has qualities of dedication, initiative, generosity, judgement, affective and emotional stability, endurance, application, warmth of heart, faith, hope and charity. For there is no ideal blend. The balance of such qualities can vary from individual to individual, they can be acquired at a quicker or slower rate, and they can be expressed in a variety of ways. What would be unremarkable behaviour quite consistent with a certain kind of temperament, might in another be a freakish oddity which signified neurosis. This observation is so simple that it would scarcely be worth making if it had not so frequently been ignored within religious Institutes.

The fact is that every order and congregation is ideally looking for an individual who is human, who is masculine or feminine human,

who is christian human, and who, as such, is willing to adopt the life-style of this or that congregation. Many orders and congregations can supply such a person with a fulfilling and satisfying life of dedication; most differ very little in their spirit, apostolic employments and conditions of service. Indeed, the distinctions which mark them off one from another are usually arbitrary, at least between those congregations which are not strictly contemplative. In future, with these arbitrary distinctions eroded still further, the criterion of suitability is likely to be less the candidate's ability to observe a detailed rule, than the fact that he or she is personally acceptable to the members of a particular order or even community. In practice this will probably mean that the ultra-revolutionary or the ultra-conservative in terms of the community's current thought and way of life will find themselves out on a limb. But even here a note of caution is needed, for every order has contained personalities whose own life-style has been extravagant or eccentric in terms of current practice, and who yet have, in the long run, been recognized as embodying the essentials of the order's spirit.

What one is struggling to say is that we are moving away from the mystique which sees a mysterious link between an individual and a particular congregation. Given certain fundamental qualities, a candidate for religious life can survive and flourish within a wide range of religious communities. The myth may have it that benedictines are peaceful and hospitable, and jesuits are jumpy and xenophobic, but in fact a particular order will make only the slightest adjustment to the basic temperament of its members. The instructors of the future will have to recognize this, that they are dealing with the essential man or woman, that this is their direct and primary concern, not the inculcation of habits and practices curious to the order: that they should be able to encourage and mark the stages of human development in candidates, and be able to judge when the time is ripe for profession.

Few people are likely to claim to be judges of human nature of the kind seemingly required. If they do, they are not. But what characteristics might point to the existence of better than normal judgement in a potential instructor? First of all one would name *openness*: one would want a man interested in and curious about the human scene, basically in sympathy with his own times, and able to learn from new ideas, aspirations, ways of doing things. Of course he must have knowledge and respect for the lessons of history, but the past should not be a deadweight on his shoulders. Secondly one would name

intelligence and *learning*: a good instructor would need the kind of mind which can take a point quickly and accurately, relate it to what he knows, and if necessary be able to modify what he knows in the light of it. Thirdly, *humility*, a sane estimate of his own strengths and fundamental weaknesses: the kind of understanding which makes a person reluctant to play God or attempt to mould others in his own image and likeness; which, too, is patient of human folly and erratic behaviour, and knows the difference between genuinely lunatic behaviour and what is only idiosyncratic within the context of religious life. Allied with this would be a profound respect for each individual person, and for the subtle differences between person and person. Next one would mention a certain *warmth*, a genuine liking for others. This may seem an odd thing to say, but even within religious life there are those whose personal relationships are governed merely by a strict sense of duty, a moral ideal of charity, which has no savour of affection in it and is uncomfortable in dealings with other human beings. To get inside another person, see things through their eyes, genuinely understand their situation, needs an instinctive love which starts by taking the side of the other and will search out everything that can be said in their defence. It is the love which flowers in that sensitivity we sometimes call social tact – the difference between the man at a party who knows when it is time to leave, and the man who has to be handed his hat. Finally, one would name *leadership*, the gift of fixing goals which are perceptibly important, and winning others over to their pursuit. A born leader is a born instructor, but because leadership seems to be innate, such a man is the hardest of all to come by.

All lists of good qualities are unconsciously funny, and the above catalogue is no exception. But perhaps dimly, obscurely, shadowy among the words, the kind of person one has in mind can be discerned. If so, is there any special training which can hopefully draw out or foster such a person? One is tempted to say that the best instructor of instructors is life itself. When we talk of training, more often than not, we think of books to be read, qualifications to be obtained, courses to be attended. Of course a certain amount of academic knowledge will be helpful to the instructor. Courses in psychology, counselling, group dynamics will be of obvious use to the instructor who seeks understanding of human nature. But more than these, practical experience of human beings in all their diversity is needed, and knowledge of human behaviour and human environments both normal and abnormal. Although some people

have the gift of making an imaginative leap into worlds where they have not themselves trodden, most need direct experience of a situation to understand how it affects others.

For this reason, one would envisage potential instructors being trained chiefly by giving them a diversity of tasks in a diversity of situations. At the risk of offending half the novice-masters and mistresses in the land, one would say that a number of years spent in a school or a parish is not the ideal preparation for the instructor of young religious. Certainly a spell as a teacher has its value: teaching does require the establishment of good personal relationships, it does provide insight into the growing pains and mentality of adolescents, it can lead to a sympathetic understanding of their values and ideals. But the teacher is always in a privileged position, if only because he can always control the amount of contradiction which he is willing or able to tolerate. Other, complementary, kinds of experience are needed. One suggestion would be a period of work which is sheer drudgery, the spirit-crushing work which is the lot of half the wage-earners in the country. For women this might well be office work, and the insatiable demand for typists, secretaries, and so forth in industry and the civil service would make this easy to arrange. For men, humdrum factory work would serve the same purpose. This purpose would be to run through the most basic human experiences – applying for a job, meeting required standards of punctuality and competence, enduring routine work, coping with and observing in others the strains and stresses, the conversation and interests of the most ordinary kind of life. If this sounds too cold and detached, a laboratory experiment, it may be added that the mere presence of a religious in such an environment, even in plain clothes, would probably lead to plenty of professionally apostolic work. A third suggestion would be a period of social work, a temporary seconding to child welfare work, probationary work, a Simon community, a hostel for vagrants, a mental hospital or some other such employment. This would provide not only a useful experience of abnormal human behaviour and its symptoms and characteristic expressions, but also provide a very valuable appreciation of the dedication, thoroughness, and methods of professional social workers. Finally, a period in a student community, at a university or its equivalent, would seem to be essential. Some rubbing shoulders with the articulate young, preferably without any official status, could be extremely valuable. It is, after all, from such an environment that the candidates to religious life are likely to

come in future, and all the informal experience of their background and mentality which can be gained will be helpful to the future instructor.

Such a programme of 'experiences', whether these or others like them, could be fitted into a couple of years, though a longer period would probably be desirable. And it takes for granted experience of the training and characteristic apostolic work of the order or congregation itself, just as this paper takes for granted a certain amount of traditional spiritual training and knowledge of the order's history and constitutions. Its main point is to propose that training the trainers requires a range of experience which has not traditionally been thought of as necessary to the future superior or instructor, but which ought to supplement the more academic courses for future instructors or superiors which may be thought desirable. And to give the reasons why.

All that has been said may suggest that the responsibility for developing mature men and women who can live out a permanent commitment to religious life will continue to devolve upon a single individual. But obviously much more is required than any one person can give. The superior or instructor of the future will be more like the conductor of an orchestra than the parent of a family. Training of the kind envisaged in the new constitution requires a team – experts in theology, spirituality, psychology, liturgy, social employments, and so forth. The task of the instructor will be to know what kinds of specialist help are required, and when to call upon them.

What has been said may seem miserably vague to those brought up in a more structured and rigorous tradition of religious life. But it is hard to see how tomorrow's opportunities can be caught on the wing except by people of vision and imagination, alive to new developments and new opportunities in society, who also possess an inner coherence, strength and conviction. Such men and women, the religious of the future, will only develop with the assistance of instructors who themselves possess such qualities, and these are qualities which rarely develop in a narrow or excessively protected environment.