

# FORMATIVE ACTIVITY IN THE NOVITIATE

By PAUL MOLINARI

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT dispositions in the recent Instruction on Religious Formation concerns the possible introduction into the novitiate programme of periods of formative activity, that is to say, of times during which the novices will lead the life and do the work which will later be theirs.<sup>1</sup>

It may be interesting to note that this legislation is not a complete novelty and by no means so revolutionary as some people may think. These periods of formative activity have, in fact, existed in the novitiate of the first great religious-apostolic Order, in the modern sense of the word, the Society of Jesus, for more than 400 years. Though, naturally, each religious Institute, if it wants to avail itself of the possibilities offered by the new legislation, will have to find its own ways and methods for making them operative and effective, it may nevertheless be of use to reflect briefly on the long-standing experience of the Society of Jesus in this matter: *Historia Magistra*, history teaches.

When Ignatius of Loyola set out to lay the structural foundations of his Order, a long and living experience had preceded: and naturally the training of the future members had occupied a very important place. The Saint had soon understood that only very few fully trained and formed persons would join his Company. He therefore knew that the future of his infant Order would essentially depend on the number, the quality and the training of young people whom the Lord would call to the type of religious life that he had envisaged. While the vocation of the future jesuits was evidently to be left to the mysterious and gracious ways of God's Providence, their training would also depend – and to a large extent – on the supernaturally enlightened wisdom of their directors and on the norms which the Society should lay down in this regard.

Here a real difficulty presented itself. The great established

---

<sup>1</sup> *Renovationis causam* 5, 23–25; cf *supra* I, pp 27–33, 69–74.

Orders of his time all had their novitiates and their own objectives, methods and regulations for the training of their members. Ignatius had a great admiration for the appropriateness of this type of training, and for the long and solid experience which lay behind it. But he felt that his Order, while making use of these treasures of wisdom and experience, would need something substantially new and different. He was urged by the Spirit to conceive of something that would be directly proportioned to the new type of life and activity for which the future members of the Society of Jesus ought to be prepared right from the outset of their religious life.

The religious Institutes of his time were either monastic, conventual or contemplative. His vision of the new religious body was a different one: he thought of an essentially apostolic Order, in which the religious life of its members should be entirely imbued with apostolic spirit and their apostolic activity animated by the religious spirit. The Society of Jesus was therefore to be an extremely mobile group, the members of which would frequently be unable to fall back on a stable community, a fixed order of the day or set periods of choral recitation of the divine office. Rather they would have to be able to live on their own as well, to spend many months in travelling from one place to another in their apostolic journeys and labours, and to lead their religious and spiritual lives under conditions which would be entirely different from those of other religious families. It was therefore imperative not only to test the candidates most carefully according to new criteria and methods, but also to introduce into their novitiate all those elements which would favour a realistic preparation for what would be expected of them in the future, and which would be a real help for the life and work which would be theirs.

From these basic considerations St Ignatius drew three major conclusions which were revolutionary with regard to the idea of the novitiate.

First of all, it appeared to him that his men needed a longer and more progressive training than had hitherto obtained in the traditional type of novitiate. At first he laid down that this period of spiritual formation should last one year and three months, but quite soon he expanded this time further, and decided that the novices of the Society should make their novitiate over a period of two full years.

Secondly, he felt that his novices needed an intensive introduction in the spiritual life proper to the Society by making the full Spiritual

Exercises; for these, in his own life and in that of his first companions, played a truly fundamental role, and can indeed be said to have been the soil in which the new Order originated.

Far from being a set of ascetical instructions and devotional practices, these Spiritual Exercises constitute an intense personal quest of the Lord, protracted over weeks and built upon a series of meditations which all gravitate around the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ and his salvific mission, as holy scripture reveals them to us. These exercises were to be done individually, though under the guidance of an experienced Master, only when it was felt that the aspirant had reached that level of maturity and spiritual growth which would enable him to respond fully to the demands of the call of Christ. Then, and only then, in a lengthy period of silence and solitude, the candidates for the religious life in the Society were expected to focus their whole attention on the great mysteries of our salvation, and to adapt themselves progressively to the demands of their call: to follow Christ the Redeemer and to share in his mission by imitating as closely as possible his way of life, his utter poverty, his virginal chastity, and above all else his complete kenosis:

Whoever desires to come with me must be contented with the food that I eat, with the drink and clothing that I have. In like manner he must labour as I do during the day, and watch during the night, in order that afterwards he may have part with me in the victory, as he has had in the hard work.<sup>1</sup>

Whoever desires to come with me must labour with me, in order that, following me in pain, he may likewise follow me in glory.<sup>2</sup>

This was the ideal of Ignatius; it was his concept of the vocation to the Society of Jesus. He therefore expected that those who had been really called by God and were opening their hearts to his grace would acquire a deeper interior knowledge of the Lord and would develop a living bond of affection for him. They would hence share intimately in his thoughts and adopt his criteria; they would participate in his love for the Father and for men; that love which led him to humble himself and to become obedient unto death, even to a death on the cross:

Those who wish to show greater affection and to signalize themselves in every kind of service of their eternal King and

<sup>1</sup> *Spiritual Exercises*, 93.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 95.

universal Lord, not only will offer their whole persons to labour, but also by acting against their own sensuality, and their carnal and wordly love, will make offers of greater worth and moment, saying: Eternal Lord of all things, I make my oblation with your favour and help, in the presence of your infinite goodness, and in the sight of your glorious Mother, and of the Saints of the heavenly court, protesting that I wish and desire, and that it is my deliberate determination (provided only it be to your greater service and praise) to imitate you in bearing all insults and reproaches, and all poverty, as well actual poverty as poverty of spirit, if your divine Majesty be pleased to choose and receive me to this life and state.<sup>1</sup>

And in the same vein the Saint had summarized his outlook on the spiritual dispositions which would be demanded of in all those who would wish to follow Christ in his new Order, by proposing to them the following ideal:

The better to imitate Christ our Lord, and to become actually more like to him, I desire and choose rather poverty with Christ poor, than riches; contempt with Christ contemned, than honours; and I desire to be esteemed as useless and foolish for Christ's sake, who was first held to be such, than to be accounted wise and prudent in this world.<sup>2</sup>

All this, of course, so as to be intimately associated with the Lord, to share in his mission and to spend oneself in apostolic labour. And yet this union with God was to be of such a nature that the religious would be constantly aware of his utter dependence on the living force that comes from God himself, because

all good things and all gifts descend from above, as my limited power from the supreme and infinite Might on high, and in the same way, justice, goodness, pity, mercy, etc., just as the rays descend from the sun, and waters from the spring.<sup>3</sup>

It is only thus that the apostolic labourer can really be a contemplative in action.

This then was the goal towards which the novice must aspire and which he must be anxious to embrace with all his heart at the end of the Spiritual Exercises.

<sup>1</sup> *Spiritual Exercises*, 98.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

Certainly, a man who in this long period of solitude, silence and prayer had generously made his oblation to the eternal King and made a total gift of self to his divine Lord and Master, had indeed achieved something great and noble. But, though treasuring highly the sincerity and generosity of those novices who had gone through the exercises with an open and willing heart, and had responded fervently to the invitations laid before them in this school of love, St Ignatius felt nevertheless the absolute need of testing their dispositions further, and of providing them at the same time with the opportunity of putting into practice there and then, during the novitiate, what they had felt to be the call of the Lord. With his profound knowledge of man, the Saint understood from the outset that it is one thing to grow spiritually in the seclusion and the protection of the novitiate, and quite another to live out these ideals in the blunt reality of every day life. Hence his insistence – and this is the third great innovation introduced by Ignatius into the novitiate programme of his Order – that the novices be tested further by a series of so-called ‘experiments’ which were intended to enable them to prove the authenticity of their generous sentiments: they were thus expected to lead, for a considerable amount of time, that type of religious life which later would be theirs, and to engage in those apostolic activities which they would be expected to discharge in the future.

So he would see to it that for an indeterminate period of time the novices would be assigned to the lowest type of service in the kitchen, under strict obedience towards the cook and his helpers. Princes and other members of the highest aristocracy who maybe had never set a foot in a kitchen, sons of rich merchants just as much as priests and scholars, who wanted to join the Order, were subjected to this severe test, so that they and their Superiors might find out whether their *Suscipe*, and their willingness to follow Christ in his poverty and obedience would really stand up under trying conditions; or whether it would fail under the strain of heavy toil and fatigue and humiliations of all kinds, or perhaps wear thin under the more subtle temptation that their talents were being wasted in lowly activities so alien to their former way of life, and so remote from what might have seemed to them to be the meaning of their religious and apostolic vocation.

But this experiment which was eminently designed to acquaint the novices with that poverty, humility and obedience which their following of Christ in the new religious Order would entail, was

only one of a whole series, out of which we will mention here but two, because they are particularly apt to illustrate the ignatian conception of the novitiate. We refer to the experiment of the pilgrimage and to that of service in one or more hospitals of the poor. Quite a few accounts of these experiments have come down to us, so that it is not difficult to give an accurate and vivid description of both.

Usually the candidates who made their novitiate in Rome were sent by St Ignatius to Loreto, the famous sanctuary of our Lady, some three hundred kilometres distant from the eternal City.<sup>1</sup> Many modern visitors to Italy have made this trip, but certainly under conditions rather different from those in which the young novices of the Society of Jesus had to get across the mountains in the sixteenth century. They went on foot, usually in twos, along roads which – to say the least – were sorely trying at all times, but which must have been torture in periods of rain and snow. For these pilgrimages were not only made in the beautiful times of the Italian spring or autumn, but also under the scourging heat of the summer sun and winter's icy winds. A modern traveller will find today all sorts of places along the road, where he can take a rest and restore himself in comfort. But in the times of St Ignatius this certainly did not apply; and besides, the novices did not have a penny in their pockets when they set out on their pilgrimage. They had to beg their bread as they went along and ask for a modest bed or simply a place in a barn, where they could spend the night. It was not rare for them to have to go without a meal or to sleep in the open. This is not surprising if one considers that in those times the number of vagrants, both clerical and lay, of rather dubious reputation was considerably high. They created a constant worry not only for the individual farmer but even for the various authorities charged with the maintenance of peace and order in the country.

The pilgrimage of the novices, then, was an excellent test, not only of their physical capacity to sustain those hardships which later would be expected from them in their apostolic journeys through Europe and in the mission countries, but still more of their spiritual endurance and perseverance. For it is obvious that a romantic

---

<sup>1</sup> For the Ignatian conception of the spiritual value of these pilgrimages, see: *Documenta pro peregrinis*, in *Regulae Societatis Jesu (1540-1556)*, edidit Dionysius Fernandez Zapico, S.J., *Monumenta Historica Societatis Jesu*, vol. 71 (Romae, 1948) pp 92-115; see further the numerous printed sources and early biographies of St Ignatius, his first companions, and in general of the Jesuits of the first generations.

dreamer would soon have awakened to reality and have begun to wonder whether this was really the type of life which he had envisaged in his lofty speculations on religious ideals. Inevitably, then, the thoughts of the pilgrims must have turned to what they had thought and felt when during the Spiritual Exercises they had meditated on how our Lord incessantly went from one village to the other, driven by his love, to announce the good tidings and to work and toil for the salvation of man in conditions and circumstances defined by his heavenly Father and out of obedience to his sacred will.

In their pilgrimage the novices shared also in the joys and the sorrows of Christ in his apostolic contacts with man. Whenever they came to a village or a hamlet, it was their task to offer their help to the parish priest: to gather the children around them and to give them catechetical instruction, and to undertake any other kind of apostolic activity of which they were capable. Inevitably they were at times scorned and ridiculed; not only the foreigners because they spoke a broken Italian, but also the Italians themselves if, as frequently happened, they were unable to express themselves in a language intelligible to the peasants and other simple folk, who at the very best spoke and understood only their own dialect. But alongside these trying and disillusioning first apostolic efforts, there were other occasions on which the word of the Lord was eagerly perceived. Here the novices experienced the mysterious and always new joy of being an efficacious instrument of the Lord: they saw how through God's grace their word was a seed falling into fertile soil. Needless to say, both types of experience were meant to have, and in fact very frequently did have, a decisive influence on the spiritual growth of the novices, and constantly gave them fresh fresh opportunities for praying in a concrete and lively manner for the people they were dealing with and for the Church at large.

However, the most demanding and the most important experiment in the Ignatian novitiate was probably not the pilgrimage but the so-called experiment of the hospital.<sup>1</sup> This was particularly dear to Ignatius and his first companions, since from the earliest times they themselves had frequently and for long periods served the Lord in this manner. Naturally, this experiment has to be seen in the light

<sup>1</sup> See Tacchi Venturi, P., S.J. 'La prova dell'indifferenza e del servizio negli ospedali nel tirocinio Ignaziano', in *Archivum Historicum Societatis Jesu* 1 (1932), pp 7-23; and *Storia della Compagnia di Gesù in Italia*, vol II, p II, cap 2 (Roma, 1951), pp 27 ff., especially pp 32-37.

of the sanitary conditions of the 16th century. If we think today of a hospital, we spontaneously imagine a great building of glass and steel, with an abundance of highly qualified doctors and nurses, with operation theatres and spotless wards, true temples of anti-septic cleanliness and hygiene. But in the 16th century things were very different indeed.<sup>1</sup> The descriptions of the hospitals at that time make us shudder; we can well understand why people were so deadly afraid of ever going there. Yet Ignatius sent his novices not just to any hospital, but to the hospitals of the poorest of the poor, the incurables, the outcasts of society, who in indescribable conditions of filth and neglect could do practically nothing but suffer and await with fear, bitterness or resignation the end of their pains and earthly sufferings.

But they were men, created in the image of God and redeemed by the precious blood of our Redeemer; and the novices, who in the 'contemplation on attaining love' had ardently longed to find God in all things, had now to discover his face in those relics of humanity, to tend their hideous and evil-smelling wounds as if they were those of Christ himself, to care for them and to love them as living members of the Body of Christ which is the Church. They were to win their respect, their confidence, their love, not because this was gratifying from a human point of view, but for the sake of the Master, so that he might console these members of his Body, prepare them for a truly christian death and make them share in his eternal bliss.

In the account of the hospital-experiment of a certain flemish novice, Cornelius Wischaven, who, on the personal direction of Ignatius spent part of his novitiate in the Roman hospital 'alla Consolata', we read that he and his companion were so overburdened with work that they were firmly convinced that they would soon die under the strain of utter fatigue, or else by catching an infection to which, incidentally, not a few novices fell a victim. They had even chosen the place where they wanted to be buried in the graveyard where, in addition to their other duties, they had to work nearly every day. In the same report we find a vivid description of what these novices had to go through in their daily routine; but we also learn that out of 60 patients who died in the two months of their stay at 'alla Consolata' – and whom they had to

<sup>1</sup> Many interesting details concerning the conditions of life in the italian hospitals of the 16th century can be found in: Vanti, S., *S. Giacomo degl'incurabili di Roma nel Cinquecento* (Roma, 1938), and Da Langasco, C., *Gli ospedali degli Incurabili* (Genova, 1938).



carry to the cemetery with their own hands and lay in the graves they themselves had dug – not a single one died unprepared. They were all reconciled to the Lord through the apostolic services of the novices, who day and night had tried to fulfil their every wish and to console them.

Obviously not all the novices had the stamina to stand the strain of similar tests and probations, nor were all expected to undergo similar hardships. But each of them was tested individually, and with great flexibility submitted to those experiments by means of which St Ignatius or the Master of novices thought fit to increase the novice's maturity, to bring out his best qualities and to offer to him and to the Society the possibility of testing the depth of his love for God and man, as well as his willingness to surrender himself unconditionally to the demands of his vocation. Not a few novices were not up to this extremely realistic introduction to the religious-apostolic life of the Society. In fact, many never returned from the experiments, and others were advised to leave the novitiate of the Order. But those who remained – and they were by far the majority – could be counted on for great things. This hope was not frustrated, as the history of the early Society proves abundantly. Their spiritual training had been adequate, proportioned to their future life and work and, above all else, in the alternating periods of solitude and hard apostolic labour they had learnt how to pray, and how to pray well.

Extensive study of their letters and other writings, and still more a thorough historical examination of their lives, reveal unmistakably that the foundations of the spiritual life laid in the novitiate had been solid, and indeed of decisive influence for their future as religious priests given over to the ministry in very hard and exacting circumstances. If their novitiate had been a time of complete separation from the world, their spiritual formation in these decisive years might not have been realistic enough; and instead of becoming truly apostolic religious, contemplatives in action, they – or at least a fair number of them – might have succumbed later on to the temptation either of activism or of leading a spiritual life not related to their apostolic labours. In neither case would they have been able to live up to the demands of a truly religious-apostolic vocation as Ignatius conceived of it. As it was, they had received a solid spiritual training in the novitiate, and this training had been tested in good time in practical experiments of apostolic activity. These experiences in their turn had made them understand, at the be-

ginning of their religious life, that authentic apostolic activity is quite impossible unless it is sustained and constantly fed by a deep interior contact with the Lord, by a true intimacy with him whose instruments they were called to be and without whose friendship and help they knew that they would never be able to support their way of life, not even for a day.

Naturally, conditions have changed since the times of St Ignatius of Loyola. It is no longer possible or advisable to copy his methods in a servile manner today, either in the Society which he founded or in other religious-apostolic Institutes which have come into being since his day. But the pedagogical and psychological principles which underlie his conception of the novitiate, and much more the spiritual and religious insights which underpin these principles, undoubtedly retain their full validity and importance today.

The new Instruction on religious formation accepts these principles:

With regard to the novitiate-formation in those Institutes devoted to apostolic work, it has been found that greater attention should be paid to the necessary preparation of the novices from the very beginning and by a more direct method for the type of life and work which later will be theirs: they also need to be taught step by step how they may achieve the integration in their own lives of contemplation and action: a unity which is one of the essential and primary values of these Institutes.<sup>1</sup>

It is further inferred from these principles that

... it seems right to grant leave to those Institutes which consider this to be useful to introduce into the novitiate programme periods of formative activity, that is to say of experimentation which closely relate to their own kind of work and life.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on the rich experience accumulated over the years by the Society of Jesus, it may be useful to indicate somewhat more in detail and by way of conclusion the general principles which should be kept in mind if periods of formative activity are to be introduced into the novitiate programme of religious-apostolic Institutes.

First of all, they should be appropriate to the type of life and

<sup>1</sup> *Renovationis causam*, n. 5. Cf *supra* I, pp 25-6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

work which will later be that of the young religious in question. These activities must in fact be closely related to their specific vocation, acquaint them with what later will be expected from them and at the same time offer both to the novices and to their Institute a real possibility of testing their willingness and aptitude. This means that the type of formative activity will have to be chosen with great care and discernment, and that it will vary substantially from one Institute to the other.

Whatever be the type of formative activity eventually chosen, it is clear that to be effective it must imply a longish period of hard apostolic labour. These periods are not at all intended to be a kind of break in the monotony of the novitiate or a sort of holiday – still less an interesting and romantic adventure. The novices should on the contrary be given an opportunity to learn the hard reality of their future life and to meet it not with an ephemeral enthusiasm but with that stable generosity capable of overcoming the strain of a routine which, from a purely natural point of view, can be both tedious and exacting.

Care should be taken that the periods of formative activity offer a chance to the novices of exercising some apostolic activity in the strict sense of the word: that is to say, of approaching people with the intention of speaking to them about the Lord. Purely manual or exclusively social activity does not seem to be indicated, since this will not be the exclusive or the main task in their future activity as apostolic religious. It is precisely in the difficult circumstances of a more and more dechristianized world that the novices should learn from the very beginning how to speak about God, Christ, the Church and in general about supernatural realities, and to find out how much the acceptance of the christian message depends today on the totally unselfish and loving dedication of religious to the people with whom they are dealing. It will be a valuable experience for them to be confronted with the religious indifference of so many of our contemporaries, and to learn to carry on cheerfully and never to be ashamed of the gospel of our crucified Lord.

Precisely because these periods of formative activity should as far as possible correspond to their future life, it is further desirable that they be spent within the framework of a religious community, that is, of a body of men or women who as a team dedicate themselves to their apostolic task and who are animated by the same religious ideals. In view of the fact that modern youth is undoubtedly very generous and normally feels the need of associating with others, the

truly apostolic and communitarian aspect of the periods of formative activity seems to be of particular importance. The young religious must learn to work together with others, to subordinate their own inclinations, ideas and wishes to the best possible form of collaboration in the community, to have their real though modest share in the responsibility of the community and its apostolic mission, and at the same time to practise religious obedience in a truly loyal and responsible manner. If the novices live and work in a community together with experienced religious, it will also be easier to help them in their difficulties and doubts, both to make them experience what it means and to be supported by the love of their brethren and to contribute one's share in supporting others.

As the Instruction states most explicitly, the novitiate is a period of spiritual formation. Consequently, the formative activity which may now be inserted into the novitiate programme is not designed to promote the apostolic works of an Institute; nor is its purpose to equip the novices with the technical and professional skills which they will need in their later work. The sole end of the periods of formative activity is to broaden and to deepen the spiritual training of the young religious. Its purpose is first to teach them how to arrive at the integration in their lives of contemplation and action: how there must be in the lives of apostolic religious times of solitude, prayer and intimacy with the Lord alternating with periods of strenuous work done out of true supernatural love towards God and man. This harmonious fusion of prayer and work is the task of a life-time; but from the very beginning of the religious life it must be the goal towards which all efforts must converge. Precisely on account of the highly personal nature of this integration of contemplation and action in one's life, much will have to be left to the individual religious and his own private experiences. The periods of formative activity should be an invaluable help here, in so far as they will reveal whether and to what extent the novice feels the need of prayer, and how he sets about achieving an harmonious fusion of contemplation and action in the midst of an active apostolic life. The careful analysis of these first experiences will be a most valuable means of discovering whether or not a novice really has a genuine vocation for the religious-apostolic life, and of assessing in what particular ways he should be directed spiritually.

This brings us to a final consideration, which is the function of the Master of novices with regard to these periods of formative activity. Without fear of exaggeration, we venture to say that this whole

experiment hinges on the quality of his psychological insight, of his prudence and above all of his ability to practise the discernment of spirits. It is his task to select with great acumen and flexibility the type of formative activity which is best suited to the needs of the individual candidate; it is his role – with the collaboration of others – to follow and to direct him in the course of it, and to help him in the assessment of its spiritual success and failure. The task of giving spiritual direction and leadership, which has been of the essence of religious life at all times, has become today one of primary importance for its existence and well-being in the Church.

The periods of formative activity, which can now be universally introduced into the novitiate programme of all religious Institutes dedicated to apostolic works, doubtless have their problems and difficulties and certainly involve from some points of view an innovation of considerable risk in the training of young religious. But it is a fact which history confirms that they are a powerful and most opportune means of fostering the spiritual and human maturity of the novices and of promoting their life of prayer and union with the Lord. It is on this prayer and union that the value of their consecration and the efficaciousness of their apostolate will ultimately depend.