


# EDUCATION FOR MATURITY

By PAUL MOLINARI

NE of the brutal facts of life in the Church of today is the dire shortage, on an almost universal scale, of religious vocations. For many Orders and Congregations, of men and women alike, the crucial question is not so much how to organize in the face of reduced circumstances as how to survive at all.

Reactions to this state of affairs amongst religious themselves and other groups of faithful are by no means uniform. Some, it would appear, have resigned themselves to the idea that within a few decades religious life in its present institutionalized form will, to all intents and purposes, have disappeared: a prospect which goes to show, it is alleged, that this form of life is no longer relevant to the existence and the mission of the Church in the modern world. Others do not seem to be excessively preoccupied about the great lack of recruitment in the religious world; they place their hopes in a radical charismatic renewal of the Church in general and the religious life in particular, in the belief that this movement of the Spirit will take care of everything. Finally, there are those (the great majority) who try to view the problem with true christian realism. They are convinced that there will always be a great need of contemplative and apostolic religious communities; but they feel no less certain that much prayer and work is needed to prepare for the future by a deeply spiritual renewal of the religious life in all its aspects, and also by a serious and well-judged adaptation to the demands and circumstances of modern life. If religious communities can be rejuvenated by the evangelical ideals of their founders, and if these ideals are lived out in a way that truly corresponds to the needs of the times, their style of life and apostolate will indeed be an authentic witness of Christ's presence in the Church. This witness, it is argued, cannot fail to attract the attention of young people and help them to discern God's invitation to them to embrace this form of life.

The call to the religious life has been and always will be a strictly

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divine initiative, a mystery of God's grace. Nor has it ever been proved theologically (nor can it be) that God has ceased or will cease to call many people to a state of life entailing a more intimate consecration to his service.

However, as in all his dealings with mankind, God expects our collaboration, our prayer, our free decisions, our willingness to do everything we can, so that others too may discern his will and embrace it lovingly. While this obliges us to renew ourselves continually so that we may remain spiritually open to his promptings, we must at the same time accept the responsibility of discerning the signs of the times. Only by so doing will we be able to understand the mentality, the difficulties and the needs of those whom God expects us to help in their search for the state of life he wants for them.

It is obviously not possible in this short space to deal with every aspect of this vast and complex problem. I limit myself here to one essential point: the *immaturity*, real or apparent, of modern youth and what we can do to help them.

One need hardly say that the terms maturity and immaturity are, on various counts, not absolute but relative. We are dealing here with intellectual and spiritual maturity or immaturity, that is, with a reality which cannot be ascertained or measured as can physical realities. On the other hand, experience, common sense and psychology teach us that maturity, in the fullest possible sense of the word, is at best achieved by man only at an age that lies far beyond the term of physical youth. If therefore we speak of the maturity or immaturity of a young person, we understand these terms either as referring to the ideal towards which the person in question may grow in the future, or in comparison with the development which other people of the same physical age have attained in the same environmental conditions. Both these processes can tell us something about the objective state of the young person; but precisely because we are dealing with human beings and therefore with personalities, any judgment here will be rough and ready. This is still more true of any general judgment with regard to the maturity or immaturity of contemporary youth at large; for in this case the comparison is made between various generations: in practice between the young generation of our own day and what we ourselves were like (or think we were like) at their age. It goes without saying that such general comparisons, and the judgments based upon them, can easily suffer from a lack of objectivity; they tend to be vitiated

by the fact that, more or less unconsciously, we fail to pay sufficient attention to environmental changes and their influence on succeeding generations.

The purpose of these preliminary remarks will become clearer if we try to describe what we mean by maturity. Without attempting to give a technical definition of this term, and deliberately avoiding a detailed discussion of the various descriptions or definitions given in the literature, it will suffice to recapitulate those essential elements on which there is general agreement amongst specialists. On the intellectual level, a person's maturity is measured by his or her capacity to judge persons and things in a personal and rational manner. It is, on the contrary, a sign of immaturity if these judgments are entirely or mainly based upon fleeting impressions, or if they are simply accepted from others. Maturity also requires that judgments on persons, things or events are not formed in isolation, but that they proceed from an at least rudimentary *weltanschauung*, a general appraisal of the world at large, and of the meaning of one's own existence as a christian human being. In short, the judgments of a mature person must spring from a universal outlook and a consciously accepted and coherently applied organic scale of values.

As far as the affective life is concerned, a person's maturity depends on his capacity to actuate all his potentialities in a free and responsible manner, without being timid, shy or withdrawn, but equally without being egotistic or anti-social, or dominated by his emotions. The affective life of a mature person must in other words be integrated with the intellectual principles he has accepted as the norms and the ideals of authentic human behaviour. This implies, of course, that the mature person is able to make decisions, to commit himself to persons, ideas and ideals and to proceed in his moral and social behaviour with a certain stability and constancy.

Maturity in the religious field further demands that a person possesses a sufficient theoretical understanding of his religion, and also that his entire activity is inspired and regulated by his religious convictions; so that his whole life is integrated and animated by his personal relationship to the Lord. It is this maturity, or a degree of it, which will enable those called to the religious life to discern this call and to follow it unconditionally. And it is the lack of this maturity which is at the root of the present crisis of religious vocations.

If we want to understand the problem and to contribute towards its solution, we must proceed from the simple fact that the younger

generation has been born and raised in a civilisation caught up in the throes of a rapid and radical transformation. The swift industrialization and urbanization of our western world, the feverish activity of a technological society, the progressive invasion of modern thought and feeling by the ubiquitous and highly suggestive mass-media, and all the other external factors which typify the life of our century: all this has created a rhythm and a style essentially different from those of any era in western civilization.

One of the most important consequences of this development is that today's adolescents are confronted with and get involved in many problems which previous generations either knew nothing about or which made their impact at a much later phase in personal development. Modern youth are, in fact, much better informed than their peers in the past; they are more vitally awake to the various problems of life and more identified with the joys and sorrows of humanity at large.

It is likewise undeniable that the scholastic formation which modern youth – and in particular, girls – receive today is not only wider in scope but also more aptly designed to prepare them for their future professions, as well as for their life as citizens and responsible members of human society.

Youth would not be youth if it did not react in a spontaneous and generous manner to this wealth of information. With its enthusiasm and ideals, not yet seasoned by the experience and the wisdom typical of a later, more mature age, it may at times opt for solutions of a too radical and simplistic kind. It is liable to give vent to its feelings in too violent a manner. Nevertheless, it is obvious that this young generation is to a very large extent inspired by the honest and loyal desire to serve the community, to promote social justice and to assure to all men conditions of life worthy of their human dignity. The ideals of freedom, of personal responsibility and of peaceful development are highly treasured by them; there is abundant evidence of their readiness to make considerable personal sacrifices to achieve these ends and to further the spiritual and material well-being of their fellow-men. In short, the rich potential of the younger generation promises well for the future of mankind.

However, there is another side to the picture, and for modern youth, as indeed for the rest of us, it is the outstanding qualities which also constitute the greatest danger. Too much knowledge, too early acquired, can easily lead to confusion and loss of bearings. The vast mass of heterogeneous and amorphous information, which

the various media communicate to the young mind by the hour, requires harmonious integration into an intellectual and spiritual synthesis. This postulates in its turn not only a certain psychological maturity but also – and particularly in the case of adolescents – sound guidance and competent direction. Today, guidance and direction is all too frequently inadequate or is simply not available, either because those who are supposed to offer it are unequal to the task or because, for a variety of reasons, young people are not willing to accept it.

The father and mother, to whom this task belongs, of course, in the first place, are not infrequently unprepared intellectually to help their children with their problems. Often, again, they are too much taken up by other matters and cannot give (or do not care to give) the necessary attention to the spiritual and moral formation of their sons and daughters. In former times, the family really was the teenager's spiritual home and, in spite of the generation problem, did not fail to make a deep and lasting impact on his outlook on life. Today, the family is rapidly disintegrating nearly everywhere in our western civilization: a fact which contributes profoundly to the general state of spiritual and moral uncertainty of modern youth, as well as to the difficulty they have of finding their feet and defining their position with regard to the essential questions of life.

The modern school-system, entrusting the adolescent as it does to a vast number of highly specialized teachers, who often vary greatly in their outlook in life, has become in many instances an agency for the dissemination of merely factual knowledge; hardly anything is done for the formation of the character of the individual person. In other instances, exposure to a variety of philosophical and ethical influences leads to confusion and even to a general disenchantment with regard to the major spiritual problems of mankind.

This situation is further aggravated by other factors, the most important among which seem to be the following:

- Precisely because they are so well informed about what is going on in the world, teenagers are aware that something is very seriously wrong with our human society. The many manifestations of social and racial injustice, wars, widespread corruption, dishonesty and hypocrisy, create and continually aggravate a serious crisis of authority. Seeing the failures of his elders, the adolescent is prone to reject out of hand whatever counsel they care to offer to him.
- The affluent society of the western world has become excessively permissive and, as a result, is pervaded and dominated by a laxist

mentality, which obviously constitutes a most serious danger for the young generation. The considerable number of youthful drop-outs from society, of drug-addicts, of perverts and even suicides, is evidence enough of the obvious: moral depravity not only hinders the harmonious growth of the personality but frequently excludes it.

– Thrown back on themselves, young people show a remarkable though easily understandable tendency to gang up with one another and to form closed groups which are frequently one-sided and often extremist. Precisely because they are still immature and as yet incapable of making an objective and critical appraisal of themselves and of society, young people easily fall victim to all sorts of slogans and half-truths. This can gravely hinder the full development of their personality.

– On the other hand, the modern environment certainly does not favour serious reflection. The hectic rhythm of life, the constant exposure to an endless flow of enticing images and noises, the excessive and over-exclusive admiration of technical achievement, outward activity and visible success; the unbridled desire for prestige, power and money as well as the constantly increasing scepticism and agnosticism towards philosophy and religion, on the part of a society which is moving rapidly towards secularism, materialism and atheism: all these elements are apt to blunt and to destroy in youth the quest for higher spiritual goods and to persuade them to abandon themselves to the impressions and the sentiments of the moment.

– It is equally certain that the Church is fast losing its attractiveness to the present generation of teenagers and that its impact on them is rapidly diminishing. Those whose task it was to announce the gospel to modern youth have been found largely unprepared and unequipped to deal with the pastoral and educational problems which the rapid change of the world has created. Consequently the young men and women of today, so much more literate than their forebears, manifest real deficiencies as far as a developed religious culture is concerned. More often than not their religious training has been sketchy and insufficiently adapted to their needs. This is particularly regrettable in view of the confusion of mind created by contradictory teachings in matters of faith, by the propagation of doctrines which go counter to catholic dogma, by systematic attacks upon the *magisterium* and by the constant belittling of the so-called 'institutional Church'. It is little wonder that the younger

generation regards the Church with scepticism and indifference, or even as irrelevant to modern man. There is also their sharp-eyed perception of the world-wide problems of justice and peace, and the wide discrepancy existing between the faith professed by many christians and their actual living of it. Thus the 'credibility gap' widens.

On the other hand, young people are manifesting a genuine need for religion and are ready to adopt any form of it which appears to meet their aspirations. There are many indications of this: not least the craving for religious and mystical experience. What is sad is that the genuine seekers so often appear unaware of the true sources of living faith and deep union with God, and turn instead to systems and practices which do not and cannot meet their needs. It is precisely here that far more can and needs to be done by men and women religious, whose role, by their very vocation and style of life, is witness to the spiritual values of religion and to the Person of the Lord, who is our way to the Father and the source of truth and life.

There is no lack of awareness, either, of the critical state in which many religious Orders and Congregations find themselves today: and in particular of the internal divisions from which they are suffering. Certain features of this situation young people find repellent, such as the narrow-minded insistence on conserving obsolete and incomprehensible accidentals, or the stubborn refusal to accept change and renewal. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to imagine that modern youth approves of the extremes to which some religious are prepared to go in their attempts to be or to appear to be 'with it'. The more intelligent and perceptive among them are quick to distinguish the pseudo-religious posture from the genuine movement of the Spirit, though they might be hard put to it to explain the difference in words. However, the extremes on both sides, the open hostility between the factions, and the exodus of so many from religious life, all tend to make this life, in the eyes of young people, a counter-value.

At the same time there are some recent developments which the modern generation fully appreciates: particularly those communities which, under the promptings of the Spirit, have become true centres of spiritual life. Here there is a generous sharing in spiritual values, reflection and meditation are treasured, silence and prayer alternate with apostolic activity in an organic whole; and everything proceeds from and visibly tends towards the ideal of following the Lord unconditionally. Experience proves that wherever union with the

Lord is lived out in a manner both communitarian and deeply personal, young people become genuinely interested and find a real incentive in their own search for the Lord. There is a great and obvious need for more of these centres, which express modern religious life at its best. In short, though there is much darkness, there is also much light in our modern world; but it takes experience and maturity to distinguish the false from the true.

To turn now to the question of the immaturity of modern youth. Perhaps it will be best to begin with an essential distinction. There seems to be no doubt that the rate of maturation in the intellectual, affective and religious spheres is slower than it used to be. This does not mean that modern youth is radically different from earlier generations; it is simply that young people today are confronted with an altogether more complex and difficult situation, and that they receive less help from their environment than was formerly the case.

This point requires emphasis for several reasons. First, I wish to reject the thesis that would account for the present vocations crisis on the ground that modern youth, because of radical differences from youth in past times, is quite unsuited for the religious life. Furthermore, the positive hope that exists of being able to help young people in their search for God must be a powerful incentive to all religious Institutes for authentic renewal. *Exempla trahunt*. Nothing is more appealing to young hearts and minds than the living example of those who take their dedication and ideals with the utmost seriousness, and try to live up to them with cheerfulness and determination. Finally, only a penetrating insight into the actual spiritual situation of young people, and an understanding of their real needs, can permit of helping them to reach the degree of maturity necessary for discerning their own vocation and for following it with the peace, joy and purposefulness that belongs to the adult mind.

How, in practical terms, is this task to be approached? What strikes us first is that the methods used in the past for the formation of seminarians and candidates for the religious life will need drastic revision. Conciliar and post-conciliar documents – *Renovationis causam*, in particular – clearly insist on a new approach, and offer guidelines for the training of future priests and religious. Here I can only select a few of the more essential points.

1. Precisely because very many young people of our times have not yet reached the sort of maturity which is a necessary prerequisite



for a fruitful life in the seminary or in the novitiate, it will be necessary as a general rule to postpone the beginning of this stage in their formation for several years. Of course, there are a fair number of teenagers who, on account of their special natural and supernatural gifts as well as their upbringing, possess a remarkable degree of maturity. In such cases there is obviously no reason why they should not be admitted immediately to the seminary or the novitiate; to defer their entry simply because of a general prescription could be tantamount to depriving them of those graces which the Lord intends to give to them. However, in the great majority of cases, a longer period of preliminary formation will be necessary after the completion of high school or its equivalent.

2. During this period of preliminary formation, candidates must be committed to the care of one or more eminently qualified priests or religious, who will be free to devote themselves as completely as need be to their charges; certainly it is not easy to find such persons, and it will nearly always be a great sacrifice for an Institute to free those who are qualified for this work from other activities. At a time when nearly all Orders and Congregations are suffering severely from a shortage of personnel, and struggling to fulfil adequately even their more important tasks, to release their most outstanding members for the work of formation will be a costly business. Yet it is a small price to pay for the future life and vigour of the Institute.

With regard to the qualifications of this formation personnel, it should be noted that they need a solid and up-to-date knowledge of dogmatic and spiritual theology, an extensive awareness of what is going on in the world, a more than average general culture, a sound theoretical knowledge of modern psychology and its techniques, and a great practical experience in dealing with young people. However, these and other useful qualifications are no substitute for a deep and manifest union with the Lord. Those charged with the task of formation must therefore be men and women of prayer, steeped in the wisdom of the Spirit, and in consequence entirely open-minded, capable of understanding the needs of others and of discerning the movements of God's grace. At the same time they need to be humble and patient enough to accept the role of a simple tool in the hands of the Father. Experience testifies that the young people of today are not averse to entrusting themselves to such personalities. Certainly, they need to recognize in their elders a sincerely altruistic, christian concern for their greater good, and a

willingness to listen to them and take them seriously. But when they sense such qualities, they will talk with astonishing openness and more than willingly accept guidance. Nor is this surprising: for the same Lord who wants to draw them closely to himself, makes them feel his presence in those whom he has chosen as his instruments and who have unconditionally surrendered themselves to his will.

3. Those who have a vocation to the apostolic religious life should be brought in good time into regular contact with one or more communities of the Institute to which they feel attracted. It is true that before the beginning of the novitiate it is preferable for them not to live permanently in a religious house; but this does not mean that they should be deprived of the religious inspiration, the apostolic atmosphere, the cheerfulness and the fraternal help which is the hallmark of any authentic religious community. The aspirant should feel that even at this stage he is beginning to 'belong', that he is appreciated, that his future sharing in the life and the apostolate of the Institute will be most welcome. Here lies a great vocational task for each religious. No one should be left in doubt that, in the preparation of future religious, few things are more effective than contact with a religious community which is genuinely a community of believers and is seen to be such: a group of people deeply in communion with their Lord and Master, and therefore closely and visibly in communion with one another. The first disciples were united in a group precisely because each one of them had been called by Christ, had followed him and was sharing in his life and work. Similarly Christ continues to call the individual religious to follow him; and, by generously accepting this invitation, each religious becomes at the same time closely united to all his brethren. The members of a religious Institute are, in fact, called to live and work with, through and in Christ, not just as isolated individuals but as members of one family which forms a particular cell within the mystical Body of Christ. This fraternal union in Christ constitutes a valuable support for each member of the group; and it is most important that candidates for the religious life should benefit from this support as early and as much as possible. Far from being limited to external elements, its effects extend to the deepest roots of their own lives, that is, their faith, hope and charity, indeed to their entire life of union with the Lord, and through him to their union with the Church and with mankind at large.

4. Regular contacts with a religious community should not be limited therefore, to the level of social visiting; they should promote

a real sharing in the community's own spiritual life. They should also include some degree of active participation in its apostolic work. Modern youth are active and keen to help their fellow-men. In the majority of cases, their consciousness of a possible vocation to the religious state has grown precisely through the experience of apostolic service. It is therefore important to encourage them in this direction and to help them to deepen such experience under the guidance of competent and deeply committed religious. In this connection, the dispositions of the recent Instruction *Renovationis Causam*, on formative activity, are highly relevant. Frequently, to engage in this activity will offer a ready-made opportunity to explain the ultimate christian meaning of the apostolate, to stimulate the young to pray for the people with whom they deal, and to relate their experience to the Person of the Lord. If all this happens in the context of community, the young aspirant will be guided towards a fuller faith and a more mature insight into the mystery of human existence and of the history of salvation.

5. This brings us to another important aspect of this question of maturity. As we have seen, one of the most urgent needs of modern youth is for serious reflection and meditation, and no effort should be spared to help them in this regard. Here too lies a task of paramount importance for the religious community at large, in as far as it is and should be clearly recognizable as a group of persons who are bound together by a deep, serene and joyful faith in the Lord.

This progressive growth in faith also requires a more profound and coherent grasp of the teachings of revelation and an insight into their relevance for the modern world. Faith, however, is not primarily the intellectual acceptance of a series of defined truths. It is an eminently personal act, which requires a privileged personal contact with the Lord. This union with God, which is of a strictly supernatural order and requires God's special grace, is particularly favoured by the prayerful reading of holy scripture, the word of God. It is therefore essential that young people acquire through their daily reading of the Old and New Testament a deep familiarity with God's revelation and, of course, a really intimate knowledge of the Person and the redeeming work of the Word incarnate. This reading should be prayerful, leading to genuine meditation and contemplation.

The individual's understanding of scripture must develop at its own pace, and the pace cannot be forced. Nevertheless, it would

appear vital that through the prayerful reading of scripture, young people should gradually come to understand that God's ways are not the ways of man. It is one of the besetting temptations of our times – and one which has left its mark on a fair amount of contemporary theology – to try to accommodate God and his dealings with man to the measure of our limited human intelligence. Objectively speaking, this tendency, though often unconscious, is completely opposed to the basic christian virtue of humility. It strikes at the roots of genuine religion and empties faith of its ultimate meaning; on the other hand, unconditional surrender to his judgments and decisions are the marks of authentic faith, and the only source of true peace in the midst of our turbulent world.

While there is every need to emphasize the transcendence of God's wisdom and providence, we should be careful, of course, to draw attention to the mystery of his love. The prayerful reading of holy scripture and in particular of the New Testament is the swiftest and surest way to an understanding of the fundamental place of divine Love in our salvation history. This love is made visible to us in the Person of our Redeemer, who died for each of us and constantly calls us to a more intimate sharing in his love and work for mankind. Here too a vital and direct approach is indicated: to see Christ, to listen to his words, to follow his example. Through the continual contemplation of Christ, the young candidate for the priesthood or the religious life will come to an ardent desire to put on the mind of Christ, to spend himself for others in union with Christ, and to embrace his cross. In view of the contemporary tendency to idolize the sort of success which can be measured in statistical data, it should be made clear that the life of faith is not subject to such criteria. Man's love for God is not to be measured essentially by external and visible achievements. It consists, on the contrary, in the imitation of Christ who died abandoned on the cross, so that by his death we might have supernatural life and have it abundantly. The lives of young people who want to become priests and religious must from the outset be deeply rooted in this conviction, the more so because it is a feature of our times that outward success is so frequently absent in apostolic work. The overpowering sense of frustration which induces many priests and religious today to abandon their vocation often arises from the lack of an adequate and truly existential grasp of this fundamental dimension of our faith. Sooner or later every man and woman comes face to face with their own uselessness and failure; and only those who have

learned to throw all their love on Christ, and to believe firmly in his love and mercy, will be able to emerge from this crisis through the full acceptance of the doctrine of the cross.

Such growth is not possible in isolation. Discussion groups, judiciously suggested reading, sharing in the spiritual exchanges of the community and frequent contacts with the director are essential. But since faith is a gift of God which he bestows according to his good pleasure, and how and when he chooses, we should be most careful not to rush things, let alone try to impose them. Rather it must be our constant preoccupation to follow and to discern with the greatest reverence God's hidden action in the souls entrusted to our care. God's ways are infinitely varied and mysterious and they require on the part of his instruments and collaborators the most exquisite tact and delicacy.

These then are a few considerations and suggestions of how we may help the younger generation on the difficult road towards intellectual, affective and religious maturity. But we cannot end this short exposition without recalling once more that it is God, and God alone, who plants the seed and makes it grow. More than any human industry, it will be our prayers, our sacrifices, our own generous response to the promptings of his grace, that will help our young brothers and sisters to find the Lord of love, and to cling firmly to him who is the source of light and peace in the turmoil of unrest and confusion so typical of the world today.