

THE MODERN NOVITIATE

By TIMOTHY QUINLAN

IT IS NOW three years since *Renovationis Causam* was promulgated. Many changes have since been introduced into religious formation and are still being made. Consequently it is as valid today as it was in 1969 to say that 'new regulations of a binding and definitive character cannot be framed without taking into account reasonably protracted experiments conducted over a sufficiently wide area, and the factual judgements based on them'.¹ Those who would like a more solid legal structure than the present situation offers may find it sobering to read in the same document that 'the Church, guided by the experience which became hers in the *course of centuries*, was concerned gradually to build up a body of canonical laws which in times gone by contributed in large measure to the strength and growth of religious life'.² Law should be seen not as a rigid scaffolding, external to the structure it supports, but rather as a skeletal system which is dynamic, flexible and supportive within a growing organism.

This article will examine the prescriptions for the novitiate set out in *Renovationis Causam* and give examples of how these are working in practice. My remarks will be directed more immediately to Institutes devoted to apostolic works and are applicable, within limits, to both men and women religious. A detailed commentary on the text has already been made by Fr Paul Molinari,³ so the ground covered there will not be retraced except by way of summary.

The document clearly recognizes the complexity of situations and the extraordinary diversity of apostolic activities undertaken by religious.⁴ It acknowledges that the legislator is not in a position to formulate laws beyond his capacity. More positively, greater confidence has been shown in the charismatic inspiration of each religious Institute. As one writer has put it, 'the particular legislation of a religious family has now greater freedom than before to develop in accordance with the inspiration of its own particular founder. Previous canonical legislation for religious has stressed uniformity;

¹ *Renovationis Causam*, Introduction. All quotations cited here are taken from the translation given in *Supplement to The Way*, 7 (June, 1969).

² *Ibid.*, Introduction.

³ Cf *Supplement to The Way*, 7 (June, 1969).

⁴ *Renovationis Causam*, 4.

but the decrees of the second Vatican Council have shifted the emphasis to the guiding Spirit of God'.⁵ Consequently the legislator has relinquished considerable control over the response which people in the local situation may feel called to make.⁶

The document clearly acknowledges the trust placed in those with local responsibility, and it is certainly a heartening call to the exercise of wider responsibility at all levels within a particular Institute. It enshrines the clear recognition that local situations raise questions which need particular answers. It indicates the validity of different conclusions arising from these situations. At the same time, it reiterates the strong emphasis that Vatican II placed on return to the sources, on the authentic traditions of each Institute and on the mission of religious within the living Church.⁷

It is within this context that certain guidelines are presented which are sufficiently broad to allow for differences imposed by widely varying circumstances. (Thus, for example, the age of entry is not defined chronologically, but 'it must be said that admission to the novitiate ought to be put off to a later age than was previously the case'.)⁸

The question of maturity

The novitiate is 'intimately concerned with the very beginnings of religious life'⁹ and is designed to help a novice 'learn the primary essentials of the religious life, and, in his search for the perfection of charity, to live out the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience, of which he will make profession when the time comes . . .'¹⁰ It comes when the candidate has achieved 'that degree of human and spiritual maturity which will enable him to respond to this vocation with a sufficient knowledge of the burden involved and by a free decision'.¹¹ This does not mean, however, that he will be able 'to put into practice immediately all that religious life and the Institute's apostolate demand; but he must be judged capable of being progressively formed to reach that state'.¹²

The questions of the pre-novitiate and the age of choice are considered in detail elsewhere in this issue. Certainly the need for preparation and for the accurate assessment of individuals is becoming more and more vital. In fact, 'most of the difficulties attaching

⁵ Gallagher, C., S.J.: 'The Role of the Priest-Religious', in *Supplement to The Way*, 13 (Summer, 1971), p 71.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Introduction.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13, i.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶ *Renovationis Causam*, 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

to the formation of novices in our time usually arise from the fact that they are not sufficiently mature when admitted to the novitiate'.¹³ The maturity referred to here is presumably psychological maturity and should not be confused with religious maturity. A person's vocation can be authentic even when 'psychological and emotional difficulties' do not disappear with the completion of the novitiate.¹⁴ Nevertheless, this lack of psychological maturity is probably the reason for the assertion that 'it is a phenomenon of the present rather than the past that, at the end of their novitiate, some have failed to achieve the religious maturity sufficient for them to be bound by religious vows there and then, though their generous qualities and genuine call to the religious life are not in doubt'.¹⁵ In such cases, time is needed to achieve both psychological and spiritual growth. In response to this need, some institutes make use of permission to send novices out of the community for a period of study at a university or to get a job. Many Institutes call their novices to make promises instead of temporary vows at the end of the novitiate.

Reference is made to this problem because it indicates the real situation in many novitiates today. For a number of reasons arising out of local circumstances, many Institutes and/or provinces have great difficulty in providing for adequate pre-novitiate formation and the assessment of candidates. Consequently there are novitiates still functioning in fact both as pre-novitiates and novitiates (as judged by the requirements of *Renovationis Causam*). It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss how these difficulties might be overcome, but their existence is sufficient indication that the ideals of *Renovationis Causam* will be realized only with time. It should be noted, moreover, that apart from the lack of opportunity of implementing the ideals, any attempt to do so will always be limited by the competence of skilled observers, by the various techniques of assessment and by the degree of openness in individuals to the Spirit of God in a discernment process.

The formative role of the novitiate

In order to realize the aims of the novitiate, the document notes the following points:

- i) Great care must be taken 'never to accept any candidate except those who show the right temperament and the

¹³ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

measure of maturity judged necessary to enable them to enter the religious life as lived by the Institute'.¹⁶

ii) The novitiate 'should be spent amongst a community or group of novices united in brotherly love and under the guidance of a master'.¹⁷

iii) 'The particular nature and aim of the novitiate, and the close relationship which ought to prevail among the novices, certainly demands some sort of separation of the group of novices from the other members of the Institute'.¹⁸

iv) There should be 'a harmony between the periods given over to that solitude in which a man devotes himself entirely to God and those dedicated to various works and the human needs which attend them'.¹⁹

v) 'The novices ought to be formed progressively to devote themselves to works in keeping with the aim of the Institute'.²⁰

vi) Formative activities outside the novitiate-house may be permitted by the General Chapter. These will be determined by the Master of novices with the approval of the major superior.²¹

vii) 'The novitiate also lays great emphasis on the study and meditation of sacred Scripture as well as on instruction in the theory and practice of spirituality; for this is vital for the development of the supernatural life in union with God and for an interior grasp of the religious state. Candidates should also be introduced to the liturgical life and to the Institute's own ascetical spirit'.²²

viii) 'The relations of superior and the novice-master with the novices must be marked by the simplicity of the Gospel, by loving-kindness and true respect for the dignity of the person, so that openness and an eagerness to learn may thrive in an atmosphere of mutual trust'.²³

What are the main characteristics and problems of the type of novitiate envisaged by these prescriptions? Perhaps the first point to notice is that a novice-master who has no support in the work of formation is placed in a difficult situation. In a changing world he must be a member of a team, for there are too many fields of specialization connected with formation. Many novice-masters rely

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5; cf 13, ii.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 13, ii.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23, i and 25, i.

²² *Ibid.*, 15, iv.

²³ *Ibid.*, 32, ii.

on others, both within and outside their Institutes, for courses in scripture and theology to aid in the growing spirituality of the novices. They rely on others who have specialized in latin and greek if these are required.

However, the main responsibility of the novice-master is the spiritual direction of his novices, clarifying and discerning with them the action of the holy Spirit in their lives. He must draw them 'to understand, by his word and example in the mystery of Christ crucified, the demands of genuine religious obedience'.²⁴ This requires much individual attention to each person and places an upper limit on the number of novices that can be managed at one time. Gone are the days when one novice-master was expected to manage over a hundred novices! A group of about twenty-five to thirty novices is about as much as any one man can be expected to direct according to the requirements of *Renovationis Causam*.

While the third point above calls for a separation from other communities in the Institute, this separation is not total. Within reason the practice is growing of inviting visitors to the novitiate, and letting the novices visit other houses to share in the eucharist and take part in their social activities, usually the community meal and recreation afterwards. One very good result of this is that the novices are less inclined to over-identify with the novice-master. They see others who are responding to God within the Institute and get a more composite picture of what it means to be a professed member of the community.

Renovationis Causam states that the purpose of the novitiate is to help the novice to live out the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience in his search for the perfection of charity. For apostolic religious this cannot be managed successfully if the novices are withheld from the very life-experiences where the charism of their founder is incarnated. Many Institutes are sending their novices into apostolic communities for this experience. The Spirit of God is present in the living community and it is here that the response to God is discerned: in a community which in fact is working according to the spirit of the founder and within the scope of its mission. In this context the vows start to take on a personal meaning.

While this work within the Institute and contact with its formed members is good, it is not sufficient for many of the novices. They

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 32, ii.

are growing and need to assess what is happening within them through a variety of wider experiences. St Ignatius Loyola sent his novices on a pilgrimage. It was not an easy experience and demanded a maturity not born of a hot-house. Today some novices are being sent out on pilgrimages, to work in factories, do parish census work and catechetics and look after the under-privileged within big cities. These experiences serve a number of important functions, one of which is the opportunity they give to a novice to be independent of the Institute. When a novice is sent to work in a factory or work among people different from his own, either culturally or racially, he starts to ask himself some basic questions: Who am I? What does my faith in Jesus Christ mean? Why have I involved myself with this Institute? During this time when he is without the familiar atmosphere of his community and feels very much alone, his prayer gains a new significance. For some people the words 'freedom' and 'responsibility' acquire new and inter-related meanings. The novice is given an opportunity of making decisions by himself: a chance to do things because they should be done and not because he is observed.

There is no doubt that the meaning of these experiences differs from one individual to the next. Ideally they should help deepen a commitment already made to Christ and be a time to live it out in different circumstances. But as in most human endeavours, the motivation is mixed and the experiences often reveal psychological needs, give a chance to acknowledge them, satisfy some of them and respond to Christ through and with them. Fortunately, the latitude expressed in *Renovationis Causam* allows us to accept situations just as they are found and to meet them more adequately. It is a fact that not all novices at the beginning of the novitiate have reached the standards set by the document. Consequently they must be respected and guided patiently according to their needs and their openness to the demands of a faith-commitment. As has been said before, many Institutes find themselves combining pre-novitiate and novitiate functions, as these are defined in the document. This practice is not in opposition to the guiding principles; decisions must be made according to the options available in the local situation. However, it is the judgment of this writer that the major difficulties and challenges to people in formation are coming and will come in the pre-novitiate period. Not sufficient evidence is available to indicate much satisfaction with organized programmes of pre-novitiate formation, though the successful preparation of individuals is often occurring without it.

Whether adequate preparation for entry into the novitiate has been provided or not, once a man has been accepted and has lived in community for some months, there arises a responsibility towards him as well as the community. If there are shortcomings the situation must be resolved. What is the cut-off point? The case of Pedro Ribadeneira is a classic example in jesuit history. He was just fifteen years when admitted to the novitiate by Ignatius. He was boyish and a nuisance and in the judgment of older men in the community should have been sent home. Ignatius saw something in the boy and persevered with him; he became a great jesuit.

If the novice is not manifesting the depth of faith in Christ and the freedom to live out his choice of vocation, a decision must be made. With smaller numbers in the novitiate an assessment is easier to make, but it is not an easy one. The document seems to allow considerable freedom to the discretion of the novice-master. On the one hand he has the criteria in *Renovationis Causam* which would suggest dismissing the novice from the community. On the other hand he knows that either an extension of time may be allowed before a decision is made with regard to vows, or else there may be a period when promises are made prior to final vows.

Let us take a not uncommon difficulty. A novice is found to have a difficulty with authority. He perceives the novice-master or superior as a threat. He takes corrections personally and cannot identify with the Institute in so far as it is an institution – it would compromise his freedom and integrity. Yet at the same time he has faith in Christ and is faithful to his prayer. For many people this is a problem which needs time to heal and patient love on the part of those responsible for formation. In cases like this, a large part of the time during the novitiate is given to counselling the person on the individual level rather than discerning and clarifying his relationship with Jesus Christ, which is the work of spiritual direction. For such a person the experiences outside the novitiate give opportunities for measuring himself against realities which cannot be pinned on his Institute. They give the novice-master, and the person involved, independent sources to evaluate the present state of his awareness and freedom.

What is to be done with this person? If in the judgment of the novice-master and his advisers the novitiate community seems to be the best environment for him and considerable growth is taking place, then he should stay. What are the signs? First, that the person can pray, that is, listen to the word of God and respond to it. This

response entails an experience of a personal encounter with God drawing him to loving service. Secondly, that he has considerable self-acceptance which allows him to take himself for granted in the company of others and be at peace in the solitary moments when he is engaged in study, reflection or prayer. Thirdly, that he can offer himself and enter into the community activities with a sense of joy and not out of a sense of obligation. In other words, there should be the experience that this is something he wants to do and which gives him a deep conscious peace. Finally, that he can be open with his novice-master or, where there is a clash of personalities, with another responsible member of the Institute, and reveal that he has some insight into his own difficulties.

On the other hand, it may become clear after considerable experience that the person involved cannot cope with the situation. He becomes introspective during prayer over a prolonged period; he is not at peace within himself or with others; he contributes to the community out of a sense of duty and conforms in such a way that he is living a lie; he finds it difficult or almost impossible to be open with his novice-master. In such a case he should be counselled to leave.

Difficulties of this sort need to be faced realistically, because in actual situations they are unavoidable. They stem from the problems of selecting people for the novitiate. Even with postulancy and pre-novitiate, some people are hard to understand and assess, and differences between novices only gradually reveal themselves. Sometimes it is the experiments themselves which bring these to light. For example, two novices may be sent out on a work-experience and live in an apartment. One can do his job wholeheartedly, turn to God in prayer and deepen the sense of his vocation. He will meet difficulties such as tiredness and a new routine, but he can reflect on these with profit. The other novice still may be searching for his independent identity, and much of his experience may be coloured by the wonderful feeling of being free, of making independent decisions. He may thank God for it, but it is not yet a full living out and deepening of a vocational choice.

This example once again bears out the challenge with which religious life is confronted in our own time. The new type of formation is seeking to prepare apostolic religious for a particular sort of world, a world which is becoming less christian, and one where the sociological differences are less marked between religious life and the so-called secular life. The life which the novice aspires to lead

requires a detachment from what is un-christian in this secular life for the love of Christ and his mission.

Of central importance in the formation of young religious to meet this challenge is community. The more obvious flexibility in the modern novitiate places greater responsibility on the formation team and calls for a deeper trust and practical co-operation from other members of the Institute. The response to this is surely a good indication of the health of the Institute and of the firmness of the only bonds which ultimately make sense in a community of faith founded in the love of Jesus Christ. When the Institute and the novitiate community 'is generous, fervent and united, the young religious who form part of it will learn by practical experience what strength and support the brethren communicate to each other: a strength which helps them to advance in their vocation and to stand strongly in it'.²⁵

This is experienced very practically during the times when the novices are living in communities outside the novitiate. The example and the help given them at such moments is very important. It is my experience that older religious often underestimate the amount they can contribute to young religious and are pleasantly surprised when they find out. Difficulties such as adjustments to a different order of time and to the differences of outlook often prove to be a valuable part of formation. The novitiate community is a relatively homogeneous group. A novice may be happy enough within his own community in a dependent sort of way, but incapable of living out the vocation called for among the professed religious. In other words, it is not necessarily a sign of vocation that he likes the people he happens to be living with. The experience of working with other communities in the Institute sometimes shatters rather idealistic or romantic notions of community and leads a man to dig deeper within himself. This is only possible to a person who in the periods of withdrawal from activity is able to know Christ and the radical demands of the Gospel.

In conclusion, it may be said that the whole spirit of *Renovationis Causam* is an encouragement to restore the novitiate to its rightful position within religious life. Above all, it is aimed at facilitating the discernment of a novice's vocation in Christ. There are risks involved in this new formation towards the fulness of life in Christ, just as there were risks in the older forms. Not enough time has elapsed

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

for a long-term assessment of the new programme or even, in many situations, for its full implementation. But there is a growing consensus of what is needed in formation and a determination to do something about it.

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