THE AGE OF CHOICE

By THOMAS F. WALSH

SINCE the conclusion of the second Vatican Council there has been a growing tendency in the admission of candidates into the religious life or into formal training for the priesthood, to set the minimum age for entrance three or four years above what it was twenty years ago. Earlier, it had been common practice to accept candidates at the end of their secondary education, which would come at the age of eighteen or nineteen years. Now it is more usual to require the completion of a bachelor's degree, or its equivalent in other training or experience, and in the British Isles and on the continent even the completion of university studies, with the result that as a norm applicants are required to be twenty-two or twenty-three years old.

The rationale for this shift is not far to seek. It is at least occasioned by the numerous departures from the priesthood and the religious life on the part of men and women of middle years and, much more crucially, on the part of younger men and women in their middle and late twenties. No clairvoyance is needed to see in the leave-taking of the younger members the ebbing of the very life-blood of a religious organization. For example, in a province of men religious in the United States, slightly more than half of the young men who entered between 1956 and 1965 left after having pronounced perpetual vows. This one instance seems to be conformable to a general trend on the part of the younger members to make a second decision to remain or to leave at about the age of twenty-five.

The presupposition of the problem and the accompanying discussion is the fact of permanent commitment. Whatever may be true of the feasibility or even the possibility of permanent commitment to the religious life and the priesthood, the fact is that the requirement of such commitment is in possession and is likely to remain so for the forseeable future. It is only a requirement of this magnitude which is sufficient to explain the attempts that are being made to adapt the screening of candidates to the changing circumstances of vocation and response.

Those changing circumstances, in fact, lend added urgency to the need for caution in admitting applicants. Our culture and our

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civilization are undergoing pervasive change to such an extent that the prospective religious emerges from a rapidly shifting family background and is headed into a religious future which is in many aspects uncertain. He or she must have an interior centre of stability which is equated in the minds of many with greater maturity and, less dependably, with more advanced years. Such maturity is especially necessary in view of the dissolution of many of the structures which once supported the individual in the practice of the religious life. Today the applicant must manifest an interior dynamic stability which will carry him along in the process of living out his profession amid a welter of shifting circumstances, claims and values.

The tendency to equiparate more advanced years with greater maturity has led some admissions directors to discount the eligibility of younger candidates. Some groups have even declared a moratorium on the operation of the novitiate in order to permit the younger candidates to catch up to the age requirement in sufficient numbers to justify the resumption of formal novitiate training. Others have closed their novitiates and dispersed the novices among the several houses of the province or congregation. The quest for older candidates has led in at least one instance to the insertion of recruiting material in a men's publication with a readership of some sophistication, certainly, but such as comports ill with the traditional ideals of the religious life.

The trend toward later admission takes it lead from *Renovationis Causam:*

> Certainly the novitiate ought to be made by each candidate at the time when he is conscious of having been called by God, and has also 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. No-one ought to enter the religious life without making this free decision, and accepting the separation from people and things which this life entails. This first decision does not necessarily require of the candidate an ability 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.[1]

Later on, in speaking specifically of the noviceship training itself, the instruction directs that the formation is to be imparted in an atmosphere of freedom and flexibility.[2] And the goal is to enable

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[1] *Renovationis Causam*, 4. Cf. *Supplement to the Way*, no 7 (June, 1969), p 17.
[2] *Ibid.*, 5.

the novice not merely to sustain the demands of the religious life but to do so with joy:

> It is important that when the religious takes his perpetual vows he should have reached a certain level of spiritual maturity: one which will ensure that the religious state, to which he is to bind himself firmly and lastingly, is a real help to him for the readier attainment of perfection and greater love, rather than a burden too heavy for him to bear.[3]

There is a ring of truth to the claim made in the instruction that the revisions it suggests are based on experience.

What makes the claim persuasive is that the instruction displays evident familiarity with the attempts made by observers of acknowledged insight to spell out the implications of human maturity. The simplest and best formula, perhaps, is that given by Sigmund Freud when someone asked him what a normal person should be able to do well. Freud answered: *Lieben und arbeiten* – 'To love and to work'. Nor is it far-fetched to see in this formula the basic meaning of what Erik Erikson stipulates as the hallmark of adulthood: the achievement of identity and the capacity for intimacy. This seems to be what *Renovationis Causam* is suggesting in looking for candidates sufficiently free and secure to commit themselves stably and to find fulfilment within that commitment.

Let us start with the qualities required for work. In order to be able to work, the candidate must accept himself in all the dimensions of his life. He must accept himself as a sexual being, as incarnate in his own body, as gifted with a certain limited degree of intelligence, as having a certain social background and status, as being valued at an inestimable spiritual worth. To say that he must accept himself is not to excuse or encourage complacency. He has to recognize himself for what he is; he must be grateful for all his gifts, cognizant of his defects and desirous of fulfilling all his potential. His attitude is well expressed in the prayer of the Alcoholics Anonymous which asks for 'the courage to change what I can, the patience to accept what I cannot change and the wisdom to know the difference'.

An applicant should be settled in his sexual identity before entering the novitiate. Otherwise, the constant association with others of his own sex (if not exclusively still predominantly) is not helpful

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[3] *Ibid.*, 6.

to the final achievement of his or her identity as a man or a woman. Moreover, the sometimes anguished attempts to settle his identity tend to take precedence over the substantial work of the novitiate, that of assimilating the ideals of the congregation and identifying with the person of Jesus Christ. The frequent tragedy is that this acceptance, which should take place between the ages of four and seven, has never been fully achieved; and this failure becomes the source of repressed and unconscious emotional disturbance.

The applicant should be at home with his body. This familiarity is partially dependent on the commonly accepted body image in his milieu. In western culture, the body image has been undergoing radical change in recent years so as to eliminate many of the less essential differences between males and females. The effect is to eliminate at the same time a certain amount of stress arising from sexual differences and to shift the preoccupation of the young away from genitality and toward relationship. It is a shift in which they are comfortable and free. But however one is affected toward the currently accepted body image, one must come to terms with the reality of one's own body and possess it as a source of strength in one's life.

Intellectually, the candidate must be grateful for the native intellectual endowment which is his and be eager to do what he can to capitalize on his gifts. This attitude is especially important in one who faces the prospect of long years of study in preparation for ordination or for apostolic work of an academic or intellectual character. He must be determined to work up to his intellectual limits while being content to work within them, and not to indulge in useless and destructive self-recrimination for not being a latter-day Aquinas. He must see the value for God's kingdom of reflecting the truth through his own unique faculties and of breathing into it the warmth of his own sympathy.

He must bring to the religious life a gratitude for the racial and ethnic background that is the source of his being and the agent which tones and colours his apprehensions and his interests. It is important to see one's national origins as contributing to the catholicity of the Church which one aspires to serve, and as helping to make up the harmony of different but complementary strains in the cosmos which reflects the beauty of Christ.

Finally, the candidate must accept himself spiritually. He must see himself realistically as a sinner, at least in some vague way. But he must be clear that he has been redeemed in the blood of Christ

and he must be conscious that he is loved by the Father who calls him to companionship and service.

In short, he must love himself in accord with the implicit command of Christ in the second of the two greatest commandments, that we love our neighbour as ourself. He must be somehow aware of a call for which he is fitted with God's gifts and in pursuance of which he is to do work and give service which is needed in the redemption of men. That confidence, rooted in his self-acceptance, will make it possible for him to give himself to the life of the Institute and to its work. Thus, in his vocation he will be able to fulfil Freud's injunction that a normal person must be able to work.

But to be really happy – and a candidate should be accepted by a religious Institute only if he gives promises of finding happiness in it – he must be able to accept others and to enter into relationship with them; Freud's beautifully simple stipulation is that he be able to love. Here again the applicant's family background is of crucial importance and should be examined. Granted a normally happy family life, he should give evidence of being able to carry out the four processes of inter-personal relationship.

First, he has to be able to believe. He should have freed himself from a narrow insistence on giving assent only to what is measured by the limits of his own powers of understanding or what has entered into his own personal experience. These limits seem to have their importance in the actual working out of the identity process. However, once one's own security has been established, one is free to risk stepping beyond the limitations of one's own powers and experience and to seek truth from the accumulated wisdom of others, whether that of individuals or of groups. This risk is especially necessary for anyone who wants to join a group with a firm tradition, identity and purpose. Without forsaking his own identity, the candidate has to assimilate the identity of the group; this he can do only if he is at one with, and the same time assured of, his own truth and value and open to the truth and values of the group. In other words, he has to be both intellectually self-confident and intellectually humble.

This combination of humility and confidence is especially necessary where the whole life of an organization proceeds from divine faith, as does the life of the Church and of a religious congregation. In fact, he needs to have made an act of faith in the presence and providence of God in his life, directing him to this congregation. He has to realize that the congregation professes allegiance to the Church and that it is not a haven wherein he is at liberty to act out

his own problems of faith. Nothing goes on by way of spiritual growth as long as he is fighting the faith, the hierarchy, and his superiors. He must come with a substantial adherence to the catholic faith and with a willingness to be guided in matters of faith and religious practice.

Conversely, he must possess a capacity to be believed. If he is really secure in his own identity, he should be able to show himself as he really is to others. It goes without saying that, like anyone who aspires to dedicate himself to the service of Christ, he should be committed to truth. Especially now when religious structures are fast disappearing, spiritual growth and deepening of one's experience of God depends on the ability and willingness to reveal oneself to one's spiritual director.

Secondly, an applicant has to be able to trust and be trusted. It is absolutely essential, as he presents himself for admission to the religious life, that he be convinced that Jesus Christ keeps his promise: 'There is no one who has given up home, or wife, brothers, parents, or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not be repaid many times over in this age, and in the age to come have eternal life'. That promise affords support and fulfilment to those who propose to forsake three central rewards of human life. His confidence in the promises of Christ normally rests upon his own experience of promise-keeping on the part of others who have been significant in his life. And as he goes about living out his commitment to Jesus Christ, especially in the formative stages of his early religious life, he will have to be convinced that he is safe in putting himself in the hands of those to whom the Church has entrusted this serious and precious charge.

In return, he must be capable of being trusted. In our age, religious life, indeed christian life itself, can flourish only in an atmosphere of mutual trust, where mature christians enter into the full possession of the freedom with which Christ has made them free. In the early stages of their religious lives, an atmosphere of compulsion, surveillance and grudging conformity would dampen if not destroy the generosity and enthusiasm which young people bring to their first experience of the form of christian service to which God calls them. But they must be able to sustain the burden of that trust.

Thirdly, he must be able to love in order to seal his acceptance of others and to complete his relationship with them. He must bring to love some capacity for communication, some ability to say with truth, and without dissembling, the words which express the love of

one human being for another and of a human being for God. He has to find the time to be alone with God, for lovers desire to be alone together; and he has to give his time to those with whom he chooses to live in community. He meets this last demand partly through his words, but more tellingly through demonstrating his willingness to give the service which is inseparable from love. Love is proved in deed rather than in word; the deeds of love are service, and they exact sacrifice and sometimes suffering. But service is something different from compulsive work; it responds to need and is given in freedom.

Love goes deeper than service; love touches us at the very core of our being. And the person who aspires to the dedicated love of God must let himself be touched and moved deeply by others and have a gift for touching and moving in turn. He has to love those whom he can see, those especially of his own community, as an earnest of his loving the God whom he cannot see. As christians we touch one another, and we touch God deeply when we celebrate the eucharist with a clear realization of what we are doing and with a personal commitment to that meaning.

However much we love, we often offend, and so the aspiring religious has to be able to say, 'I am sorry'. Love is wounded time after time, and it has to be restored. The glib excuse amounts to nothing more than evasion; the words or deeds that express our regrets, whatever form they may take, have to be deep and genuine to burn away the guilt and to heal the wound.

All of this is to say, then, that Freud's dictum about love and work applies to one who seeks entrance to the priesthood or the religious life. Love and work in religion imply a commitment for life which the novice must be able to make at the time of his vows. From the start he has to give evidence of an ability to grow in self-knowledge, to assess his own suitability for the life he ambitions; to assess, too, his prospects of fidelity in his commitment.

He needs the courage to face the alternatives and the discernment to recognize the various possibilities to which his life is open. When the time comes to take the risk of a responsible decision, he must have the wisdom and the humility to seek that decision in prayer and to say 'Yes' to God's loving design for him.

There remains the question whether these capacities for love and for work can be found in young people before they reach the early twenties. Statistically at least, the chances are better for a slightly older age group. But it is individual human beings who apply for

the consecrated service of God, not statistics. Rather than a statistical norm, what must be employed is a searching policy of admission, coupled with an intimate personal knowledge of the candidate. The ability to love and to work are sadly lacking in some applicants in their twenties and thirties and are to be found in abundance in some not yet out of their teens. Whatever the age of the applicant, he has to be received and evaluated for what he is. God continues to send to his Church, though indeed in smaller numbers, talented and generous young people for the work of the kingdom. They must be greeted with love and the work of selection and formation must be done with that dedication and generosity which itself evokes in candidates the qualities required and which is the stamp of God's blessing on the gathering of this precious harvest.