THE PRINCIPLES OF FURTHER FORMATION

SAILING THE SEVEN-PLUS SEAS

By PAUL EDWARDS

ALMOST EXACTLY twenty-four hours ago I was taking a class in the 'use of English' with the lower sixth science. I was showing them the 'alpha privative', pointing out that in words like 'amoral' and 'asymetrical' the initial 'a' negatives the rest of the word. A sixth former in the front row raised a languid hand. 'Then I suppose', he said, 'that the word afloat means that the thing has already sunk'. I was so pleased with this remark that I decided in the course of yesterday afternoon to attempt to give this talk an aquatic flavour, and spent much of yesterday evening's journey down from Leeds in trying to find nautical-sounding labels for the various sections of my talk. No doubt I should have been brooding upon something more deeply significant, such as the determining of the eschatological parameters of my material. Those of you who teach will sympathize with my reluctance to do so on a Friday evening — or perhaps at any other time.

Now I have been asked to speak on 'The Principles of Further Formation', that is, 'formation during the life of the apostolic religious after final profession'. Final profession, I believe, commonly comes five years after the first profession or promise, which in its turn is preceded by probation and novitiate, giving us in all a rough figure of seven years already spent in a religious institute. So, in my present marine mood I have called this paper 'Sailing the Seven-Plus Seas'.

A parish priest was once explaining to me how much he preferred his seaside parish to his previous country post. 'The countryside', he said, 'especially in winter, is very much the same from day to day. But the sea! The sea is like a woman. It can change completely in half an hour!' I quote this remark to 'point up' (a metaphor whose literal basis quite baffles me) the fact that the most predictable thing about the behaviour of the sea is its unpredictability, a factor to be always borne in mind by our apprentice navigators, and never

forgotten by their instructors. Nevertheless, I presume to offer both groups two principles.

The first of these I have labelled 'Dropping the Pilot'. The most important educational axiom which I know, says, 'It is the business of the educator to eliminate himself'. To teach someone effectively is to take away his need of a teacher. I wonder if this point was in the mind of those theologians who described the episcopate as the *ecclesia docens*, the 'teaching Church'. Be that as it may, it seems to me indisputable that the training of religious, especially after final profession, should aim at making them entirely able to navigate their own craft, and so 'formation' at this stage should be designedly an ever contracting factor. This is not to say that mature religious will never need advice, will never need to check their own judgment against a second and preferably more expert opinion. Everyone does. The best trained mind falls a long way short of infallibility, and is even further from omniscience.

[I am grateful to the sister who pointed out that the word 'formation' is used in English of inanimate things, as in 'rock-formation', or of the disposition of troops. Plainly, we need another translation. At present, the best I can suggest is 'education'. Helping religious to follow their vocation is not some arcane science operating in some mysterious sphere apart. It is an effort to foster knowledge, understanding, appreciation and accurate judgment, in which general educational principles are plainly applicable.][1]

For my second principle I am indebted to Cardinal Newman, of mental 'reality the rarest-veined unraveller'. (I know that Hopkins was talking about Scotus, which is why I added the word 'mental'.) I think that everyone here will be familiar with his distinction between the notional and the real. Much early formation — I suppose I must retain the word — is bound to be 'notional', a matter of fine words, with an admixture nowadays of clumsily imprecise 'in' jargon and noble sentiments. These may glow beautifully like the filament of an electric lamp encapsulated in an inert gas, and have an equally brief life when exposed to ordinary air. I would see as the prime object of 'further formation' the total transformation of notional principles

[1] When I addressed the conference in April, I did so from a single page of notes. In preparing my paper for publication I have laboured to express myself a little more precisely and occasionally more temperately. I have attached one consideration to the end, which I did not ventilate at all in the meeting, and I have gratefully added some of the observations shrewdly offered in the course of the discussion. These contributions I have inserted into the text, in square brackets.

into authentic, effective premises, from which concrete decisions are regularly, realistically and logically derived. This very significant antithesis between the notional and the real I have renamed in pelagic parlance 'A Painted Ocean versus the Cruel Sea'.

My two principles of further formation thus tersely limned, I now wish to propose for your comment five areas in which I think the young, or the newly professed, religious may require support and counsel, as they strive to transmute the bright bronze of good intentions into performance's solid gold. The first of these areas I originally called 'The acceptance of adversity'. In my present marine mood I have renamed it 'Gale Warning'.

I attach very great importance to this subject and must ask for your patience if I seem to give it disproportionate space and emphasis. This matter causes me much concern in the whole field of education, not merely in that specialized branch which we are now discussing. Hardship, disappointment and even tragedy remain conspicuous strands in the texture of human life, and yet their anticipation seems to me wholly absent from the so-called preparation for life which our children receive. Most of our british children grow up in an atmosphere of warmth, both physical and emotional, with pocket money by the standards of previous generations almost lavish, with expertly produced entertainment available at the turn of a knob. School discipline is commonly mild, while medical care and improved dentistry make the experience of more than momentary pain a rarity for most young people. I would not wish any detail of this to be different, but I worry lest a child reared in this benign climate be quite unprepared for an adult world in which 'sharp and sided hail' can fall mercilessly.

Working-class people, I think, especially the women-folk, often retain a robust, traditional realism as to what life may hold in store for them, which education, or rather prolonged and academically successful schooling, only serves to undermine. The intelligent child for whom knowledge does not make 'a bloody entrance' has a smooth passage through school and then, perhaps, passes into the humane, cocooned environment of tertiary education. Education, of course, should produce an intolerance of evil. The student should come to aspire after a world in which more of the truth is known, in which men are less and less deceived by things, by others and by themselves, a world in which man is less exposed to the indifference of things, the hostility of other people and his own personal folly, a world in which moral and physical squalor have less and less place.

The teacher, the scribe, should be for ever recruiting for this crusade fresh troops of chivalry, who will ride without illusion to a war without end, without truce and without quarter. We teachers and scribes do succeed in teaching our pupils that they should not submit to the harshness of life, but we seem to teach them flight rather than fight. We teach them not to conquer evil, but to expect to have it conquered for them, by governments, by institutions, by medical and welfare services.

A member of a religious congregation is surely a dedicated recruit to the battle against evil, a volunteer for special service. Yet it appears to me that many of us expect to campaign without wounds, indeed without even being shot at. Of course warnings are dinned into the recruit's ears. The gospels speak eloquently of the high cost of discipleship, of a life with nowhere to lay one's head, of an existence as precarious as that of a sheep among wolves, of the bitter chalice to be drunk, of the cross which is to be carried daily. And much of this, indeed all of it, can be totally notional. I speak vehemently here because I have been dismayed to meet people who, having for years dutifully meditated on the Foundation and the Passion and the Third Degree of Humility, when they encountered a real hardship, were spiritually disorientated. I was not surprised that they were hurt, for religion is not an anaesthetic in any way, but at the extent to which they had, at least temporarily, lost their spiritual bearings. This difficulty, that our preparedness for the cross is so often so notional, is, I think, gravely compounded by our tendency to apply our religious ideals quite stringently to other people. My vision of the Church as a congregation of saints quite blots out the more relevant fact that I am called upon to be in some degree a martyr. My congregation should be ruled with consummate wisdom, my superiors should be at all times inspiring, equable and appreciative, my colleagues similarly inspiring, without their example being too challenging, and also utterly reliable and personally congenial. A very different set of expectations from the daily carrying of the cross, etc.! It seems a programme for a sunshine cruise rather than a lifetime voyage over 'the widowmaking, unchilding, unfathering deeps'.

The second area in which the maturing religious will need assistance, I first called 'The Prerogative of Service' and am renaming 'Checking the Compass'. In the first formation there will have been considerable emphasis on apostolic service, on the dedication of our lives and energies to serving God and our fellow human beings. It may well have been emphasized above all other considerations as it underlies

all other considerations. Yet no matter how thoroughly the spirit of selfless dedication has been inculcated, the deepening of that spirit must be a primary aim of later formation. I suggest that in no other area is the transition from the notional to the real so late, and in no other area is our perverse talent for self-deceit so insidiously deployed.

The small child is, of course, for himself the centre of the world. He is wholly absorbed in his own needs and wishes. All other people and things are measured by their ability and willingness to meet those needs and wishes. Many people never really outgrow this sub-human perspective. Their objectives remain those of the baby. Napoleon I, launching half a million men against Russia, and the baby bawling for its feed, are mentally twins, only the relative sophistication of his means distinguishing the emperor. Christian achievement consists, I think, in the effective displacement of the centre of gravity of one's life, outwards from one's self towards God and the rest of mankind. This was the formula of Christ's life, and it is the formula by which I must try to remake mine. This requires a revolution in outlook, a revolution which is always exposed to counter-revolution. The counter-revolutionary forces will fight an occasional pitched battle, are skilled in sabotage and are at their best in a war of attrition. Take them seriously.

As I seem to be tangling myself in an accumulation of metaphor, from navigation, physics, politics and warfare, I had better begin again. I think that one cannot expect the young to be radically selfless. They are re-finding themselves after the upheavals of adolescence, and a great deal of self-absorption is as psychologically necessary to the post-adolescent as it is biologically necessary for the infant. And when does post-adolescence end? When must we finally boot Narcissus from the margin of the lake? Myself, I would allow him quite a long time to study the plasticity of his own features, for I regard a genuine selflessness as a very slow growing plant, and one that bears far more blossom than fruit.

A major part of the problem is that if I am to serve, I shall do so better the more I can develop my own powers. And while I am carefully cultivating my own powers whom do I really have in mind? Are those the features of suffering mankind which I see? Or is it Narcissus back, watching himself grow in grace (of a kind) and power? Is he just making a brief visit for old time's sake, or has he come to stay? And when Cinderella — I am changing my myth — is gowned in her degree and decorated with diplomas and courses, to which

ball shall she go? Will she choose the party which most needs brightening up, or will she go to the one where she expects the most fun? Our motives in choosing how and where to serve need to be scrutinized as suspiciously as a group of men of military carriage and civilian dress asking in strongly slavonic accents to be admitted to a MIRV base.

A ship's captain checks the course of his ship by its compass. He would never willingly sail without an accurate, freely moving, sensitively reacting compass. Moreover, his compass has already been adjusted to make allowance for the magnetism generated by the ship herself. Happy the religious to whom the selflessness or otherwise of his course is clearly evident and the degree of deviation exactly plain, who knows into the bargain precisely what allowance to make for the pull of his own self-interest. He has found 'an ever fixed mark, that looks on tempests and is never shaken'. He may need a good deal of help to find it.

My third heading in this part of the paper I originally called 'The Search for Inspiration', for which I imagine the nautical equivalent is 'In Search of a Fair Wind'. My notes at this point are unusually clear. They read:

> A religious lives, or suffers debility, or is one of the walking dead, according to the strength, weakness or absence of inspiration. We need to range in search of inspiration as primitive man hunted and foraged for food. We cannot live indefinitely on stored insights. New light needs to play on new situations; new visions are needed in strange contexts. The life of the spirit demands much richer nourishment than that of the body, and food of that quality is not easily found.

That astute and peerlessly articulate observer, Dr Johnson, said of friendship, 'A man should keep his friendships in good repair'. The romantic may find this distasteful, imagining something so natural and spontaneous as friendship to be quite incompatible with deliberation and regularity. I am not going to argue the matter here. I have found the romantic to be wrong. A man should keep his friendships in good repair and he should tend his visions most sedulously. The terms 'inspiration' and 'vision' are such hard-worked members of my 'word-workforce', that like Humpty-dumpty I may owe them extra on saturday night. Inspiration stirs the mind and the imagination simultaneously to create the vision; it stimulates our hearts and wills to respond to the vision. Vision is the perceiving of rich possibilities demanding to become actualities. It is not day-

dreaming; it is not fantasy. It is a shaft of insight into things as they are, revealing what they could become. Inspiration leads us to think more energetically, to see more clearly, to feel more deeply, to decide more effectively, to act more vigorously. A religious without inspiration is like a sailing ship when no wind blows, reduced to a drifting hulk.

Too many of us spend too long in the doldrums. Some degree of inspiration brought us into religious life; some breath of the Spirit launched us on our course. The initiating vision needs to be kept alive, by which I mean growing, developing new depths and acquiring fresh facets. We should seek inspiration as avidly as modern nations prospect for oil. I am not suggesting that we should all streak — I had forgotten the present connotation of that word — that we should all scuttle back and forth across the country to the newest charismatic guru, to the latest liturgical workshop, to the most spoken-of 'sensitivity group'. I am not deprecating the new. I honour the matthaean formula, 'Every scribe who has been trained for the Kingdom of Heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old'. Inspiration is to be sought in the scriptures, in the liturgy, in the spiritual classics. It is also to be sought in modern theologians and modern writers.

In fact, I think that we can find inspiration on all sides. The other night, quite by accident, I saw a TV programme in which the producers had taken some dozens of self-portraits by Rembrandt, arranged them in chronological order, somehow reduced them to the same scale and then faded one into the other, so that Rembrandt passed from young manhood to his last years in front of one. At the end I thought that I ought to lead a better life. No! You mistake me. It was not because the programme gave me a sense of mortality. It was because its excellence somehow demanded a response. Quality calls for quality. A wise headmaster once said to me that there is nobody who cannot teach you something. I think that inspiration, like information, is to be had on all sides, if we know how to look, if we know how to see. I like to prepare for a sunday sermon by looking at the relevant readings on the previous Tuesday, and as the week-end approaches, consulting the commentaries and perhaps the theologians. Then on saturday night, as I battle to put my thinking into some sort of order, I like to read some good lyric poetry and watch *Match of the day*. It is not for me to comment on the resulting blend. I hope that something passes from the contemplation of physical skill and verbal power into my presentation.

The difficulty is, of course, to unify the inspiration that comes from such disparate sources as, say, reading St Luke, relishing Housman's verse and watching Heighway outmanoeuvre the defender. That too is the problem of my general policy of pan-eclectic pneumatology. To welcome inspiration from anywhere, and from anyone and anything, is to expose oneself to intellectual incoherence and emotional fragmentation, whereas all those insights should be assembled into a single structure, a cathedral of understanding, perception . . . and prayer. Faced with the vast architectonic project, the young religious certainly stand in need of assistance. I think that they will have difficulty in finding it.

My fourth point I labelled *Pietas*. Perhaps I should have said 'loyalty', but I have heard that word so often abused that I am reluctant to employ it. In my marine mood I have renamed the section, 'All in the same Boat'. Time was when a religious congregation was its members' whole world. They received therein their religious training, probably their higher education; they were set to work in an institution perhaps owned, founded and directed by the congregation. The congregation provided their material needs, their few relaxations, their closest friends. It was rather like living on another planet. We english Jesuits spoke of mere earthmen as 'externs', a phrase which included every non-Jesuit from the bishop to the binman. The scene has been transformed. We have rejoined the human race. The modern religious may work in an institution which his congregation does not direct, where the majority, perhaps all, of his colleagues are 'externs'. His or her spare time apostolates, interests and hobbies may become to lie wholly outside the religious community. This situation may degenerate to the point where I am strongly reminded of the attitude of some callous, self-centred students for whom the parental home is something useful to fall back on, when they are short of money, have run out of invitations elsewhere. At the worst, a modern religious may cease to give his community any personal interest, concern or companionship. The community may become a place where he has a bed and, when necessary, board, which will look after him if he is ill and serves as a handy address for his mail. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of this problem is that it is a comparatively new one.

[There are, I think, no precedents for dealing with it. The point was well made in the subsequent discussion that we belong to several communities, to our families, to our congregations, to our parish, to our working community, to our neighbourhood, etc. To assess our

responsibilities and opportunities, to harmonize our activities in all these contexts calls for very shrewd calculation and sound judgment. Here also, perhaps, we lack precedent.]

The words of another speaker recalled to me a comment I heard only last year from a wise nun. She said, 'The last thing we come to terms with in religious life is chastity'. She was not speaking of physical chastity, but of its emotional concomitants. Many a religious has, in consequence of dedicated celibacy, lived a life of general usefulness, moral correctness and impersonal kindliness. No negligible achievement in a vicious world, but a formula more befitting the administration of an operating theatre. We should give personal warmth, individual affection and private appreciation. It is at least equally important that we accept them joyfully from others. And there is a whole catalogue of mistakes we can make, being over-intense, over-demanding, over-dependent, proprietorial and exclusive, not to mention the more primitive possibilities.

There remains what to me seems the most complex problem of all. All our concepts, including those of God, of Christ, of the spiritual, are formed from what we have experienced and learned. As our experience grows, as our theoretical knowledge develops, as we observe, listen, read and reflect, so our key religious concepts must be enlarged, deepened, purified and enriched. This is no smooth and easy process. If, as they should be, our lives are directed by those central religious notions, then the process of re-examining them and modifying them is always liable to create doubt and insecurity. It can produce dismay and even demoralization. I think that for this reason many people avoid it, or try to. When I was dredging up nautical terms to recast this paper in thalassic terminology, I decided to call this section 'Updating the Charts'. It would perhaps be more accurate to describe it as 'Continually rebuilding your ship while it is on the high Seas', which expresses better the thoroughly hazardous character of the operation. And I think that it is in the years after final profession that the most challenging experiences will come, demanding the most radical modifications to the structure of our craft. Here, more than anywhere else, the maturing religious will need counsel and support.

Having now indicated my two principles and my five areas, as promised, I see that I have scribbled at the foot of the page three words, 'realistic, hopeful, idealism'. I have written them down in a triangle. They are not meant to be in any order of chronology or priority, because they must be simultaneously present and are all indispensable. Put together they are my attempt to describe what

I think should be the mood of 'further formation'. It is not a precise analysis, it is meant to sum up an intellectual and emotional atmosphere. Idealism we can never be without. Not at any time, nor in any context. But idealism has nothing to do with ignoring fact; it is not fantasy, it is not 'wandering unchecked in a garden of bright images'. It is a relentless striving to produce something of good, something of unalloyed quality in the real world, without in any way underestimating the difficulty, the complexity, the 'expense of spirit' involved, none of which will vanish at the incantation of a simplistic formula. Because we do not underestimate the difficulty, our enterprise will never be sustained without hope, without the conviction that the goal can be achieved, without the belief that it is possible for us to achieve it.

> By a high star our course is set,
> Our end is Life. Put out to sea.

Addendum

Since the delivery of the above paper I have decided to raise in the printed version a matter of nagging interest to myself. It concerns 'common sense'. I am not going to attempt to define it, because I think that you all know what it is. Also I think that everyone will admit that it is a desirable quality in people. What I want to suggest is that it is not so much desirable as priceless, and that it is necessary for salvation. No! I am not saying that a man is likely to find himself shut out of Heaven on the charge of inadequate common sense; I am saying that he will have made it much more difficult for other people to arrive there. Loving and morally good parents who are very short of common sense are quite likely to make a mess, not so much of their children's health, as of their moral training. If a parish priest is very devout and is deficient in common sense, his people will suffer spiritually. In fact he should be encouraged to go and become a hermit.

Virtues have been symbolized and celebrated in sculpture, painting and stained glass windows. Does common sense ever figure there in the august society of Faith and Co., or of Prudence, Liberality and the rest? Are we not in the habit of relegating common sense to a lower sphere, as something belonging in the kitchen and the counting-house rather than in the world of noble aspirations and religious inspiration? By doing so we underestimate religion. If it is more important than puddings or profits, then everything which contributes to clear, sound judgment should be pressed into, and

kept in, its service. It is, of course, no use my exhorting people who have no common sense to use common sense. I am concerned with those people who, possessing that priceless commodity, are nevertheless often persuaded to put it aside, thinking that to use common sense is to 'show lack of faith' or to be 'wanting in generosity'. I knew a very shrewd priest who was persuaded by the aphorism 'people cannot become trustworthy until they are trusted' to leave his door unlocked. His cash box was lifted out of his desk. I knew a man whose judgment was very down to earth, but who made himself ill through overwork because 'Christ didn't spare himself'. What particularly riled me in these two cases was that it was in, and only in, a religious context that these two very sensible people would have abandoned their common sense. I am sorry to say that they are not alone in thinking that common sense is somehow rather base and can be trumped, as it were, by any high sounding, sloppy, trendy generality such as 'you must never reject anyone' or 'it is the individual that counts and not the institution'. There is usually some truth in these incantatory formulae, but, like all generalizations, they need to be handled with great care and applied — with common sense.

I have often wondered why, if common sense is as important in the religious life as I think, it hardly seems to figure in the New Testament. True, the Apostles were taught to be 'as cunning as serpents' and Christ complained that the 'sons of this world' show more sense than 'the sons of light', but a few odd texts hardly stand comparison with the gospel insistence on faith, forgiveness, humility, etc., I think I know the answer. The Hebrews were such a down-to-earth people that it would never occur to them to undervalue common sense. You can see this in the sapiential books; you can see it in many of the parables.

However, I must not allow my interest in this point to turn this codicil into another article. I content myself with saying that I hope that those responsible for the 'Further Formation' of religious will never suggest to their clients that there is any religious situation to which common sense is inapplicable. Better they should be fitted for their millstone now.