

NOVITIATE FORMATION

By JOAN FABER

I MUST GO through the pain of giving birth to you all over again, until Christ be formed in you. I wish I were with you now so that I could know exactly what to say; as it is, I have no idea what to do for the best.¹ So it seems that even Paul had to seek out the 'how' of christian formation. We want the path to be so clearly sign-posted, but we are being called to imitate the earliest Christians, who tried to re-live the experience of the first followers of Christ. However, there was a difference; Christ had been present amongst the first apostles. After his resurrection the christian community had to find, under the guidance of the Spirit, how to live and act in a radically new situation, but one analogous to that of the apostles. The conversion encounter with Christ always means rupture with the past. The task of the early Christians was to see wherein lay the continuity with the apostolic life.

Today, in the same way, living religious life in a progressively secularized world, we need to see where we are being called to break with the world and with the past, and where we need continuity, creativity and insertion in God's world. We, like the primitive Christians, have to discover what is the connection between human aspirations, the promotion of man and christian experience lived in a life of faith. Gradually, for example, we are being awakened to the fact that there can be no true faith commitment if there is not, alongside, an awareness of the demands of social justice as a sign of the Kingdom. The young men and women who come to our congregations will expect to find in religious life a realistic attempt to show that the Kingdom is come, because the poor have the gospel preached to them, captives are set free and the attitudes of the beatitudes are lived out in community.

Different cultures and economic situations demand different lifestyles and raise questions about the how of being a Christian and a religious. Much of the structure of the traditional religious life was in fact not specifically 'religious' but the result of socio-economic structures. The rural pre-industrial society, which saw the rise of so many of our religious orders, is not that of the highly organized

¹ Gal 4, 19-20.

technological world. We are not being asked to envisage formation therefore that is faithful to a past life-style, but one that is a faithful *yes* to a living God, who continues to erupt in man and his history. Not only is the world in which religious life is inserted different, but the candidates themselves arrive with a distinctive value system. Only when we begin to situate the candidates in their world, rather than in the one that moulded so much of the thought and spirituality of the past, shall we be able to grasp more clearly some implications for formation today. That is why it seems good to focus briefly on a sociological background.

Pre-industrial Society

Authoritarian, vertical structure, Patriarchal. Control by public opinion, traditions, regulations. Conformity and literal application: 'We have always done this'. The good of the whole before that of the individual.

Sacral, homogeneous, closed society. Everyone knows everyone. Slow communication.

Continuity in unchanging structures. Immobility. Rigid resistance in face of change — which was slow. Future prepared for and foreseen.

Large extended families. Father *the* authority. Prolonged submission of the children.

Conventional choice of work/profession by parents, prolonging the *status quo*. Family patrimony to which each contributed.

Technological Society

Democratic, horizontal structures. Equality of persons trying to reach consensus. Need to change, all is different, past experience often irrelevant. Greater value given to the individual.

Desacralized, heterogeneous, open society. Uprooted families. Anonymity. Technological culture. Rapid communication. Mass media.

Mobility. Flexibility. Unpredictable situations. Knowledge quickly outdated. 'Change is avalanching down upon our heads and most people are entirely unprepared to cope with it'.²

Small nuclear families. Diminished and shared parental authority. Precocious emancipation of children.

Personal choice of work by young who look for their own development and live off their own work.

² Toffler, A.: 'Future Shock' (London, 1970).

All needs fulfilled by family or village (leisure, education, religion).

Certain functions clearly linked to sexual roles.

Pessimistic view of man — unable to be responsible for himself. Knowledge rested with the few.

Faith a heritage and that of the majority. Preserved through collective attitudes, expressed through cult, sacramental practices. (Spiritual consumer society with instant goods available.) Community based on parish and priest. Faith handed on through instruction of children completed by religious institutions. Mass apostolate.

Needs catered for by numerous groups of varying social make-up.

Diminishment of sexual role differentiation. Emancipation of women.

'Man has come of age'. Formation of the individual conscience. Knowledge stored by computers. Elders now asked to distil wisdom.

Faith a person option and of the minority. Personal conversion to Jesus Christ. Search based on the Word of God. Christian community small, but participation of all. Continuing catechesis of everyone. Explication of faith in cell groups. Apostolate of small groups. Yeast in the mass.

Juxtaposition of these two world views may make it easier to see factors at work which are influencing our way of life and formation. We cannot live both ways of life with their own value systems simultaneously. Working in a village in Upper Egypt, it is clear in which world one is situated: in a village in the Highlands it may be more difficult to decide. Bishop John Robinson spoke of the difficulties of 'living in the overlap'. What we, who are responsible for formation, have to remember is that we are preparing those who will be the leaders of the Church in the twenty-first century. 'A time for building' is sign-posting the need for a different 'mind-set' regarding such questions as christian formation, the witness of the Church, the role of woman, together with new and specialized ministries which would bring some of 'the openness and freshness found wanting in our catholic life'.³ Religious must not be afraid of their prophetic role in all this; they are not part of the hierarchical Church but essentially charismatic, because they come together in the name of Christ, to hear his Spirit in the world and respond.

With this background, what of formation for ministry today? How are we to lead and challenge highly articulate, idealistic, concerned young people wishing to commit themselves with other

³ *A Time for Building*. Report of the Joint Working Party on Pastoral Strategy.

like-minded men and women in a radical, authentic following of Christ? How create the sort of structures and climate in community that will help them to respond in fidelity to the Spirit living within them? How allow them to see Jesus Christ as the pivot of life, who continues to call us to enter into a movement of liberty, through an exodus, through entry into the paschal mystery, which alone will make us agents of new life? How sustain their vision, make real the fact that Jesus Christ is our only model, the only Absolute; that each one of us has 'this one work to do — let all God's glory through'.⁴ No question here of law, legalism, external discipline. We are about a mutual process. We are all involved in formation together. There are no initiated and uninitiated. We are all seekers, interacting, sharing, calling each other forth, discerning. This is why community has come to be seen as the locus of formation. Evidently, there is a content, and some specific steps that need to be thought of in a community of initial formation, which will lead a candidate at the end of three or four years to a free commitment. Having been helped to know herself as being a 'graced', called and free person she will have been led to be 'one who has already become a someone with the experience of a self out of which to speak. A man must have a self to commit or there will be no act of commitment, christian or otherwise'.⁵

We have to focus on the formation of religious who find their direction from within: people who have been helped to know themselves, to face their unconscious inner conflicts, to clarify their motivations, act responsibly and make congruent and appropriate choices: people who have discovered an inner stability that will enable them to be unthreatened by ambiguity, search, insecurity and the demands involved in assuming a community identity, because aware of their own personal identity. Led to believe in themselves and their own self-worth, they can believe in that of others too, and so will be trusting and trusted. Formation is to help sustain the demands of being for another, for others. So it will deepen a capacity to live in gratuity — able both to give and receive. Inner-directed but other-orientated, they will be led into the truth of interdependent dependence, discover true independence and not fear handing over an autonomy to the charism of the order. Openness, sharing, respon-

⁴ Manley Hopkins, G.: 'The Blessed Virgin compared to the air we breathe'.

⁵ Wilson, G. S.J.: 'Christian Commitment', in *Supplement to the Way*, no 10 (1970), pp 24ff.

sibility, to accept guidance, to live in a discerning attitude: of themselves these qualities will safeguard the area of personal asceticism and self-discipline, seen as a necessity in the life of one trying to live with christian quality and presence.

Novitiates should be directed to the formation of mature adults, allowing space for their own responsible choices. Therefore there must be the acceptance of mistaken decisions, whether in the area of leisure, budgets, sleep, work, apostolic endeavour, prayer. It will not matter so much what they have decided to do, if they are able to be openly accountable to their director and community. Perhaps in some unexpected way they have been putting into effect an evangelical value which ought to be questioning our actions as well. All formation must be suited to the individual. Some on arrival may need to be helped through a bereavement and mourning experience, others through a honeymoon. There will be little in common amongst a group of candidates, except their call to this community. They have to learn that, from now on, they must in all things take their sisters into account. Well able to take their own lives into their hands, now they have to do so no less responsibly, with and in a community. Do not let us underestimate what these demands are, nor the demands for a young adult to learn the quality of relationships that celibate loving is going to bring into their lives. The formation community will be the place where the elements of shared life, work and faith are learnt. There communion is made visible and is a witness. There, too, are learnt the demands of non-exclusive loving to which our vow of chastity commits us. There is learnt something of what it means to belong to a wider community, and so there will be the need to study the spirit and history of the congregation, and all that touches upon the world and Church it is called upon to serve. (Church history, conciliar and synodal documents, pastoral directives of local churches, etc.)

Formation communities must be places where there is the experience of a group living under the scrutiny of the word, reflecting upon it, being questioned by it, and where the Eucharist is central to life. This will inevitably lead to religious becoming more and more dissatisfied with the way in which so many parish Eucharists are celebrated. The sort of religious formation I envisage will be uncomfortable for many. It will not produce the quiet, docile 'good sister'; rather those who by their living, searching and questioning will be both proclaimers and denouncers.

If community introduces the element of togetherness, then there must be time and space for that other vital element: aloneness and

prayer. The time of initial formation is a privileged one for the growth in an interior attitude of the gift of self to Christ and the Father through love. It is a time to stabilize the contemplative stance of one called to look upon and love the world with the mind and heart of Christ. It means allowing the experience of enrichment through receiving Gift from Another, leading to impoverishment of self in him — *kenosis* — and of sharing in the urgency of his mission. In prayer, the obediential attitude of true inner freedom will be developed; in life, it will find its practical form. Wise direction leads to inner unification, avoiding separate compartments of prayer and work. Candidates must learn to put into words their prayer experience; only in that way will what has been barely perceived come to the surface. Personal, consistent spiritual direction is a necessity. It is also a help in the learning of silence: that silence which is listening to the truth of things. Do not let us be afraid of creating special times apart, 'desert' periods, thirty-day retreats made in their entirety or spread over a year, one week being made each holiday. (If this begins in a summer holiday, the retreat 'weeks' fit very well into the liturgical periods of the year.)

We need to help the candidate to be true to herself. We know so well the quotation from *Hamlet*: 'To thy own self be true, and as surely as night follows day, thou wilt not be false to any man'. This means — turning to *King Lear* — 'to speak what he feels and not what he ought to say'. This is vital, if there is real danger of conformism to be avoided. We need to know the candidate as she is and where she is. There are many subtle influences at work, tempting a candidate to put on an acceptable outer garment. This is particularly true in the more 'normal' living of community, where the director is much more present in all activities than in the more traditionally styled novitiates. The director will have an important say about admission and belonging to the congregation: so the creation of a climate in community, where each one will feel free to be herself, is both essential and difficult to achieve. It is within this context that the place of apostolic experiences made outside the community setting can be invaluable. They will provide the opportunity for the candidate to make a critical assessment of herself in relation to an outside reality, and in the context of service and ministry. It can be an opportunity for candidates to be challenged by people who live and think very differently from themselves. It could be an opportunity to discover the life of the poor, the voiceless and powerless, either through service or through a work that will make them more

identified with these people. How do the candidates respond and react? What does the experience evoke in them? How do they integrate it into their conception of God and man, justice and love, power and poverty? It can be a real discovery of the dichotomy between professed gospel values and those of our culture. Of course, responsible apostolic experiences within the congregation should also be provided before a first commitment. What needs to be safeguarded all through these experiences is the continual assessment and evaluation by each candidate. We often learn so little, because we do not reflect on past experiences. Training is needed to help a true self-reflection, made under the Word, on an event, relationship or personal situation. This evaluation, shared not just with the director but with the group, can be a powerfully formative factor, fostering openness, honesty and trust, creative of community and an awareness of the mystery of each other.

If we are to be contemplatives in and for the world, in the face of many choices, no religious life can be lived today without a discerning attitude, discernment at a personal level — by what spirit am I moved? — and at a community and provincial level. Being in touch with personal inner movements — the Examen of Consciousness as G. Aschenbrenner S.J.⁶ has called it — will be an important daily structure for each one. Candidates will need help to read the pattern of their lives, their own personal salvation history and the unconscious forces that are obstacles, in their own lives as well as in the community situation. In a world of injustice, how can we be sure that our action for the liberation of man is in tune with the gospel, if we do not know how to put it under the word, and alone, or with others in trust, truth and love, try to discern God's action? It is this sharing, too, that helps to keep alive the faith within us, pressurized as it is by so many outside forces.

I am very aware that I have said little enough of the how of formation, of the structures. But, given the diversity of call, of ministry, of place, is it possible? What will have to be present in every formation programme will be the essentials: serious study, work, time for prayer and good direction, and a community life that fosters the personal growth of each one. I have tried to stress the attitudes and qualities that need to be underlined, as well as the importance of a community willing and able to live their faith and share it, to discern

⁶ Aschenbrenner, G. S.J.: 'Examen of Consciousness', in *Review for Religious*, vol 31, no 1 (January 1970), pp 14-21.

reality with a contemplative vision, committed to apostolic mission and endeavour for the service of the Church. Formation personnel must be people of faith and prayer, agents of growth, ready to relate and to communicate, able to tolerate and wait on the growth of each one, willing to accept and to hear questions of all kinds while remaining free and committed in joy and friendship. The formation community and team should be able to supply complementary skills and so give mutual reassurance when it comes to evaluating the growth and personal integration of each candidate.⁷

⁷ Note: This article is meant to apply to all religious formation, whether for men or women. If in places it reads as though more directed towards women, it is because my experience has been drawn from my working with them.