

IDENTITY AND MATURITY

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THE EXPECTED response on hearing the words Identity and Maturity is a wise nod: they are hurrah-words, standing for qualities widely supposed to have been undermined by 'the old-style formation' (a boo-phrase), and part of the desired goal of 'the new thinking in religious formation'. If someone asks you if you would like them for Christmas, you must reply 'yes please, by the bucketful'. Unfortunately, however, this ability to make the correct noises is of little help in writing an article on Identity and Maturity, for which a prerequisite is some idea of what precisely is meant by those labels. The schoolmaster, for example, who bellows 'who are you, boy?', and 'why can't you grow up?', is presumably posing (even if only rhetorically) questions of identity and maturity. Philosophers (who always like to spoil the fun) will set mind-bending puzzles like 'identical with what?' or 'when you say "mature", are you asking for a statement of fact or a value-judgment?'

To avoid any unpleasantness of this kind, I propose to say that someone has 'identity' as a Jesuit in so far as he is unable to conceive himself as other than a Jesuit (or Benedictine or Sister of Mercy or whatever), and that one attains more or less maturity in the religious life in so far as one has the ability to make decisions more or less conformably with the spirit of one's particular Order, in a reasonably clear-eyed way, and unswayed by factors extraneous or seriously alien to that spirit.

The invitation to write this paper urged me to approach the issue by way of at least some reflection on my own formation so far (for I am still being formed, in the narrow sense of the term). Now I have always found merciless exposés of the dehumanizing iniquities of the system of religious formation, and slashing attacks upon the moral and psychological integrity of those responsible; utterly compelling reading, while treatises on the Benevolence of Religious Superiors leave me cold. If you share this distressing psychological trait then you must be prepared to be bored, for on the whole my failures to be an identical (can one say that?) or a mature Jesuit seem to me to arise rather from deficiencies in the raw material than from the perversities of 'the system'. It is not, I think, possible to produce a recipe for fostering maturity and identity in religious, but the

training I have so far received has tended in that direction rather than the other, even if it has seemed at times that this was more by accident than the fruit of precise calculation.

Two points may perhaps be usefully made by way of theoretical prolegomenon to the 'autobiographical', to serve as a control and a criterion upon it; although I am of course uneasily conscious that there is a certain circularity in this procedure. (The kind of thing that I feel I ought to say about formation is in part conditioned by the formation I have had.) The first is this, that the 'experiments' or 'trials' that St Ignatius envisaged as an indispensable part of jesuit formation seem to me to be calculated precisely to instil the two qualities that we are considering, which might be otherwise described as 'the ability to cope' in a jesuit way, and it is an unmixed blessing that they are once more being taken seriously as a part of jesuit formation. The first and fundamental such 'experiment' was the making of the Spiritual Exercises for thirty days, and the remainder were enterprises of considerable difficulty or unpleasantness, demanding a high degree of poise under pressure, intended, I take it, both to instil and to test the ability to behave conformably with the jesuit vocation in outlandish circumstances (and as everybody knows, the experiments mentioned by Ignatius were very arduous indeed in the context of the sixteenth century). However, the absolute priority and indispensability of the Spiritual Exercises means that these experiments are quite different from 'initiative tests' set for budding soldiers; for all the subsequent experiments are coloured and informed by the first one. The experiments are intended as an indication to the novice of what it might be like to live out the 'election' or decision made in the course of the Exercises, to give in other words an existential mooring to the wish to follow Christ poor and suffering. They are also, it is true, a test; but what is tested is not merely a certain practical ingenuity and an ability to survive, but also the tendency to 'find God in all things': to live out, even in the oddest situations, the response to God's call heard in the contemplations of the Kingdom and the Two Standards, and definitely made in the Election.

Now to live this response as a Jesuit requires a continual listening to God in prayer; and the experiments can reveal, as the (necessarily) quasi-monastic life of the novitiate never can, whether the novice is likely to persist in this listening when there is no one to check on him and when the chips are down. Moreover, in addition to revealing to him what life as a Jesuit might be like, they pose the important

question of whether he would be happy with such a life of contemplation in action.

Secondly, in addition to what we may style (somewhat pretentiously) this dialectic of prayer and experience, the twin notions of identity and maturity (in the sense in which we are using them) presuppose some knowledge of what it is to be a Jesuit (or Benedictine or Sister of Mercy). Jesuit identity (and hence maturity as a Jesuit) requires therefore some understanding in the following four areas:

(a) The nature of the 'charism of the founder', what were the circumstances in which the Order was founded, and (more importantly) the spirit of the founder's response to those circumstances. Any living out of the vocation today demands a recognizable link of some sort with what the founder of the Order thought he was doing.

(b) The history of the Order: it is necessary for a sense of continuity with that original spirit to be aware of how the understanding of the vocation has changed over the years, or at any rate of the different modes of living that vocation. It is also important for a certain self-critical reflectivity to be able to match one's own approach to that of other Jesuits in different centuries and different continents.

(c) The 'signs of the times': the mere study of history is far from sufficient as an indication of the precise response demanded by the vocation today. It is necessary therefore to make the extremely difficult attempt to see what are here and now the expectations and needs of the Church, and what is the situation of those with and for whom we are working.

(d) A crystal ball: the religious in formation requires for his identity and maturity some view of the future needs and expectations of the Church, which involves the double risk of being wrong and of being incredible. To hold such a view and to live by it will often demand considerable moral courage and sometimes a training in theology as well.

These preliminary points (which do not perhaps rise very far above the level of unexceptionable platitudes, but are so obvious as to be frequently overlooked or at least not often stated) may serve as criteria for evaluating those aspects of my own formation which strike me as worthy of mention. To be candid, I mention them only because I have been asked to be autobiographical, and with considerable trepidation: the risks, of self-deception and of either tired cynicism or odious priggishness, seem to me to be endless.

At times it has seemed that the whole process consisted of a series of strange experiences following one another rapidly and at random;

but on looking back over scarcely seven years a pattern is discernible. There was first of all the novitiate itself, inevitably a rather peak-and-trough affair, the background from which one emerged to undergo the 'experiments', and the backcloth against which they were performed: on the whole an experience one is glad to have been through but would rather not repeat. The importance of the novitiate, and in particular of the Spiritual Exercises within it, seems to me to be that there, as nowhere else, one can attain a clarity of vision about the way in which one wants to live, and hence make the sort of decision on which it is possible to look back with a good deal of confidence.

A second important element is the not inconsiderable amount of time we were encouraged to devote to the study of the spirituality of the Society, in particular to the writings and the historical circumstances of the first companions; the new-minted freshness of the original documents represents a far better introduction than the rather tired summaries with which previous generations of novices had to contend.

Thirdly, there was the experience of learning to pray. I am not sure whether or not this was totally new: it is easy to paint the contrasts too starkly; but it was at all events at a different level, and something that it would now be hard (though not, I imagine, impossible) to jettison entirely. And this is true even though I am still not very good at it.

What life within the novitiate cannot of course afford is an indication of the practical implications of the decision: what will it be like when lived existentially, outside of the protective membrane? In part this function is performed by the experiments, which in my case had the added effect of breaking down some of those secure compartmentalizations with which human beings protect themselves (and which, incidentally, the action of God tends remorselessly to destroy). An arduous month working at a hostel for destitute men (which in effect meant meths drinkers) in Manchester remains in the mind as a blissful period, tinged with the doubtless rather naïve (but striking) discovery that to have reached the gutter was not to have lost all humanity nor all goodness. Then there were three weeks in the inner city of a large industrial conurbation in the Midlands, specifically examining how the churches in the area coped with the area's problems, in particular with a very large number of asian immigrants, and the alarming discovery that the churches were not coping and hardly saw that there was a problem. But then I had not seen the problem until my nose was rubbed in it.

Another formative experience was that of working in a factory for a month, and learning for the first time of the dirt and noise and tedium in which most people have to pass their working days; this was instructive from another angle also: to be out of close contact with Jesuits, away from supervision, living alone in digs, inevitably posed, and with a certain existential bite, the question of whether or not this was the life I wanted, and whether I was able or willing to behave as might be expected of a Jesuit.

There were many other such 'experiments' that meant a great deal to me, such as a month in Liverpool docks, visiting ships in order to advertise to the sailors the existence there of a catholic seamen's hostel, and three months spent in the irish novitiate at a time when anglo-irish relations were very poor indeed. The warmth and friendship I experienced then taught me more than anything else has done of the meaning of community in the Society. The point of all these experiences was partly, as I say, that they were strange and therefore instructive; I was doing things, and meeting people, that were for one reason or another quite new to me, and I assume (but would not know how to prove) that this made for growth in my identity and maturity as a Jesuit.

After the novitiate came theology and two important new elements. In the first place there was the learning to articulate the conceptual problems (already half grasped) implicit in being a theist, a Christian, and a Roman Catholic, to distinguish the real from the pseudo-problems, and to live with at least some that remain unresolved. This seems to me to be an essential part of the formation of a Jesuit, who must live within the Church, but with clear eyes. Secondly, however, there was the experience (not always, it must be confessed, a pleasant one) of discovering the importance of the community in the much freer life of a scholastic, not merely as a group with whom one can relax, but also as a group of 'friends in the Lord', with whom one is conscious of a shared vocation. It is almost impossible to exaggerate the seriousness of this issue: one's identity and maturity as a Jesuit are bound up very largely with the influence of one's peer group, of the existence of a genuine and adult affectivity, and the consciousness of a shared life of prayer.

At present I am teaching classics in a North London comprehensive; and although both the subject and the nature of the school would render laughable any claim that I am eking out a battle-scarred existence in the front lines of the Blackboard Jungle, the experience has served, nevertheless, as first a useful cultural shock and then, as

various prejudices were shown to be without foundation, a most instructive time; useful for learning a little about how human beings tick, for discovering certain areas of striking incompetence, for actually doing a little pastoral work, and for the frustrating discovery of immense opportunities and one's own inadequate resources of time or talent to exploit them.

In addition, the mere fact of removing from a community largely concerned with philosophical and theological studies to a largely 'apostolic' community (I am conscious that the distinction is too nice, but it will serve) has proved highly educative: a community of professors and scholastics tends to have a deceptive homogeneity, which might tend to obscure the fact that Jesuits come in different shapes and sizes. To be able to give an emphatic affirmative to the question, 'do you share the same vocation as these men?', without necessarily feeling that my manner of living out that vocation must be identical with theirs, has been an important part of being formed as a Jesuit.

In the nature of things, this rapid summary suggests only conclusions which are either disputable because entirely subjective, or platitudinous because admitted on all sides. The account I have given is, moreover, a lop-sided one, since I have not treated directly of growth in the experience of poverty, chastity and obedience, the three distinguishing marks of a religious; nor have I discussed the vital principle of manifestation to a superior and to a spiritual director, without which growth as a Jesuit seems to me to be so hard as to be almost impossible; nor the tightrope dialectic between apostolic freedom and the restraints arising out of membership of the Order. With the admission that it will be incomplete, let me nevertheless draw the concluding moral. It seems certain that two of the major requirements for 'producing' an apostolic religious who is mature and who truly belongs to his Order are first, a life of prayer whereby God is found in all things, and second, life as part of a community of 'friends in the Lord' who are conscious of a shared call. Now these two observations are 'correct' (full marks to that novice for the right response), but I think that they are also true. If these two pre-conditions obtain, then the shocks that the service of God (and indeed 'real life') brings in its train can be absorbed and lived with; and it becomes much easier to see oneself as inevitably part of this particular Order, so that one's whole outlook becomes increasingly conformable with membership of this particular body.