

# THEOLOGICAL AND ECCLESIAL PRESUPPOSITIONS OF FORMATION

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IT WOULD be premature, not to say temerarious, in this introductory paper, to offer a definition, or even a full description, of formation. For it is in discussing the goals and methods of formation — not to mention our own presuppositions about it — that we are likely to come to a clearer idea of formation in its various dimensions, intellectual, cultural, inter-personal, psychological and theological, at the present time. Nevertheless, we must begin to focus on the notion from the start, for we need to formulate some concept of what we are looking for — even if it be like the proverbial needle — if we are to have at least some chance of finding it in the haystack of contemporary existence.

I would like to begin by referring you to the fourth chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians as a short essay on the goals and methods of formation. It refers to 'a calling to which we have been called (v. 1) . . . in hope': that is to a gift of God, not an achievement, and a step into the uncharted future in trust. Called to what? To 'maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (v. 3): the accent here is on the call to community, as Christians, animated by the Spirit. And this inter-personal level of being is complemented by the dimension of mission, of 'the work of ministry for the building up of the body of Christ' (v. 12). The whole is a process of growth 'to mature personhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ' (v. 13), by 'doing the truth in love' (v. 15): that is, we are concerned with a process of fully human development (and human because Christlike), by a loving facing of reality, which, since we are sinners, needs conversion and renewal (cf vv. 22ff). To sum up, then, we are concerned with a living and continuing process of personal maturation both in its individual and communitarian aspects: concerned with becoming Christlike and thus fully human, but not in a manner divorced from the task, the mission for which training is needed. And all this is first and foremost God's gift.

*Presuppositions*

Since our whole symposium is concerned with formation, I may perhaps be excused for giving so broad and general a sketch of our subject, at the very outset. My next task cannot be despatched so briefly. Our aim, of course, is to try to deepen understanding of the whole process of formation. In a rapidly changing situation we need constantly to ask, What are we about? What are our present aims and methods?, and, Why are well-tried formulae failing us now? We need to question. Even this process many people regard with fear, for in the face of questions solid ground dissolves and we find ourselves walking on water. Others reject the questions as enervating, as sapping energy from simply getting on with the task. But questions once raised do not go away. They must be faced or repressed. And repression is life-denying. However, my task is more fearful and enervating still: it is to question the questions. Not only to ask, what are the problems? What are the needful changes? But to ask, Why do we see certain things as problems and others not? What are the presuppositions behind our very questions? It is my task to call attention to the fact from a theological point of view (and the same must be done from an historical, sociological and psychological standpoint as well) that the most cursory inspection of the very structure of our knowing — knowing anything, not only in a religious context — reveals that we do not simply inspect 'reality' as it is, as an open book, and find our answers written there; but we filter the events and data through our own perspective, our own viewpoint. In a word, we have our own, usually unexamined, presuppositions. To ask a question is already to have predetermined at least the range of possible answers. To ask, Is the eucharistic presence of Christ a real presence or a symbolic presence?, is to have presupposed that 'real' is opposed to 'symbolic' and to have excluded, or at least rendered unlikely, the answer that there is a real symbolic presence. And we cannot help taking up a stance. Not to choose is already to have chosen the viewpoint already held. In theology, not to choose to ask political and social questions is to have chosen to endorse the political and social *status quo*, to accept it and work within it, perhaps for good, but usually for unexamined reasons. No answers offered by human beings to questions posed by human beings, and this includes theological ones, can be of completely universal application. (Hence the move to the decentralization of institutions and organizations.) One must always take into account the particular presuppositions of the questioner and responder.

I would like to highlight certain conclusions from this basic observation:

(i) There are no undiluted statements of what is really the case. The richness of the events we experience are always inextricably entwined with our interpretation of them. This does not hide reality behind a veil; but it does mean that the standpoint of the observer enters into the definition of what we mean by real.

(ii) All our statements, ideas and plans will be partial and incomplete interpretations of that richness of the events, and can always be revised, filled out, complemented. And this is the case for corporate bodies, including the Church, as well as for individuals. But nevertheless, this does not mean that human beings — and the Church — cannot make true statements. It does mean, however, that there are no totally exhaustive and complete statements of the truth. But our genuine insight into truth can be revised, complemented and re-expressed by other, sometimes contradictory, ideas and statements; as would be the case for example, with the notion of a 'love-hate' relationship.

(iii) Hence we need to question our questions, our stance, our ideas. Why does such and such an idea for change (or no-change) seem right to me and positively wrong to the younger members of the community? What are my presuppositions, and theirs? Are mine valid today? Were they ever valid? And how valid?

### *Theological presuppositions*

Having called attention to the area of presupposition in general, my third task is to examine the presuppositions we are liable to have, or to have had, on formation from the theological and ecclesial angle. First the general theological. Given that we are living through a period of radical change, I would like to look both at the position as it was and at what seem to me to be the main currents of change. And I risk losing my readers by labelling these presuppositions, these stances, in time-worn but still serviceable phrases, as 'essentialist' and 'existentialist' approaches.

The essentialist presupposition would then be the most fundamental characteristic of post-tridentine scholasticism. It concentrated on the nature of things, on their definition, on what classes of things they have in common. And on the whole it claimed to know things as they really are. Equally, it tended to be static, and to identify the ideal goal with the present reality. Thus the Mass is by definition a sacrifice, man is a rational animal, the Church is the bride spotless and without

wrinkle. What fell by the wayside in this outlook was firstly the whole epistemology which reveals our need to study our presuppositions. But naïve realism will not do. We do not simply inspect the natures of things, we interpret the uncapturable variety of experience in diverse and always incomplete ways; not, therefore, that the Mass simply is an instance of some timeless essence of sacrifice, but 'sacrifice' is one important image among others with which to interpret the ultimately indefinable mystery of Christ's pasch celebrated in the Eucharist. Secondly, there was obscured the whole uniquely individual, and, in man, the personal dimension of things. A person is not reducible to an instance of a general class of persons. Each, as person, is unique, uniquely gifted, uniquely responsible for the ultimate decisions. There was also obscured the dynamic sense of growth, of development, of movement, of history. The Church is *not* the ideal, the kingdom on earth, the perfect bride; it is inchoately the kingdom, a preliminary sketch, 'already' adumbrated but 'not yet' fulfilled. The Church is, in the concrete, the Church of saints and sinners, always needing reform. More, any projected plan or structure must be seen to be culturally and politically conditioned; we cannot escape from incarnation, from the limits and determinations of history and culture in our efforts to express the truth and the life of Christianity. To assimilate the message, we need to study our Founder more closely! By contrast, therefore, the approach to reality which recognizes the interpretative role of understanding — in broad terms, the whole aspect of meaning, as also the unique-personal, and the dynamic-historical dimensions — has been well labelled 'existentialist'. It owes something to existentialist philosophy but more to the whole sweep of research in post-Enlightenment Europe which rediscovered the historical, social, political dimensions of man; as theology, this approach owes even more to the rediscovery of biblical, hebraic categories and the patristic symbolic understanding of the cosmos. The most fundamental affirmation which divides the existential from the essential approach or series of presuppositions is that natures or essences do not 'exist' as such (and hence cannot be observed), but only as concrete beings, in the richly mysterious complexity of their existence, and these two aspects of 'nature' and 'existence' make one concrete whole in reality.

The consequences of this approach are many. I would like to restrict myself to three, which bear on the purpose in hand.

(i) Concepts are interpretative tools, not descriptions of existent essences: they signify aspects of concrete reality. Useless to argue

whether the Eucharist is a sacrifice or a meal: the Church, Body of Christ or institution. All such concepts are images or models more or less useful to convey something of the richness of Eucharist or Church. It is not in the first instance a matter of truth or falsehood, but of adequacy or inadequacy.

(ii) Revelation or disclosure of transcendence, whether relative, such as that of personal values over 'object' values, or absolute, as is God, is not to be seen as the discovery of new facts, a new compartment of being on the model of the discovery of America; but as making explicit what is implicitly recognized and already given in experience hiddenly. To discover the soul or God is not to prove a new existent being, nor to meet a complete stranger, but to recognize in differing ways aspects of our own being, as constitutive of it or as its ground, the condition of possibility of our existence and personhood.

(iii) On 'existential' presuppositions, the notice of transcendence itself, at whatever level, helps towards the recovery of a 'layered' or 'multi-dimensional' approach to reality, which is well symbolized by the model of a gift and its gift-quality or meaning. The gift is an object, but its quality as gift, its meaning conveying esteem or love, is just as real, although in relation to the object it is nothing. For it exists on a transcendent plane and because it does so it is able to make one concrete whole of the gift and its dimension of meaning: the gift is a true incarnation of personal self-gift.

These three factors are relevant to our next step, which is the illustration of the general shift from essential to existential presuppositions in terms of a number of theological areas relevant to christian and religious formation.

1. I would like to mention first the whole field of law and moral presupposition. Being, like most doctrinal theologians, of an angelic disposition, I fear to tread on the moralist's ground and I will be brief. The essentialist approach to moral law presupposes that the individual's significance in a particular area is to all intents and purposes exhausted by his membership of a class, and general norms apply to him without remainder. The model is syllogistic and deductive: all men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore Socrates is mortal. So, lying is wrong. This is a lie. Therefore it is wrong. Further, this approach works with the model of physical nature and organic growth: moral action (e.g. sexually right action) can be 'read off' the laws of human biology. The tendency of such an approach is thus to suppress individuality and to exclude the whole

realm of the human creation of meaning. By contrast, an 'existentialist' scheme will insist that moral laws are general principles ('rules of thumb' and primarily inductive, the result of case law), because each individual is irreducibly unique in his existence, and has ultimate responsibility for determining the implications and applications of general norms. Hence the modern stress on individual responsibility and, in spirituality, on discernment in the Spirit of the unique, the personal (both individual and communitarian). To call such an approach 'situation ethics' is a misnomer, for it is not a purely subjective creation of right and wrong without general norms. But nonetheless no concrete norm is an absolutely universal norm: it gains its normative force as an inductive insight into the one absolute but transcendent, and therefore 'empty' prescription: 'Love in all that you do'.

The consequences of this general shift in presuppositions has had an enormous influence on formation and necessarily so. There is no need to document it here. But it may have been useful to set it in context.

2. Next comes the area theologically basic to all others: that of the theology of grace and the relation of grace to nature. The 'essentialist' approach tended to presuppose that 'nature' connoted a really existent entity that could be examined and described. It was labelled 'pure nature', nature prescinding from grace, and denoted the whole area of our lives to which grace, seen in its turn as a separable entity, could be added and from which it could be separated. 'Mortal sin' deprived man of grace and left him a natural (but worse, a damaged natural) man. And without the advent of grace, a child who died unbaptized could not see God's face, not so much because of the 'original sin' (which in any case was not its fault), but principally because it had a purely natural existence. This 'essentialist', 'two-tier' model of nature and grace led to a fundamental division of our real existence into the areas of the sacred and the secular: the area of ecclesial life, of rite, of prayer, was the sacred (ignoring the fact that it was also part of our normal natural lives) and the area of everyday living was the secular (in spite of the half-recognized fact that the grace of God permeated it). This in turn led to a radical distrust of the human, the 'natural', which tended to be either ignored as irrelevant or suppressed as harmful, in the pursuit of a grace-filled, almost angelic, existence. Christians, and in particular Roman Catholics, adopted an attitude which Monica Lawler described well in the title of her survey of catholic attitudes in the late 'fifties as *Out of this World*.

By contrast, the 'existentialist' approach presupposes that nature and grace are concepts which in partial and complementary fashion describe facets of the multiple reality of human existence in the concrete. They do not signify isolatable areas, but dimensions of one concrete reality: graced-nature. And this is not a 'fusion' model on the monophysite pattern, for grace transcends nature, as the personal meaning of the gift transcends the object which is the gift, and yet makes one concrete whole with it. Further, the *whole* of human existence is thus graced in differing ways. Even in a case of personal resistance to the love of God that we call grave sin, the creative gift of existence is itself fundamental grace, and the presence and love of God who is himself uncreated grace enfolds the sinner; also whatever rays of love are received through human association mediate the created gift of his grace, and so on. Here, in graced-nature, we have the fundamental presupposition (shared with the Fathers of the Church in different ways) of a *sacramental* view of man-in-his-world which can be called a christian humanism. This viewpoint is the focus of the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World of Vatican II.<sup>1</sup> In this perspective, the sacred and the secular are not seen as two areas of life but as two dimensions of one life. Life itself is the primary worship of God, and when we devote time explicitly to worship and prayer, we are explicitating what is implicit in life as a whole. It is life itself which is primarily worshipful and holy; religious activity is at the service of life, to deepen our perception of the depths of human existence. In this perspective, the Church is seen as the community of those committed to witness to what it is to be fully human, and human because Christlike.

The consequences of this series of presuppositions for formation are incalculable. We have been brought up, on the whole, within the separation of the sacred and the secular, and religious life has been seen as a largely 'sacred' activity. Religious have separated out from a world seen as being irrelevant or positively harmful. By contrast, 'existential' presuppositions lead to the conclusion that human life as such is the place of meeting with God; that 'time apart', whether directed to worship or to being formed morally and spiritually, is a 'second order' activity which is pursued in function of a more fully human life. It might well be a principal part of our present task to tease out further the implications of this contemporary theological model, though it is not the only one. But I would like to stress one

<sup>1</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, especially 22 *in fine*.

thing. What this model does *not* do is to pre-empt the decision in favour of the active rather than the contemplative form of life in the concrete. The degree of explicitation of the transcendent grace-filled dimension of life is a matter of the call of each and of the appropriateness of the sign at a particular time. What the model does however insist on is that we see ourselves fundamentally as striving to become more and more human, and Christlike because human: that we accept the incarnation in terms of the integration of human wisdom, whether in psychology, sociology, history or literature, into our outlook: that we eschew 'angelism' and seek full integration of body and spirit in our christian formation and witness. Also, that we study the implications of resurrection as bodily, that is, total resurrection in a renewed world. No longer should we presuppose a battle of the spirit against the body, but of the whole person as godward against the whole person as god-resisting.

To be more direct still. What are our presuppositions about the choice of site for a house of formation? Do we fear the distraction, the bad influence of the city? Do we say that the city is inimical to the quietness and solitude needed for prayer? Why? Why presuppose that God does not come to the young (and the old) in the present day in the hurly-burly of life? Are we still tied to the monastic model as really the only valid model? Does the symbol of silence and solitude have to mean green fields and woolly sheep? Are not the concrete wastes of the city a desert also?

And then, most fundamentally of all: is our model of formation itself that of a benign fascism which has been well defined as the conviction that one can make people good? Do we take reasonably mature young adults and then treat them as children because we distrust the human maturity so far gained? Do we not believe that it is God who makes all things new (and that sometimes cure is better than prevention): that fidelity is primarily God's fidelity to man, and that the prime model of christian life is not that of the systematic acquisition of virtue, but that of letting God more and more into my life? And what is our model of permanent commitment? Is it the essentialist one of an indelible stamp on the soul, something acquired once and for all; or can commitment mean dedication to an ideal ever sought but never fully realized, an ideal which does not exist unless God is speaking now and we are responding *now*? Do we, further, identify commitment with the model of commitment to a human institution, so that the meaning is exhausted by the purposes and goals of the institution? Are not religious vows made to God in

a religious family? Does not the commitment to God lie deeper than that to the concrete body we join? And does not this have implications for an assessment of many of those who leave religious life? If we do prefer the former to the latter model, why do we do so? Is our reasoning valid? And so on. . . .

. . . and ecclesial presuppositions

My last section concerns communitarian and ecclesial presuppositions, and here I wish to consider the various models (those incomplete and complementary images) of the Church in contemporary theology which influence our thinking about formation. After the long predominance of the institutional, hierarchic or pyramidal model, the 'forties saw the resurgence of the model of the Body of Christ as an organic union of persons animated by the Spirit of Christ.<sup>2</sup> This was followed by the still more biblical and historical model of the People of God: the antithesis of the institutional model both because it was a dynamic image of a people moving through history and because it defined the Church as the whole people of God, the *laos*, and not in terms of hierarchy. Subsequently to the second World War, theologians developed the sacramental model (in relation to the grace-nature question) in which Christ is seen as the sacrament of God, the effective symbol of the Father's presence among men; and the Church is consequently seen as the sacrament of Christ, the extension of the incarnation in our midst, making a unity in plurality of this world and transcendent reality on the analogy of the union of the divine and human in Christ. Parallel with this in ecumenical and protestant circles, the model of the Church came into prominence as creation of, the Word and herald of the Word. All these find their place in the synthesis of *Lumen Gentium*: the Church is primarily a mystery whose richness cannot be exhausted by the various models. Further developments therefore, lay in store. All these models had seen the Church at the centre of the stage of salvation history. Subsequent to Vatican II and drawing on developing sacramental and christian humanism, a new model emerged, the latest in a line, that of the Servant Church, the Church as the servant of mankind, of a humanity which is the primary place of the working out of redemption.

All these models have affected our presuppositions in regard to formation. The Church as Body began in turn to develop a stronger

<sup>2</sup> Cf the Encyclical of Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis Christi*, published in 1943.

sense of the corporate as opposed to the hierarchic nature of religious life, and this was reinforced by the People of God model. At least two things happened: religious life was removed from an artificial pedestal as an altogether higher grade of life where the perfection of the counsels prevailed over the humdrum life of the commandments, and it began to be seen as a living out, through a specific charism, of the baptismal consecration of all Christians to perfection: that is, to love to the limit. And secondly, the whole concept of authority developed from the monarchic model towards a more democratic model. (Here I would stress yet again that no model exhausts the possibilities or the truth: the Church and religious life are not monarchies or democracies, but creations of the Spirit, and they will have aspects of monarchic and democratic life as is suitable.)

Thirdly, the Church as sacrament reinforced the primacy of community over individualism. It underlined that entry into Christ is entry into concrete community, and all sacramental actions are seen now as first conferring a status in the Church, *through* which grace flows: baptism is primarily affiliation to the community in which our sins are forgiven and in which grace abounds. In religious life the discussion began of the primacy of one dedication to community which contained implicitly the traditional three vows and much more besides. The model of Church as creation of the Word re-emphasized the gift quality of vocation and consequently of formation — the theme with which we began; and the servant model stressed anew the aspect of mission.

In conclusion I would like to emphasize four points:

- (i) Our study of the notion of 'presuppositions' has led to the conclusion that there can be no one model of formation or of anything else. We need to adapt our models all the time, and we can only do this as we radically relativize them and see them as only partial and temporary frameworks, always open to revision and renewal.
- (ii) While recognizing the value of the existential range of models, we need to examine them also and sift out the valid from the less valid conclusions.
- (iii) We need to think through the implications of the fundamentally sacramental or incarnational model.
- (iv) We need to relate problems and attitudes that we come across, which perhaps we share mainly by osmosis, with the wider reasoning which this article has sketched.