ONGOING FORMATION: CONTINUING RENEWAL

R ENEWAL and continuing formation are more than synonymous terms. They seem to mean one and the same thing. There are many religious who expect this 'ongoing formation' to solve all their present and future problems. They believe that it will ensure perseverance and fidelity, provide a bulwark which will safeguard their own proper identity against the host of changes which threaten to erode it; that it will reveal the secrets of self-education and creativity, and enable them to see what provision should be taken for the future. They see it as preventing them from becoming creatures of routine, or blasé before their time. We are not speaking, either, of some passing fancy. This aspiration towards a totally new kind of formation which is the equivalent of continuous education constitutes a real and widespread expectation.

This idea of ongoing formation has made a considerable impact over the last fourteen years. It has played its part in the decisions of general chapters, in the revising of constitutions and religious rule, as well as in community deliberations. It has become a part of modern life, in exactly the same way as the general developments in our modern society. Numerous experiments have been launched at various levels of administration and government — central, regional and local alike. One might say that it has become an organizing principle affecting initial formation and all its subsequent stages, giving it inspiration and direction. In our day, personal formation and education have come to mean an unconfined capacity for learning in the existential situation rather than the acquiring of a large store of knowledge.

We are, therefore, dealing here with up-to-the-moment issues, with those aspects of experience bristling with ambiguities and complexities. What we will try to do is to consider concisely and briefly the essential factors: the nature of ongoing formation, its present urgency, its various elements, the personnel responsible for it, and its critical moments.

THE NECESSITY AND URGENCY OF ONGOING FORMATION Its necessity

There is nothing particularly new about continuing formation; all those who have been faithful to their vocation as human beings and Christians have always been subject to its exigencies. It is merely that, in our times, it has become a matter of more immediate urgency; it has entered more into our conscious reflection, and we have become aware of the need to think and to act about it constructively.

The human person is neither a once-for-all fixed object, nor even the centre of forces which accumulate and then begin to wane little by little. Rather, in all its physical, psychic and spiritual components, the personality is under the influence of a historical dynamism, which is responsible for its unfolding through the gradual experience of a time-sequence. It is in perpetual movement. Even though there are moments when it can be said to be at rest, it is still undergoing change as each instant succeeds its predecessor, and in a manner that is almost always imperceptible; for the simple fact that it is constantly reacting to exterior and interior 'historical' events. The person is always being challenged to mature: that is to say, not simply to be the passive object of his own history, but to welcome it and to take interior charge of it, capable of putting it together for himself, so that he discovers his own form and function in the universe.

Then, in virtue of his baptism, the human person is subjected to a new dynamic force, that paschal regeneration effected by the breath of the Spirit which impels him towards holiness. This means that he must needs be growing all the time in the experience of faith, hope and love, which is now at the heart of every existential happening of which he partakes. To live as a Christian is 'to walk by the Spirit in newness of life' (Gal 5,16; Rom 6,4), 'to walk in the truth and in love' (2 Jn 4; Eph 5,2). It is to discover in the Church one's true vocation and actively to respond to it, so as to form, with one's brothers and sisters, 'a structure which is being built up according to plan', a body which is always growing towards the 'full maturity of Christ' (cf Eph 2,21-22;4,12-13.17); and to be fully conscious that all this is happening in history, under a variety of impulses and calls from the Spirit, as well as the choices which actual events evoke.

Clearly, this whole dynamic permeates a *fortiori* one's personal experience of religious life. The radical nature of the attachment to Christ and to his mission implies a yearning that is ever new, a

constant seeking. To make religious profession is to proclaim, in the presence of the Church, that one has left behind all half-heartedness, and that, for the future, one will strain every nerve to listen in all humility to God's invitation and to respond to him with steadfast loyalty. He is a God who makes his appeal in every moment of one's history, and in the contingencies of events unforeseen. These one must be prepared to face and positively to welcome, both for one's own growth as well as to fulfil that service in the Church which is consonant with one's own call.

It must be understood that if such continual formation is incumbent on monks and *ex professo* contemplatives, it assumes a much more vivid significance for religious consecrated to the active life, since they are more immediately involved with the world, and hence more affected by its changes and its day-to-day cries for help. If it is their wish to remain faithful and effective in respect of the mission which the Church confides to their charge, consistently to manifest their conviction that they are religious — Christ's witnesses and apostles, then surely they must be adepts in discernment: in knowing how to react and to adapt with true wisdom, in taking up new stances, in 'finding themselves' over and again whenever they are overtaken by surprise events, or when 'the going gets rough'. So it is that continual formation is not merely necessary; it implies an urgency which demands fresh effort, more clear-headed and vigorous than in previous generations.

Its urgency

First of all there is the phenomenon of historical acceleration. Cultural changes are occurring with such frequency and rapidity as to transform, and sometimes totally, the environment in which the Church, or more specifically the religious Institute, is accomplishing its mission. Here, religious are exposed to a twofold danger. One is being too sure of themselves: enfolding themselves with the wrappings of a security which belong to the past; of acting out again attitudes which have become irrelevant to reality, in order to protect themselves from an encroaching environment full of uncertainties and risks. The other is rashness: launching out into experiments modelled on the worldly and superficial, which are in direct contradiction to their evangelical identity and rupture their ties with their authentic tradition. We may notice here that a recent Church document calls upon bishops and religious superiors to learn how to 'confront the more difficult situations in face of the more urgent needs of the faithful', but also 'seriously to study and evaluate objectively the new apostolic experiments', and not to be afraid to 'correct certain initiatives which they judge to be aberrations'.¹ Only the endeavours towards such formation which are illumined by the Spirit carry with them the spiritual and apostolic discernment necessary for making the right choices, in co-operation with God's loving designs.

A particular aspect of today's cultural evolution is the emergence of pluralism. The bewildering variety of ideologies, the daily saturation by the news-media and the continuous process of democracy all contribute to our pluralist society. It is no longer a simple matter of clear divergences between right and left, or catholic and protestant, in the secular sphere or among christians at large. We find these divisions within the Catholic Church, in religious life, and in the individual Institute and its various communities. Tensions have become the order of the day: between 'conservative' and 'liberal', across the 'generation gap', between decentralization and unity, consecration and mission, human development and a more explicit evangelization, between prayer and action, individual and community charism, obedience and fidelity to inspiration. Religious are being driven to a deeper reflection on and criticism of their own identity and what contributes to its formation, on their own life's purpose and its actual realization. It is ongoing formation which offers us the means for such reflection, and can transform the tensions, so that their product is fruitfulness and not frustration.

Finally the profound renewal called for by Vatican Council II, prosecuted by the synods of bishops, papal teachings and episcopal conferences, exerts a very special pressure on today's religious. There can be no doubt that the Church expects from them a witness of high quality, in order that she might fulfil her mission as 'the universal sacrament of salvation' in a world beset by crises. She looks to them to engender a real capacity for dialogue and evangelization, to manifest the steadfast love which emanates from their charism:

The 'charism of the founders' would appear to be a certain 'experience of the Spirit' handed on to their disciples who, living in its shadow, are to be its guardians, to improve its quality, to foster its constant development which is proportionate to the continual growth of Christ's body. . . . In order to be visible, the charismatic

¹ Mutuae Relationes, the document published in May 1978, by the Sacred Congregations of Bishops, and of Religious and Secular Institutes, on mutual co-operation. Cf 40-43.

mark proper to each Institute demands of the disciples, as it did of the Founder, a continual verification of the Lord's steadfast love and docility to his Spirit; a diagnosis, both prudent and intelligent, of modern conditions, of the signs of our times, a willingness to incorporate themselves into the Church, and a disciplined audacity in undertaking new projects... What the world of our day is asking of religious, in no uncertain terms, is an authentic devotion to their charism which is alive and creative, marked with that ability to discover new approaches — that ingenuity which was peculiarly distinctive of their founders (*Mutuae Relationes*, 11,12,23ff).

In short, what these texts emphasize is that the charismatic nature of every Institute is crying aloud to its members to make decisive and courageous efforts in constant reform. In its substantial reality, this means a consistent docility, not to the founder or foundress as such, but to the living Spirit which has always been the source of their inspiration and direction. It is this charismatic character which will ensure that the Institute never lets the flame of the Spirit die (cf 1 Thess 5,19).

DEFINITION AND CONTENT OF ONGOING FORMATION

Definition

Within these perspectives we can attempt to define this formation.

It is the totality of the endeavours assumed by religious, in the consciousness that they are led by the grace of God to cling with a positive and active steadfastness to their spiritual and ecclesial identity, so that they remain able and flexible enough to make a positive response, in the Lord's name, to the various demands of their vocation across time and space.

It is clear that the religious we have in mind is not considered as an isolated individual. He or she is the member of a local and/or provincial community, and of an Institute whose dimensions are often world-wide. The community in its turn, and on every level, is in process of continual formation as long as it locates its apostolic identity in whatever actual situation it finds itself — and progressively so. In other words it is the educational milieu for the ongoing formation of all and each of its members.

Content

Continuing formation is a global process of renewal which extends itself to every aspect of the personality and the life of the religious. What is of primary importance is to maintain this concerted vision, refusing to make an absolute of any component part of it, whether it is a matter of spiritual development (which may indeed be the first priority), the renewal of pastoral methods, or of technical or intellectual reorganization. To be authentic, ongoing formation means that one is aware that its various elements cannot be separated out: they complement one another, each influences the other mutually and reciprocally. We can perhaps resume these elements as follows: (a) *Life according to the Spirit* (or spirituality). Formation is here oriented to a continual conversion, and a consistent christian and religious process of maturation. It will, therefore, involve a deepening of the feeling for one's consecration and profession. It will promote renewal in focusing on God's word and the liturgical life, in prayer and in the capacity of living the evangelical counsels in a community of brothers or sisters (cf *Mutuae Relationes*, 27).

(b) Apostolic witness and service. This looks to participation in the life of the Church in accord with the charism of the Institute, to a real availability for new pastoral initiatives which harmonize with the endeavours of the local Church, bringing up to date pastoral activity both with regard to method and content, a capacity for developing the quality of team-work and collaborating with pastoral workers in one's locality (cf Mutuae Relationes 19-20,23,27,40-41).

(c) Doctrinal and professional re-orientation. This involves expanding one's biblical and theological knowledge; the study of conciliar doctrine and recent magisterial pronouncements, universal and particularized; an increasing acquaintance with the cultures and localities in which one lives and works; acquiring new professional and technical qualifications (cf Perfectae Caritatis, 18).

(d) A general fidelity to one's own charism. This means increasing one's knowledge of the Founder or Foundress, of the history of the Institute, of its spirit and mission, and a corresponding determination to live it at a personal and community level. If spiritual renewal has pride of place in continual formation, this last element of fidelity to one's own charism is its criterion of unity. It means that one accepts the task of constantly improving the quality of one's being in the the Church and in the world; this is indeed the nature of one's personal call, the divinely-given purpose of one's existence.

Methodological consequences

If first formation addressed itself to younger disciples, and was, in its substance, an experience of living under direction, continuing formation is a matter for adults who know how to reflect on their experience and to take advantage of it for their personal renewal. It follows that a programme for ongoing formation can never be reduced to a series of lectures. The animators and experts must adapt their techniques to the real needs of the participants, and prime time must be given to the exchange of spiritual and apostolic experiences. There is a very definite risk of throwing those concerned into an even greater confusion by setting up programmes which are in themselves of considerable value — courses in updating or specialized forms of apostolate — but which take little account of the needs and actual capabilities of those who are subjected to them.

Let these facilitators and experts who offer their services to their brothers and sisters take to heart what is said to the Church's pastors:

They must be highly conscious of the primacy of *life in the Spirit*; for this demands that they be at one and the same time directors and members of the Community; *fathers*, certainly, but *brothers* as well; teachers of the faith, but above all, *fellow-disciples* in the company of Christ; those whose task it is to bring the faithful to perfection, but equally true witnesses to their own growth in holiness (Mutuae Relationes, 9d. Italics in text).

CONTINUING FORMATION: ITS IMPLEMENTATION

The person of the religious

The subject, the one who has the primary responsibility in ongoing formation, is the individual religious. There is no substitute for the free co-operation which emanates from a firm conviction. No one can take the place of the individual in the personal journey towards renewal. Depending wholly on God's steadfast fidelity and love, the religious take their lives in their hands in order to live out their own fidelity. The context of ordinary life will provide the means: a life centred on the liturgy and personal prayer, in which there is regular recourse to the sacrament of reconciliation as offering those graces typifying restoration and a new beginning, and timely contacts with a spiritual director; which has a definite ascetical shape, allowing time for daily reading and regulating one's many resources; which has the support of a community assured of its own dynamism and generosity, where renewal and growth through its everyday tasks and God-sent encounters is a first preoccupation.

It remains true that religious experience at particular junctures a special need for extraordinary times of purification, of spiritual rejuvenation: times when they expose themselves to the light and heat of God's word, to their actual presence to the Institute and the Church. These 'moments' demand not only qualitative recollection days and regular retreats, but also protracted 'desert experiences' consonant with this life of continual re-formation: a stay, for example, in some centre of spirituality where a true experience of the Lord is prepared for, and where it is possible to find spiritual guides. and brethren whose own witness provides an added stimulant. On the level of cultural and pastoral up-dating, the religious sets about finding both common and special means for this renewal; while 'superiors will take all possible steps to provide the necessary opportunities, assistance and the leisure for this purpose': that is, for the harmonious development of what they already possess culturally, doctrinally and professionally (Perfectae Caritatis, 18: cf Mutuae Relationes, 19).

The community

Any religious community worthy of the name will understand that it must look upon itself as being in this situation of ongoing formation. It has a continuing need to renew itself as a community of friends in the Lord, in its role of educating its own members, in the quality of its witness, in its fidelity to its own proper mission and its integral belonging to the local Church. It will attain this goal in so far as it succeeds in creating a climate of spiritual freedom, and in offering the help that brothers and sisters are accustomed to afford one another, by defining their goals and assessing them at regular intervals, always on the alert for what the Lord expects of the community, particularly by listening in common to his word, by their lively awareness of what is happening around them, and by seizing the opportunities which present themselves as a stimulant towards communal reflection and active zeal. Across this wide spectrum, the superior has a decisive responsibility in the role of animator.

The Province and the Institute

Initial and ongoing formation are to a large extent conditioned by the Spirit and general life-style of the province, by the Institute's current vitality and by the clarity with which the latter reflects its own charismatic identity, and translates it into actuality in the apostolic endeavour of its daily living. One could hardly demand of people this 'dynamic growth', if their own religious milieu is limited to mere survival and no longer open to the generosity born of poverty (cf 2 Cor 8,9). Provinces and Institutes ought to march together in a courageous effort for the renewal, first of their own members, and then of their apostolic works and their structures. This is not a once-for-all business, a single response to conciliar demands; it is a law of life for every Institute. We have been slow to catch the drift of *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, the 'motu proprio' which legislates for that renewal best suited to our times:

There can never be any question of the right kind of renewal being accomplished once and for all; it must be kept in train continually by the fervent support of the brethren and the constant care of chapters and superiors (*Ecclesiae Sanctae II*, 19).

Every provincial chapter, and a fortiori the general chapter, becomes a privileged occasion for all its members to renew their own outlook on life and to share in the more structured orientations intended to infuse a new and more lively spirit into the movement of the province and the entire Institute: above all if these experiences can be properly experienced as a paschal celebration.² Similarly Mutuae *Relationes*, speaking of formation, insists that religious superiors have the competence and authority of 'spiritual teachers' (magistri spiritus) in the context of 'the evangelical shaping (conformatio) of their Institute', giving it a truly spiritual direction. Theirs is the special competence and duty of increasing the life of charity proper to the Institute, with regard to continuing as well as initial formation, and the individual and collective fidelity in living out the evangelical counsels in the context of the Rule. It is for them to set in order the life of the community, to care for and to develop the Institute's mission, so that it is effectively incorporated into ecclesial activity under the bishops' leadership (13).

Collaboration

Every ecclesial community is involved in ongoing formation. A general collaboration is essential in the Church for all pastoral initiatives, whether this concerns apostolic relationships among

² Cf Cardinal Edward Pironio, 'Reflections for a chapter meeting', in *Joyful in hope* (Slough, 1979), pp 119-28.

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Institutes, or takes place across the face of the Universal Church, with Episcopal conferences at the local level. *Mutuae Relationes* devotes a whole chapter to the topic, offering directives and suggestions which it is up to us to heed and to follow.

A structural collaboration is to be set on foot between the various Institutes, both of men and women, to discover together how best to manifest the authenticity and the relevance today of the religious life. Each Institute will make its specific contribution according to its own charism, in creating new structures which will better serve to revivify these gifts and communicate them to all christian peoples (21,48). Institutes dedicated to the ministry of evangelization and the works of mercy will have the advantage of helping one another in stimulating their members to a more powerful witness and to a more efficient and co-ordinated service. Institutes of the contemplative life can also offer their support by demonstrating in Church and world a presence which, besides being a vivid sign of Christ's own, they can make available to other religious and to the men and women of our time in a practical way: that is, by providing the places and the occasions for renewal in prayer and the life of the spirit (25).

At the same time, it is hardly possible for an Institute to delegate to external organizations the whole task of the ongoing formation of its members, since this is so closely linked in many aspects to the values of its charism. Hence every Institute must make itself responsible, according to its requirements and resources, to create and to orchestrate different initiatives and programmes. It will thus be a particular concern of superiors to set up at Institute or Province level - or perhaps groups of provinces - special teams with the right kind of competence and preparation to undertake this work. Their principal preoccupation will be to convince their brothers or sisters of the need for continuing formation: no mean task. Their next step will be to co-ordinate various initiatives which will ensure that ongoing formation will achieve its purpose across the spectrum of the real deficiencies and make its impact on life as a whole. It is all too easy to take shots in the dark or to approach it in a haphazard and fragmented way, so that nothing or very little is achieved. The techniques of reflection, as well as the content of such programmes will have to be carefully thought out; which means that the efforts of those who are willing to share the work must be properly organized: spiritual exercises of real quality, prayer-days and sessions in which the emphasis is on a community-sharing lacking every trace of

artificiality, special courses for superiors and community facilitators, the provision of appropriate reading-matter. The over-all strategy will be to assist individuals and communities to discover for themselves a style of life which will enable them to achieve a personal reform in their everyday lives — a fresh awareness and desire to respond to the Lord's repeated calls.

THE STAGES OF ONGOING FORMATION

Initial formation has its own structure, which traditionally consists in the three periods of postulancy or pre-novitiate, the novitiate itself, and of first commitment. The gradual nature of continuing formation, which is the longer and most fruitful period in the life of the religious, and only comes to an end with death, should stand out equally or even more clearly. Its stages should correspond to the critical points in the growth of the individual. Just as the history of salvation itself is seen to have been achieved according to the providential arrangement of sequential events, so it is with each person's spiritual journey: there are ups and downs, cross-roads and critical junctures. It would be folly if continuing formation remained blind to all this, as though it could be applied in the same way to the entire adult life of the religious. Undoubtedly we have structures in mind: but only those that have a high degree of flexibility, capable of application in uniquely personal situations. There will indeed be a certain external order, but this must always be integrated with whatever touches off the various and often unforeseen movements of the Spirit.

From first formation to continuing formation

Perpetual profession brings to an end the period of initial formation, whose purpose is to lead the Christian, who has already left adolescence behind, both as a human being and as a believer, for the adult state proper to a religious: one which enables the person to acquire the autonomy required to match the obligations of the consecrated life. It is perhaps unfortunate that the same word 'formation' is commonly used to designate these two very different periods, especially as it suits the first stage much more exactly. For the second period, phrases like 'ongoing renewal' or 'a continual and persevering fidelity' would be more appropriate. But we need not worry too much over semantic problems.

The important point is that initial formation must be structured

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with a view to continual formation. It is during this time that young religious learn to discover and to live the faithfulness to their vocation in the concrete circumstances of daily life. When obligations are tied to a particular time, it is most fitting that there be ample space for the use of personal freedom and spiritual discernment. An overstructured first formation might produce competent performers; but these would be likely to find themselves taken unawares when confronted by a civilization which is constantly in 'future shock', and where the emphasis is on a fidelity creative enough to cope with each day's contingencies.

The critical times

The first experience. The movement from guided experience to one which is autonomous brings in its train a change of life-style and requires that we achieve a fresh inner coherence: a very demanding task. The professed religious must discover for himself and put into effect his own down-to-earth way of persevering in response to the divine fidelity. In this situation, directors with a more than ordinary share of discretion and fraternal understanding are very valuable, as are the sort of structures analogous to those which episcopal conferences are directed to create for the pastoral formation of young priests (cf Optatam totius, 22).

After ten years or so, the danger emerges of getting into a rut and losing the spark of enthusiasm. In this situation one can recommend a protracted period when one 'stands off' from one's ordinary life, to look at it afresh in the light of the gospel and the thought of the founder or foundress. In fact, this is a time of deepening one's commitment which some institutes offer to their members in the shape of the tertianship — 'third year', 'second novitiate' or 'second probation'.

The point of maturity often carries with it the danger of a development of a marked individualism, particularly for those with strong temperaments and of outstanding competence. Such people need the opportunity for fresh spiritual and theological pabulum, and for a more meaningful community life. The same opportunities should also be provided in the case of radical changes in the shape of community, of milieu or of apostolic work, which usually demand a fairly long period of time for psychological, spiritual and practical adaptation. Acute crises can emerge because of external factors: a totally unexpected or too drastic a change of work, a marked blockage or misunderstanding, suddenly finding oneself 'on the

fringes'. Such events may also be occasioned by more directly personal factors, such as sickness, psychic deficiency, dryness, fierce temptations, a crisis of faith or of sentimental feeling. Everything seems to be called into question. What is needed here is the sort of help which enables the professed religious to comprehend the positive spiritual values inherent in such a crisis, so that he can live it through.

The time of the 'third age'

The 'third age' presents a new problem which must be faced. The number of old religious in our communities is rapidly increasing. With Institutes of the active life, there is a real risk of their being caught up in the general tendency of society — in many countries — to retire its workers at a very early age and to 'put them on the shelf'.

There must be a great difference here between what happens in the consecrated and in the secular milieu. Religious life is not intrinsically bound up with the external efficiency of its administration or apostolic works. Its total meaning and full value-transcends all situations limited to time and place; for the reason that it is first and foremost a mystery of a covenant between God and the person he has called: a covenant which always maintains its actuality and is open-ended in its dimensions (cf Eph 3,16-20). No matter how long the religious patiently endures this life of the flesh, he or she is being called to live, under ever-changing forms, the profound dynamic of vocation and of mission in the Institute (cf Gal 2,20). Instead of being caught up in the moil and toil of office or ministry, one leaves it to the Lord to complete the detachment, and is content to see the younger take over the responsibility, freed of the suspicion that they are less capable of carrying it.

In fact, all the formation the religious have received should be a preparation for this moment when they can grasp their situation with complete interior freedom, in the spirit of self-oblation.³ But here again, they need special help. First, they must remain truly integrated in the community, which should be able to count on the resources of their wisdom, of their life-long experience, their spiritual understanding and good counsel, refusing to coddle them as if they were no longer possessed of spiritual vigour. They also need a

³ Perhaps the author will be indulgent if we refer the reader here to the oblation repeated in the 'Contemplation for attaining love' (Exx 234). *Ed.*

specially adapted form of spiritual and pastoral nourishment, and the possibility of undertaking whatever kind of apostolic service they are still able for, in which their human and consecrated maturity will shine for all to see. Usually, this will be the most valuable ministry of a more simple and direct contact with people, especially the old and infirm. In short, the grace of God can continue to act powerfully in the life where the heart and spirit are still awake, even though less subject to 'the plans of mice and men'.

Conclusion

There can be no doubt that post-conciliar religious life is beginning to find itself again as the privileged *locus* and the ideal set-up for the ongoing formation of the Christian. Everything about it, from the minuscule tasks of everyday to its momentous choices, is designed to situate and to maintain the religious in this continual movement of renewal: 'the seeking after the perfection of charity' (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 1). We are being brought face to face with a phenomenon of great moment. A fair distance has been covered in a very few years. But the task which lies ahead leaves us with a great deal to do:

we must continue our work of clarification in strategy and tactics. Religious must reach consensus concerning the exact meaning of continuing formation and bear the burden of all it implies in their lives with all their courage;

we must prepare zealous and competent facilitators;

above all we must importune, in all humility, the Holy Spirit, who has the decisive role to play in this continual renewal — he whom scripture calls the living Water, the powerful Wind, the Fire of Love which can never be extinguished.

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