

SHARING EXPERIENCES

Accompanying people growing in awareness of a call

IN MY contacts with groups of religious in different parts of the world, I have sensed the desire of many to be helped in practical ways to collaborate with the Lord in accompanying the young people of today, as he calls them to different walks of life. It is in an attempt to respond to these expressed needs that I am led to share some of my own experiences in this area, in the hope that they may offer some little light and reassurance to those who may find themselves in situations similar to mine.

For the past seven years, I have been asked by my Congregation to be in touch with and to follow young women who, in one way or another, had come to the point of manifesting not only an interest in religious life, but the longing and desire to respond to something that seemed like an invitation, an urge, an appeal to go beyond themselves and their own plans, dreams and ambitions. In fact they were looking for a way that might lead them to discover, and eventually to accept, what God wanted and expected of them.

I have often asked myself (or been asked) why it is so difficult for young people today to come to a conviction (decision) concerning their vocation in life; or what the complexities are that give rise to the need for a new approach in our dealings with them. Basically, they are no different from those of preceding generations who have similarly stood at the crossroads of life. They have the same deep-down yearnings for security, success, meaningful relationships, love; they have the same basic fears; they ask the same questions on the meaning of life; they are open to the true, the good, the beautiful. Yet there is a difference. The political, social and economic milieu of their lives is in a condition of constant change. Values which were taken for granted by their parents are no longer values for many of their contemporaries; they are influenced by circumstances, by ideologies which are bewildering in their diversity. Consequently, their need for help in discerning whither God is leading them is that much greater. In the concrete, this seems to mean that God is also asking of us something more taxing than it used to be. Each person has her history and her past. The diversity of our present-day society, not only with regard to different countries and continents, but within these same, demands that we be more

inventive in our approach, so as to meet these different needs. There is thus no one formula valid for all.

In former days, there was a tendency to consider and to classify our Catholic schools and establishments as 'privileged areas' for the fostering of vocations. By so limiting ourselves to these specific areas (and here I in no way wish to underestimate the positive contribution made by these educational institutions over the centuries), it seems that we have ignored many other possibilities within the Church, as well as in society at large, where young people lived, and in whom God was also at work. We have perhaps, forgotten one of the fundamental theological principles concerning vocations: God's sovereign freedom in electing and calling people, as it pleases him, without confining himself to the few who were receiving special attention. God acts in all kinds of situations: it is perilous to try to limit the Spirit's working.

As a matter of fact, my experience over the years — and indeed not just mine, but that of many others who have been involved in pastoral work — shows and confirms very clearly that there are many young people who, within all strata of society and from different backgrounds and situations, are sincerely searching and asking themselves what to do with their lives. Some feel drawn or invited by God to devote their energies and talents to the work of the Church, by contributing to the good of others in various organizations. Others, however, seem to feel drawn to give the whole of their lives to that 'Someone' who attracts them. (I say 'Someone', because at the early stages, while many may recognize him, for others he remains a somewhat vague and obscure figure.) If these many people could only avail themselves of the presence of another with whom they could speak and share what is going on in their hearts, one feels sure that they could be helped to discover their own path in life. If they were really encouraged, first of all, to come to know God and what the christian life and commitment entails for all his faithful, they would be in a much better position to discover their own specific vocation. And we must remember that there are many vocations . . . each one has his own, because God in his providential plan leads each one in a very personal way: to find out and then to fulfil his specific rôle in the Body of Christ, which is the Church.

The christian life takes into account the whole Body of Christ, of which those who are called to the religious life form a minor part. We are all brothers and sisters, sharing the one life of Christ, received in Baptism, and we have to foster the growth of this life in all our brothers and sisters. There is the need for a more pastoral and ecclesial approach: we have to be Church-minded, concerned with helping all people to do the Father's will; and therefore we must set the whole of the religious life, and formation to this life, in the wider context of the local Church. Thus, in contributing as religious to the vitality of the entire Church, and in laying the foundations of a true and solid christian life, we can more clearly discern the variety of

ways in which this one life has to be lived; 'according to the measure of the giving of Christ' (Eph 4,7). It is only in this context, and against this background, that we can then consider how best to accompany those who may be called to that form of christian living which is the religious life. If, on the other hand, we narrow our horizons and give our attention only to our own 'possible candidates to the religious life', our main concern will tend to reduce itself to finding or recruiting 'staff' for our own existing works and institutions. We shall find ourselves involved in anxiety about our own survival and that of our congregations. If and when this mentality is present in any shape or form, it is a sign that we are thinking more of ourselves, rather than the real needs of God's people, for whom we are called.

The religious life has its own specific qualities; but — and this cannot be overstressed — it presupposes basic christian tenets to which we failed to give sufficient attention in former days. The result appears to be a loss of vitality, a lessening in the appreciation and understanding of what the call to the religious life entails. In the quite recent past, whenever a boy or girl expressed an interest or desire to become a 'Brother', a 'Sister' or a priest, the tendency was to consider and label them straightaway as 'aspirants' or 'postulants'. We hardly ever asked ourselves whether they possessed that human and christian maturity which would enable them to make a responsible choice concerning a way of life. A manifest generosity, or even a sincere interest, was often considered as a sign. If we thought at all about an authentic awareness or conviction that they were being called by God to a specific form of christian living, that would come later — in the novitiate, perhaps. The hidden presuppositions of such a view, that the dimensions of the human personality had developed to the point of their being enabled to make a free choice with the adequate knowledge of the variety of ways in which the human and christian life can be lived: this was not part of our thinking. (In saying this, however, I am not overlooking the fact, that, under God's action, a very young person, even a child, may genuinely have a clear awareness of being called and therefore of wanting to belong totally to God.) What I wish to underline is that, in order to live intensely the life that such a call entails, a person must grow in all areas of human development, so as to reach the mature conviction typical of one who has passed through the stage of adolescence, and faces life with a true awareness of personal responsibility for serious choices.

The negative consequences of overlooking this fundamental reality are well known to all of us. They extend from infantile attitudes protracted throughout life, to the multiple problems we have been facing, especially in recent times: 'opting out' of the religious life after final profession, and embracing the married life, or even trying to have the best of both worlds.

These are the main reasons why the Church, twelve years ago, issued its instruction on the renewal of formation to the religious life, *Renovationis Causam*, pointing up the need for Institutes to reconsider their ways of

acting. We have already been counselled to seek out other, better, possibilities for acquiring that educational, psychological, affective and moral maturity required of those entering the religious life. The Instruction also directs us to be as sure as we can that the person entering has a real conviction that he or she has received an authentic call from God to such a state of life.

In an effort to implement these orientations given by the Church, many congregations have moved into new pastoral areas. They have also experimented in new ways of accompanying young people in their search and in promoting their growth in true vocational maturity. This has been the area of my own apostolic concern in recent years. I have become conscious of the desires of religious all over the world to learn to respond to the needs of young men and women, whom God may be calling today, who themselves need assistance and guidance in order to respond to him. I understand only too well how easily we can be led to look for 'solutions' that may seem to guarantee the assistance needed: for example, the setting up of special houses or structured courses to bring together and to enlighten those who might seem to have a call. Such methods can easily overlook the precise needs of today. In order to reach that awareness and true conviction of a call from God, each person must be helped in a very personal way. It appears that we must take account of very diverse needs stemming from personal histories against highly diversified backgrounds. Each person has to be helped to reach progressively that conviction through a series of personal choices, made freely and responsibly in the spontaneity of love. To discover the sincerity and authenticity of these personal choices, to avoid their being prejudiced by others, young people are best accompanied whilst living their lives in their active environment, not by means of 'rules' or structures, or of what might be expected of them in an artificial setting; but in response to the invitations and demands of God to which they become more and more attuned. Nobody can take the place of the one who has to respond in love. Thus we, in following the movement of God in these persons, are led to respect his times and timing, avoiding the danger of moving ahead of him by introducing what is proper only to a later stage: for example, customs and ways of acting associated with religious life itself.

Here let me share some of my own personal experiences with young people in various countries whom I have had the privilege and joy of accompanying in recent years. Out of many possibles, I will choose a small number, each with her own history, struggles, solutions, none of which follow an identical pattern. I propose to begin by asking a few questions, which I will then try to answer by making use of actual examples. Where feasible, I would like to let each one speak for herself, as she expresses the ways in which she was gradually helped and led to discover and respond to God's plan. Finally, I will try to draw out some conclusions which I have reached as a result of these contacts.

1. From what situations and backgrounds do young people today ask for help in discerning their vocations and how do they express what they are experiencing at this stage?
What do we have to look for and help to foster in them?
2. What does God want of those who desire to collaborate with him in accompanying those whom he is calling in different ways? What qualities should these 'companions' possess?
3. What are the signs which become manifest in the lives of those who are being called to the religious life?
In other words, what are the signs of an authentic vocation?

A recent convert writes:

'I have just returned from Zambia where I spent two-and-a-half years as a lay missionary. So much happened during this time I'd like to share with you. I went out as a teacher, as I had the desire to give some years of my life to helping those in the Third World who are less fortunate than I am. I found myself teaching young girls in a catholic school, run by catholic nuns. Before too long, I discovered that I had something to share alright, but there was also a lot for me to receive. I became interested in the catholic faith and sought help and instruction from one of the Sisters. After eighteen months, having undergone the catechumenate, I expressed the desire to be received into the Catholic Church. Shortly afterwards I received the sacrament of Confirmation, another highpoint in my life; and then what next? Before I returned home, I spoke to Sister again and told her of my desire to enter the religious life. She advised me to write to you and see what I should do'.

We met on a number of occasions. I found that this young woman had received good instruction in the faith, but that she now needed to be helped to live out her christian commitment, before seriously considering a call to the religious life. It was all still very new and exciting for her; and in her zeal and goodness, she felt that the next 'logical' step was to commit her life. We talked about the christian life, and opened the Gospels to find what the living of it entails. We explored the possibilities of exercising her love and generosity within her own parish community. It then emerged that she had a problem in readjusting her life to live as a Catholic in her home situation. Her parents and friends did not take too readily to the idea of her catholicity; and, as her new-found catholic friends who showed her understanding and gave her support were mostly Sisters, she wanted to be with them. I felt that more than this was necessary. Whilst assuring her of my support, guidance and availability, she came to see her need to grow and live as a Christian and to deepen her relationship with Christ through reflection and personal prayer.

I accompanied her over a period of two years, during which she lived a very normal life as a young teacher, enjoyed her friends and the good

things that life offers, and became very involved in parish activities of various kinds, which in turn made demands on her time and self. In all of this, the parish priest was very helpful and encouraging. It was a joy to see her 'come of age' in her lived faith, as she learnt to discover Christ as a Person who was important in her life. She experienced the demands of following him, especially through the pain and misunderstanding of her parents whom she loved, but who were no longer 'on her wavelength'. Gradually she came to realize that the Lord was calling her to take a further step towards him. This conviction grew, even though she had some idea of what it would cost her.

Later she wrote: 'I have no doubts or questions any more. How different my understanding now of what the Lord wants of me. When I first wrote to you, I suppose I could say I wanted to *do* something for God and people, but now I have come to know the One who is inviting me to give my all to him, and knowing him for what he is, makes me long to give *myself* to him, and what I will do is not all that important any more. . . .'

A young girl at the end of her Secondary Education:

As I was showing a film on missionary work in Africa, this girl very shyly approached and spoke of her desire to be a missionary. She asked me about my own life, and what had led me to be a missionary Sister. We spent some time together, and arranged to meet again if and when she so desired.

As she had just completed her secondary education, I spoke to her of her interests and plans in the professional field. She spoke of her desire to do nursing training and we discussed the possibilities available. I encouraged her in this because I felt that, in her case, she needed to move away from home, mix socially and learn to stand on her own feet. Her father was not a Catholic, but her mother was very protective and anxious that she be good.

After some months of training she shared the following news: 'I think I'd better tell you that I have met a boy! I like him very much and get on very well with him, and we seem to have so much in common. However, I am keeping an open mind about everything. The idea of marrying such a man as John appeals to me, but at the same time I have not ruled out other possibilities either. Do you have any advice on this matter?'. . .

We met and corresponded a number of times during the following twelve months, and reflected and prayed and shared together. She was gradually led to what she came to recognize as the deeper attraction of God within her. Her own words describe what she experienced at this time: 'Your letter arrived just at the right moment, as I feel the need of your help in sorting myself out at present. I'm afraid I am not going out with John any longer. I miss his friendship very much as I enjoyed being in his company, and he is nice. I'm grateful for this experience of love and understanding which I feel has helped me grow as a young christian woman. But it's difficult to explain what happened within me. As our love grew, I became aware that it

would be unfair on John to continue going with him. He was getting serious about our relationship, and thinking in terms of a life-long commitment to each other in marriage. This is where I felt urged to call a halt; because much as I valued our friendship and much as the idea of a husband and family of my own attracted me, it became very clear to me that the Lord was leading me along a different path. This experience, rather than putting the idea of giving my love and life to the Lord out of my mind, has rather strengthened my desire to offer myself to him. I want to 'spend time' with him now and come to know him better. Will you help me?

A qualified nurse of 22 years of age wrote:

'For a few years now I have been considering the idea of a vocation — at times I feel very definite about it and at other times very doubtful. I have been putting it off until I've finished my training, but now feel I need help to make up my mind one way or the other.

At present I'm rather mixed up and I feel very uneasy trying to sort things out, so any help you can give me would be much appreciated'.

In this particular case, the value of the period of discernment was to help this young woman come to grips with her basic uneasiness, that turned out to be a feeling of guilt in 'rejecting *her* vocation' (which had been put before her as good by her mother and others), and a lack of awareness of other God-given vocations within the universal call to holiness. Through a deeper understanding of the demands of the christian life, and being helped to share her deeper aspirations, motivations and longings, as well as being freed to relate spontaneously with God and other human beings, she came to experience a sense of deep peace. In due course she developed a relationship with a young man and found *her* true vocation in life.

One year later she wrote: 'I have come to the end of my search and now feel at peace with my decision to marry in the near future. You helped me think very deeply before I made this choice. God has his plan for all of us; how good to know that we can help one another respond to what he expects of us. I feel I appreciate more now what it means to be a Christian and with God's help I'll be better able to respond as a christian wife and mother'.

A teacher in her twenties:

After five years' experience, a good christian woman expressed her desire to help people and respond to what was asked of her in life. We spent a number of week-ends together, looking at the christian vocation and the different ways of living it out. She felt attracted to married life and had friendly, healthy relationships with young men.

She came from a very good home, was very attached to her family and went home regularly at week-ends. She owned a car, liked good clothes and enjoyed having money and being independent.

After close contact over a period of months, this person felt that her call was not so much to religious life as commitment to people, which she could

see as possible within the context of married life. She said that she did not feel called to give her life totally to Christ.

She was grateful for help received, which enabled her to pray more easily and sincerely, and led her to realize that the Lord would continue to lead her. We continued to correspond from time to time over the following twelve months, and she shared with me her experiences, her needs and struggles and her uneasiness at times. As a teacher of religious education, she had the opportunity to do further studies in Scripture, which she found very enriching. It was interesting to note how she was led from studying Scripture as a subject to seeing it more as coming to know a personal God.

She reached the stage of wanting to do missionary work in the Third World with some agency or other. I supplied her with names of people who might be of help to her, but her contact with one of these lay missionaries clarified still more what was now going on within her. She knew now that she was being called to give herself completely to Christ, and only by 'giving in' would she be at peace and happy.

A far-reaching development had taken place in her life. No more doubts, hesitations, fears. Christ was after her. She was now prepared to give everything! Things which before had mattered a great deal, and which seemed impossible to give up, were now seen in a different perspective. Her attachment to the Lord had grown stronger than her other previous 'attachments'. She continued to be involved in various ways with people: with invalids during the holidays, serving meals and washing floors, with weaker pupils who needed extra help outside of school hours, and so on.

Later she made her decision to enter with another congregation. She had found where God wanted her to be.

Another example:

'I am 23 years old and have been working for the past two years (since I finished my training as a nurse). I have been kept busy for the last year or so, trying to get the idea of the religious life out of my mind, but it has kept popping up in spite of my efforts! I feel I have to do something in order to get some peace. I don't know what to say except that I want to do the will of God, whatever it may be for me, though I would prefer to trace out an easier path for myself. The path seems chosen for me and sometimes this leads to a feeling of hopelessness, which is only overcome when I try to put my trust in the Lord . . . but I still don't feel ready to listen to him while he plays a different tune from what I would like to hear'. (This made me think of the book of Jonah and I suggested that she read the first chapter.)

We met quite a number of times; on each occasion, I became more and more conscious of the mystery of God's dealings with the individual. He continued to draw her, in spite of her struggles and her attempts to escape (God arranged for fish to swallow Jonah . . . and fish listened, ch. 2).

On different occasions, she needed different kinds of help. Sometimes all

one was asked to provide was an open ear, and time and patience to let her pour out her heart: 'I know he is after me and that he wants me for himself. But why me? I wish he would leave me alone. I'm so afraid of what he demands'. At other times, a gentle challenge was called for to help her become aware of what her resistance to God's action was producing in her; a sense of hopelessness and a lack of peace and joy. We prayed together, and she received great consolation in being helped to express her feelings and longings and plans to God in a simple, spontaneous and personal way. At other times, by looking through the psalms, she was able to choose one which expressed what she had in her heart. Gradually her fear gave way to deep trust and serenity, and an awareness of God's love and presence. Her self-pity turned to concern for others. 'I have made arrangements to spend my summer holiday working with the handicapped and under-privileged children at Lourdes. God has been so good to me. I want to let others experience his love'.

And finally some months later: 'I cannot resist or delay any longer. It's such a mystery that he loves me all this time, in spite of my stubbornness. It makes me feel so humble before him. It's a "yes" to at last'.

A young woman also in her early twenties writes:

'Your name was passed on to me by a friend who visited me recently. I meant to write long since but put it off — no excuse but have just really been waiting to test the water — a bit like Godot really! If it would not inconvenience you too much I should like to come and visit you. I feel I would like to be a member of a religious community. This notion has been present in an increasing way for about four or five years.

At present I'm teaching in _____. I enjoy the work, and am now well into my third year of teaching, but I feel that there is something still further that the Lord might be asking me to do and so perhaps at last I'm prepared to give ear for a while! I find it extremely difficult to express myself — maybe because I don't know what I'm expected to say. If I could pop in one day of a week-end perhaps I'd find it easier to talk it over . . . '.

Anne didn't turn up . . . she couldn't face it yet! I continued to write to her, encouraging her, assuring her of my understanding and support and availability if and when she thought it would be helpful. Since my only way of reaching her was by letter, I tried to make use of this to provide her with what I felt from her letters she needed. She too continued to correspond over a period of some months. Two letters, written at different times, convey what she experienced.

'Many thanks for not giving me up! You are very patient. I feel you are entitled to some explanation for my apparent silence.

I spent five days on Retreat with Father _____, whom you suggested might be of help and he certainly was. I spent the time just trying to look at and work out what the substance of my relationship with the Lord was

really about. It was a good experience — the first retreat I have ever made, and it stood me in good stead for the weeks that followed. I think in retrospect that the Lord was really preparing me then, to help me through a fairly traumatic six weeks or so. A few bombshells were dropped by my parents on whom I thought I could rely utterly, and I now find myself in the extraordinary position of being almost alone with no family for the time being. I have grown a lot through this painful experience and can now look back and see in what a fantastic way the Lord was leading me, since I first corresponded with you. . . .

I feel I needed this to come to the point where I can in honesty and in truth present my ideas about religious life. Thank you for carrying me broken and in pieces until I was able to sort the wood out from the trees. I often return to re-read your letters and from this I gain peace and strength and the inspiration to take another step'.

Finally the moment came when we met. This was almost three years after her first contact by letter! She had worked through many family problems, and had reached the stage when she could speak freely about them and see them in perspective. As time went on, I felt she could be helped further by a priest psychologist whom I recommended to her, and she was very happy with the results and regained her confidence.

At this point, the Lord was drawing her more and more and she expressed the desire to meet regularly for some time, in order to have the opportunity to pray and have some quiet and solitude. This entailed a two hours' journey for her each week-end. After some time she was able to face home again; and later, when her mother was ill, she made herself totally available to her for as long as she could be of help. A sense of peace and serenity came into her life and she eventually came to the point when it was obvious from her behaviour that she had found that 'something further that the Lord might be asking of me', as she expressed it in her first letter.

It wasn't easy to hold back and wait. But I am convinced that if I had tried to rush her decision she would have been confused and possibly broken. She needed this time to sort things out, and the Lord persisted in pursuing her!

Another young woman (in another part of the world) approached me and expressed a desire to enter. In the course of that first conversation with her, she shared something of her background with me. It became clear that her decision to enter religious life (which she seemed to take for granted already!) arose from her parents' influence: they felt that she had a religious vocation, and she didn't question any further. She tended to be very 'pious', labelled 'a goody' by her fellow students and friends, and therefore she had not taken part in the ordinary social activities of other people of her age. When I spoke of other possible walks of life, and especially marriage, she showed obvious disdain: this was something beneath her!

From her conversations with me, I felt that this person was out of touch

with reality. She had been pampered and protected in her home, and seemed to feel that 'the convent' was the safest place to be. I talked with her and with her parents, and led them to see her need to mature as a young woman in an environment open to life and love. She went to live in the nearest township away from home, and found a job in a hospital where she really gave herself in a very humble way. After two years, she was a very different person and ready to make her own decision now concerning her future, fully convinced of why she was doing it.

These are just a few of the many contacts I have made in the course of the past few years. I have made this particular selection because I feel they express and draw attention to the variety of situations in which young people find themselves today, in the course of their search for their own individual paths in life. All of them come from very different family, cultural and social backgrounds; they are the products of various types of educational institutions more or less christian; they are influenced and affected by current diversified ideologies and values, and they have lived in environments which in some cases have been conducive to a normal healthy development, whereas in others the opposite is true.

As a result, certain conclusions become clear. I will express these in turn, bearing in mind the three questions which I posed earlier.

1. With regard to the people who are being accompanied: there is a need for a very personal approach in dealing with them; because the opportunities available for growth in their development vary so much, they require different forms of assistance, different challenges, to enable them to come to their own maturity. The case-histories I have given may underline these differences. For example, for one person, perhaps a recent convert or someone whose life has not been sufficiently grounded in christian principles, there may be the need for growth in christian maturity, which presupposes not only a solid knowledge of basic christian belief, but also the experience of actually living out the christian commitment in a christian community. Someone else, who perhaps has not experienced the warmth and love of a family or has suffered rejection or isolation, or has been over-protected and not allowed to experience the normal healthy human relationships of a growing adolescent, needs help to develop and mature effectively. For yet another, the need may lie in the area of human and psychological maturity, in order that she may find within herself the freedom to cope with the inner struggles and resistance which are inherent in the process of the clarification of her motivations and options. And so on for the others.

In each case, situations must be provided that will give the person the opportunities which can contribute to her growth, in which she is free to respond with generosity and constancy to God's action in her, so that she can make choices according to God's promptings, rather than because of or in spite of other outside influences. It is not enough for a person to express an interest or desire to enter the religious life, sincere as this may be. The

underlying reason for this interest, the real motivation for the manifestation of this desire, must be carefully examined and clarified, so as to ensure that it is truly the result of a call from God. It is only by discovering what the Lord is doing that she will be able to respond truly to what he wants of her.

2. With regard to the role and qualities of those who are involved in accompanying the person, God calls people as it pleases him; he reaches them where they are and as they are. Those who wish to collaborate with him must welcome and accept the other as led by him, and try to be attentive to each one according to her own particular needs. This means being at their disposal, lovingly and discreetly available, just letting them feel that there is someone who cares, who is sensitive to and respectful of what the Lord is doing, without being an obstacle in his path. This is by no means easy. It demands being 'on the move', at the beck and call of the other, ready to go at God's pace. Often it entails an attitude of patient waiting, especially when nothing seems to be happening, and it is so tempting to step in and make our own moves. There has to be a growing consciousness of being in touch with people who are being influenced by God, whose action is always gentle, patient and constant. To force or put people under pressure in any way is contrary to his mode of dealing with them. They must be helped to become aware of, to be attentive to his inspirations and demands, and to reflect on their consequent reactions: joy, serenity or sadness, peace or unease. In this wise, they are led to become familiar with the patterns of his action in their lives.

Support and encouragement must be offered in moments of darkness, doubt and perplexity; while at other times there is need for courage gently to challenge or confront, in order to draw out and foster a response which God is asking but which it is not easy for them to give. One must do this, however, in a way which leaves the persons free to respond. Here, it is never a question of imposing oneself, or making decision for others; but simply seeking to provide that light and guidance that will lead them to make their own decisions with discernment. Furthermore, it is important to refrain from judging or sweeping aside these decisions, even when one feels unable to approve of them completely. The Lord may see the need for a little more time. We need to wait on him with humility.

A very essential step to be taken in this process is to introduce those who come to us to a simple form of prayer, thus putting them in contact with the Lord, leading them to converse with him, and stressing the need in such dialogue to listen as well as to speak.

One must also encourage them in their search for a more personal knowledge of Christ, by suggesting special readings which are in keeping with what is happening in them, and which can help their development.

Finally it must be remembered that God's ways are mysterious. The relationships he fosters with his children are very delicate. Each one, then, who is being drawn by God in this personal and precious way is looking for

a guide — someone who is capable of understanding the delicate nature of this experience. Hence our own need for a growing familiarity with God's action and a heightened awareness of the sense of mystery involved. This demands a conviction regarding the need of prayer in our lives, both for ourselves, that we may be led and guided by God in this delicate work of 'walking with' others; and especially for these others, that they may be open and generous in their response to God; conscious that 'we are fellow workers with God . . . neither the planter nor the waterer matters . . . only God who makes things grow . . .' (1 Cor 3,9). The first duty of the spiritual guide, says St Irenaeus, is to pray constantly for the one who needs help.

3. With regard to the signs which help us to discern whether or not a person is being called to the religious life, I feel that the following are the most important: first, the experience of a delicate and loving contact which creates a longing, a yearning to find the One who is so real and yet so mysteriously hidden.

It is notoriously difficult to express in words the qualities of this 'felt presence'. Sometimes it conveys the sense of being drawn and pursued; at other times it is the experience of being taken hold of, overpowered, invaded by that Someone; and this can be quite terrifying. Yet again it comes more in the nature of a gentle whispering within. Whatever form it takes, it encourages a kind of prayer which is very simple, and which finds expression in a longing to be just quietly at the side of the Lord. Very often, at this stage, the Eucharistic presence of the Lord becomes the focal point: rather like a magnetic force that leads to the stillness one longs for.

At the same time, this prayer takes into account the various states of soul and moods of the person. Because it is at bottom the expression of a true relationship, one feels free to voice whatever is in the heart: it leads at times to actual complaining, to struggling or 'fighting' with God, to the point of even pretending to ignore him. And yet deep down, the person knows only too well what God is seeking, that he is 'the stronger' . . . and he is right.

Simultaneously and very often imperceptibly, the person feels the need to be generous towards others in a simple, hidden unobtrusive way, without pretending to be good or different. It takes the form of a new attentiveness to other people, and a willingness to be of some service to them, especially those who may be in need. This also entails a spirit of sacrifice; and yet, because it is not the result of good resolutions, but a response of love, it brings about a deep sense of joy; the joy of loving without thinking of oneself.

Finally, this joy brings with it another quality — a deep peace. Joy can sometimes be the result of an emotional and ephemeral feeling or mood, whereas this peace is experienced at a much deeper level, even in the midst of pain and struggles, as one offers a constantly renewed 'yes' to God, in response to the experience of his constant affection.

Concepta Fallon H.R.S.