

# THE INITIAL STAGES OF FORMATION

## I. Introduction

IT HAS been useful, and indeed necessary, to have examined in some detail those passages in the Gospels which describe the phases in the call of the disciples, and to have analysed, in particular, those texts which illuminate the nature of the life which Christ's call involves. Their significance is paramount for our understanding of the constitutive elements of first formation in the religious life, which must needs have its source and origin in the experiences of Jesus's disciples. It is the Council which has insisted that religious life is likewise the fruit of the divine action in the hearts of those whom the Father has freely chosen. On them he has bestowed that 'precious gift' which is 'given only to some, so that they may live in virginity or celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom' (*Lumen Gentium*, 42): and thus in union with Christ as he spends himself for the people to whom his Father has sent him.

Before developing further these evangelical implications for initial religious formation, we feel called upon to ponder at some length certain basic truths which are often left unsaid, or at least not sufficiently understood or rightly stressed.

In the accounts given in the Sacred Scriptures of the divine call and its effects in shaping the lives and personalities of those summoned by God 'according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his own will' (Eph 1,11), one fact emerges with unambiguous emphasis. This is the divine sovereign freedom of the Holy Spirit, 'who breathes where he wills'. He calls whom he wishes; and he retains the initiative in dealing with those whom he has called, throughout the entire span of their lives. Not only does he enter into a person's life; he continues to work in him with infinite constancy and care. He attracts and invites incessantly, endeavouring to call forth from the heart of the one called a succession of responses in the freedom and spontaneity of love which the individual alone can and is constrained to give.

God is truly the potter at the wheel, who patiently tries to mould the clay and give it the shape he has envisaged for it. But our God knows the clay of which we are made; he is always prepared to start afresh, even when we fail to respond to the movement of his hands; and he unceasingly calls us back when we have escaped from him.

Nothing could be clearer. God is the One who is truly in charge of formation. No one else has the power to create and give life. This is an attribute which is exclusive to God; it is his prerogative alone. It is he who communicates his life-giving Spirit; and this very Spirit of God, which dwells in the heart, urges the person to ask and move in accordance with his promptings.

This is the basic principle of all life. It is therefore also the fundamental law in formation to a life. Attentiveness to God and docility to his life-giving action are the essentials, and must always be given the first priority: 'Your eyes beheld my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them' (Ps 139,10).

The contribution to be made by others, who certainly have an important role to play in formation, must always be in keeping with this first principle. Revelation itself shows that in this process of growth, God often expects of other human beings that they collaborate in this delicate and profound work of his. We have seen, for example, the part played by Eli in helping the young Samuel to be attentive to and recognize the persistent voice of God who was calling him (cf 1 Sam 3,1-18). The New Testament, in its turn, in presenting to us the strong and affectionate personality of John the Baptist, shows him preparing the ways of the Lord, alerting people to the coming of the Messiah, speaking to his disciples of the One who, though not yet openly recognized, is already in their midst, and then pointing him out to them when he passes by (cf Jn 1,10-23.29-36). It is the same with Andrew and Philip (40-42; 45-46). Their role, however, stems from and is totally dependent on that of God, and is of value only in so far as it fosters the contact between the person called and the One who alone has the right to call and the power to give life through his creative action.

Clearly then, the fundamental and guiding principle for those involved in the work of formation is that they be constantly attentive to what God himself is doing in the person who is being fashioned and moulded by him; and that, as his humble servants, they collaborate lovingly with him, fostering with delicacy and sensitivity what he is trying to do. Thus we can say that any contribution one

makes in the field of formation will be of value, only in so far as it is a service rendered to the Spirit acting in the one he has called, who is helped by such accompaniment to become aware of God's action, and is encouraged to be docile to his promptings.

This guiding principle of formation obviously implies the necessity, on the part of God's fellow-workers (cf 1 Cor 3,9ff), of being familiar with his ways of dealing with people. It means being sensitive to the distinctive traits of his action in those he is inviting to a particular form of evangelical life: one which is rooted in and stems from the call to make a fundamental choice for Christ, loved as 'the one necessity'. Again we must turn to the Gospels and focus our attention on the experience of those who were first called to be companions of Jesus.

It is surely axiomatic that if we look and ponder on what Christ effected in the hearts of those whom he thus called to himself, we can come to a true understanding of what he, the Risen Christ present in our midst, continues to do today in the lives of those whom he draws and invites to follow him unconditionally, in the same form of life. Contemplation of the gospel-accounts impress upon us the process of spiritual growth in the hearts of the disciples: first, as they were being led to a true awareness of the call itself, and afterwards, the way in which they were introduced, step by step, into the life that they were being called upon to live.

Consequently, if we wish to discover for ourselves how to collaborate with him in the process of formation, we must ask ourselves the following questions:

1. How did Christ deal with those whom he approached in order gradually to draw them to himself? What dispositions was he fostering in them? What did they experience under his influence and tutelage?
2. How did Christ act with the disciples, during this growth in their attachment to him, so that at a given moment, they left all things to follow him, and began to live with him and learn from him? What was their precise experience at this moment of choice?

The answers to these questions will teach us how we can best help those whom God is calling in similar fashion today: how they can best respond to him in these two initial and successive stages — the pre-novitiate period, and the novitiate itself.

## II. The Pre-novitiate Period

**W**E WILL begin by considering the first stage, *the time that precedes the entrance into the Novitiate*. Our method will be the same: a detailed consideration of those passages in the Gospels which tell us of Christ's first and frequent contacts with those whom he destined as his own.

What first strikes us is the personal and familiar way in which Jesus deals with them. The evangelists leave us in no doubt about this. He comes to them, he looks at them, he speaks to them, he asks something of them, he puts questions to them, he invites them to spend some time with him. To approach them in this fashion creates in them a marked sense of attraction. It is the beginning of a personal relationship which presages a deepening, lasting friendship: the true bond of affection.

Again we must underline the variety of ways in which the Lord acts to develop this attraction in them: how he approaches them by choosing different moments and situations. He comes to them where they can be reached: in their own physical environment, their villages and places of occupation, whilst they are with their friends and families. Then, after having talked to them, he moves on in the pursuit of his own mission — the will of his Father who has sent him to preach the good news, leading him from one town to another, always making contact with the people and comforting them in their distress; and then he returns again to the lakeside.

Why does Jesus act this way? What is the object of these frequent but passing encounters with them as he comes and goes? After establishing these preliminary contacts of the relationship, he is intent on deepening it. At the same time, he is careful not to force the relationship. He is aware that it must be the fruit of an unfettered response on the part of the disciples — one which will take firmer shape by contacts frequently renewed; one which must be lived by them in the freedom and spontaneity of love.

Each time he comes, they experience the growing attraction his presence evokes; he is asking for something for which they are imperceptibly reaching; but he will never force it. His approach will be later formulated for us in the memorable words of John: 'Look, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and

opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me' (Apoc 3,20): where the biblical phrase 'to eat with him, and him with me' is used precisely to convey and describe a relationship of mutual intimacy.

How the disciples react is clear enough. Experiencing the attraction, they let themselves be drawn, they follow his gentle lead . . . they look for him and feel the joy of having 'found' him. They begin to expect his coming, eager to meet him and be at his side whenever he returns to the lakeside. Thus the Lord evokes in them these dispositions of eagerness and of promptitude to respond to what he is asking of them in the present moment and what he intends to ask of them in the future.

The effect and result of this constant action of Jesus over a period of time was an increased readiness on the part of the disciples to be with him. We know that the expression, 'at once, they followed him', emphasizes the note or urgency conveyed by the call; but it reveals even more clearly the disposition of readiness which was increasingly present in their hearts. At the same time, we notice that this process of growth takes place while they are leading their ordinary lives; which means that they had to make constant choices in order to be at his side and to respond in a way that corresponded with what he was doing in them. It was whilst they were still with their own people, involved in their normal occupations and relationships, that they were invited to accept the 'word of God', allow it to enter into their hearts and fructify, like a seed falling on fertile soil. Thus it was that new attitudes, new dispositions, began to enter gradually with ease and a certain connaturality into every corner of their normal human environment and ordinary relationships.

The growing awareness of what Christ meant for them, the place he had begun to occupy in their lives, brought them to the actual moment of choice, of readiness to leave all things in order to be with him. It finally articulated in their hearts the conviction that they had to follow him, to surrender finally to the power of his attraction, which was to change the whole course of their lives.

Here is Christ's methodology, his pedagogy as the Son of his Father. Before he introduced these men into the warp and woof of his life, before he asked them to take the irrevocable step of 'abandoning father, mother, home', and so on, he realized that he must help them to a certain degree of maturity. He put them in touch with their own conviction that his call was at once irresistible,

and yet that he was leaving it to them to choose to respond or not. He was fully aware that without such a conviction, and unless their affection for him could develop within them to the point that they would prefer him to others, prefer to follow him rather than continue living in their own way, looking after their business and interests: without such a conviction and affection, the hardship of being with him and accepting his ways would have crushed them. It might even, later on, have led them to turn away from him. We have a clear statement of this in the episode at Capernaum, when Jesus turned to the twelve and asked them: 'What about you . . . will you also go away?' (Jn 6,67). Simon Peter's answer, on behalf of them all, is evidence enough that it was only their bond of affection for him that kept them together at his side. Finally, Jesus's own reaction, in reminding them that it was he who had chosen them, not they who had chosen him, is a declaration that to be introduced into his life and to share it, presupposes both the call itself, and a clear awareness of it.

We are now in a position to formulate some conclusions concerning the first phase of initial formation.

1. As a preliminary, we insist again that it is God alone who can call to a life of companionship and union with himself. This truth determines the very nature of the life which we are considering, and consequently the vision and understanding of both the time of pre-novitiate and of the novitiate itself. No one can dictate to the Lord concerning the loving relationships he chooses to establish. The sovereign freedom to act as it pleases him is one of the fundamental divine attributes. To say this may appear to be labouring the obvious, but one is constantly surprised how often many well-intentioned people tend to forget it. It is obvious, too, that no one can be initiated into this life, which is grounded on an ever-growing relationship of love with the Lord, continually sought as the one necessity, until all steps have been taken to discover that the person has indeed been called to it by God himself. Otherwise, we are not only wasting our time; we are, in fact, flouting his will and design for the individual in question — which is a different kind of call, demanding a different orientation and style of life. The history of consecrated life, from its very beginnings, is a consistent illustration of this truth.

This is why the Instruction *Renovationis Causam*, following its clear declaration that 'the religious life begins with the novitiate' (in which the initiation takes place), states firmly that no one should be

admitted into the novitiate unless the candidate (and the community from its side) reach the conviction that he or she is called by God.

2. The purpose of the time which precedes the entry into the novitiate is, of course, to help the candidate's growth in every possible way. More directly, however, this time is to enable both community and candidate to discover:

(a) Whether that level of human and spiritual maturity has been reached which enables a person to respond with conviction and true freedom to the Lord's call: one which the candidate in question is gradually perceiving as authentic.

(b) Whether the candidate has a sufficient knowledge and a quasi-instinctive awareness of the essential demands of the religious life, which is influencing and affecting the person's behaviour for the better.

(c) Whether the candidate's situation has been such as to enable him or her to make free choices, in accord with the demands of the vocation as its perception is intensified.

(d) Whether the candidate has, in consequence, shown a readiness to make certain necessary changes in life-style, as a result of the growing attachment to the God who calls.

These points the Church has already clearly affirmed in *Renovationis Causam*. Unfortunately, these directives have frequently been shelved, often with negative if not destructive consequences. We cannot insist too strongly, in keeping with the Instruction, that the key to the door of the novitiate should be kept on the inside, to be opened only when such a human and moral certainty has been obtained.

To admit into the novitiate those who have not yet reached that state of readiness, that openness of heart and surrender to God consonant with 'human and moral certainty', would not only create a situation detrimental to the intensity of life proper to the novitiate; it would also be unjust towards those who are truly ready for the initiation, and whose own response and development would inevitably suffer, particularly with regard to the communitarian dimension of their vocation, which is meant to begin in a warm and healthy atmosphere.

In order that the novitiate achieve its aims, it has to be lived at a time when the first 'encounter' with Christ has created the urge 'to be with him'. Otherwise, it is hardly likely that the relationship with Christ will grow into a real familiarity: one that will endure and

intensify all during one's life. Its various stages will then be seen and lived out as a constant deepening of love for the One with whom one must live as a companion, until that day when we meet him face to face.

3. In 1969, in the Instruction on bringing up to date the religious life (*Renovationis Causam*), the Church offered certain profound considerations on the actual situation of the world and society in our times, in order to help us to understand more fully the various aspects desirable and necessary in the life of a candidate. There, religious were urged to reflect and to deliberate on the need to scrutinize and even abandon some of the structures of the past, in order to introduce new and more suitable forms. Many congregations were greatly encouraged by these recommendations, and addressed themselves to this arduous task with eagerness, honesty and prayerful reflection. New ways have been tried; better and more flexible structures have often been introduced, many of which are already bearing the fruits hoped for. Through such deliberation and experimentation, many have been able to come to the heart of the matter. They have discovered the true purpose of the time that precedes the entrance into the novitiate. We can formulate their findings:

To help the candidate become aware of what God is doing in heart and spirit, and to discern the reality of this conviction of being called by him to the religious life;

to see whether the candidate is responding to the Spirit's action: that is, whether his ways of living and acting indicate that the person is gradually, and more consistently making the kind of choices which correspond to the nature of that call;

to help the person to acquire the maturity — human and spiritual, psychological and affective, intellectual and moral — which is required for anyone to enter religious life.

#### 4. How can we best achieve this purpose?

(a) It is essential that one who has manifested not simply an interest in the religious life, but a real desire to become a religious, should live in a situation and environment that enables such a person to be and to act spontaneously. If we put people into an unreal setting, it is almost inevitable that they will become artificial, and act so. It will also be difficult for them to make use of those opportunities which contribute to the normal growth of a person, especially in the areas of affectivity and generosity.



At the same time, it goes without saying that each one is different, and that the needs of each, in the various areas of human and christian growth, will also vary. Hence there can be no one formula valid for all. The Lord expects us to collaborate with him in offering to each candidate the means which correspond best to individual needs; and these, let us repeat, can vary very widely.

(b) After having found out their most urgent personal needs, whether in terms of christian living and instruction, of studies, affection and familial love, we should look for and offer to them the opportunities and means which will meet these needs. This will demand considerable ingenuity in the search for genuine accommodation to individual requirements. Above all, we must avoid that 'conformity' which, in the past, has shown itself to be such a hindrance to the growth of the human personality.

(c) Close contact with each candidate is therefore essential, in order that they may experience real care and loving appreciation of their efforts. These contacts should first of all be on a personal level. The general approach should be one of simplicity and friendliness. One needs to meet them 'where they are', to see them in their own environment, so as to be aware of the many facets of their lives, their family and social background, and so on.

From time to time they should be invited to come for week-ends, to experience the life of the community. On these occasions we should be able to offer them new insights as to what the Lord may expect of a young person who wishes to respond to his call to the religious life; but without letting them forget that there are other walks of life which equally belong to God's designs.

(d) The time will come when the candidate has shown a *constancy in the response* to God, and has manifested those signs which typify a genuine vocation to the religious life. It is then that the community will be reasonably sure that the person is actually being called and is now able to make the first definite response. It should then be made known to such candidates that we sincerely consider them as persons who have shown, and are showing, through their way of living and acting, that they genuinely desire to respond to a call, and that they give every sign that they feel the need of requesting with a certain urgency to be admitted. When such a step is taken by the community, simply and without formality, it will give the candidates that reassurance and psychological security that they need. It will constitute a recognition of what they are: persons who have manifested in the quality of their lives a humble and sincere request

to be accepted. This, incidentally, is the true meaning of the word 'postulancy'. It means neither a place nor a house, but a settled disposition of heart which makes of the candidate a 'postulant': someone who begs and asks. (The term derives from the Latin verb *postulare*, to ask with an insistence determined by a conviction.) To reassure the candidates that they are 'postulants' in the true sense, will offer them fresh stimulus to respond generously and eagerly to what is expected of them, so that they may be later received into the novitiate.

(e) At a given time, such candidates may, if it is considered desirable — though it is by no means necessary — be brought together for some time, so that they may be in contact with one another and especially with members of the community. If this experiment is tried, the 'postulants' should never be expected to lead a kind of life that in any way approximates to that of the religious life. This is not the time to introduce them into the religious life: they are not yet novices, and nothing premature should be expected of them. Certainly they should not live in the same house as novices.

(f) The most important need of all is, of course, true and solid *spiritual direction*. However, this does not mean that the spiritual director makes the decision for the candidates, but simply helps them to be honest with themselves and with God. The director should put simple yet profound questions that will enable the candidates to reflect on the interior movements within themselves: peace, serenity, or lack of peace, discomfort. (A wonderful example of this is found in Jesus's dealings with the disciples on the road to Emmaus.) With this help in discernment — but without discerning for them — the candidates will grow in familiarity with God's ways; they will enter into a movement and develop a disposition that should accompany them for the rest of their lives.

(g) It is obvious that these views concerning the periods preceding the entry into the Novitiate, offer the greatest assurance that the candidate will enjoy the freedom that is needed for making a choice which will govern his or her entire life: a choice that must be the fruit of a responsible and free 'yes' to God's invitation.

There are those who are afraid, or even sceptical of this approach. They feel that it is too unstructured, too vague. However, those who are familiar with God's mysterious yet very sensitive and powerful ways of dealing with people, feel that this personal approach appears to be the only one which corresponds with God's intentions, as these are revealed to us in Scripture, and recommended in recent Church

documents. It is certainly in keeping with 'the signs of the times'. It would be so much easier to bring people together, to put them into the same mould, to give them the same instructions and expect them all to respond in the same way. But it is doubtful in the extreme whether this is any longer relevant to the growth which the Church herself has strongly recommended.

A much more personalized way of dealing with the possible candidates will ensure that we offer that kind of assistance suited to the specific needs of the individual. This will also imply that the length of time involved will likewise vary. The probability is that, even if there are several who are showing some real signs of an authentic call, they will not all be ready for the novitiate at the same time; no matter how convenient it might be to have them all 'enter' at the same time. Something more demanding is being asked of us, which entails on our part a willingness to be present, even at great inconvenience, when and where we are needed. It also presupposes an openness and docility to God's promptings. Often, the requests that reach us come from the most unexpected sources and, while these initially may voice very humbly and almost imperceptibly something of what is being sought, we need to be on the alert to discern these initial attempts to 'feel one's way', ready to take the trouble to help the beginners in every sort of situation. They ought to be able to find in us that understanding and non-possessive attitude which allows them the freedom to express their deeper aspirations and desires in their attempt to respond to God.

When all is said and done, this was, as we have seen, the way in which Jesus, as he moved around Galilee and the adjoining provinces, led by the Spirit of the Father, was attentive to the many appeals for help from a variety of people who were not only asking for something but for light and guidance as to how to respond better to God.

Equally, in his dealings with those who, in the Father's plan, were destined to become his 'disciples', Jesus respected the growth of each individual. Having gradually led them to a true vocational maturity, he knew that he could press home the invitation to take a step which enabled him to move forward with them and introduce them into his own very life.

### III. The Novitiate: Initiation into Christ's Way of Life

**A**T THE moment when the candidate experiences that profound irresistible conviction, 'God is calling me; I must respond to him', a marked interior change takes place which expresses itself in a choice of love: one which involves 'leaving father, mother, brothers, sisters and all things', so as to follow Christ. 'You have seduced me and I let myself be seduced' (Jer 20,7). This moment marks the beginning, the point of entry on a new phase of the life whose development we have attempted to describe above. The candidate is on the threshold of a new adventure in love. The affection which the person feels for the Lord is now gathered up in one overriding and deeply-felt desire: that is, to withdraw with him in solitude, so that by speaking and listening to him with open heart, he or she may come to know Christ within. It is an inner movement similar to that experienced by a young man or woman who is utterly convinced of being truly in love with another human being. Such lovers begin to speak and listen to each other in fresh ways, coming to know and to share all that is truly dear to the other. In fact this love is leading toward the sharing of the same life; where this disposition of heart is present, one is open and vulnerable to the influence of the other.

Thus it is with the person whom the Lord has chosen and called and touches in this way, as we find it described for us in the Gospels: those moments when 'the disciples', overpowered by the attraction of the Lord and called by him in the presence of the crowds, actually left all things and began to live with him. This group of men, drawn by the Lord, accompany him as he goes about doing good, listen to his every word, watch his every movement, to the point that they become increasingly able to enter into the heart of the One whose love they experience, and whose ways of dealing with people so attract them (Mk 3,13ff; Lk 6,12ff). Every detail of his life, his style, his attitudes and reactions becomes meaningful to them in ways that escape the comprehension of other people.

Meantime, Christ on his part, at appropriate moments, takes them aside to a lonely place where they can be by themselves (Mk 6,31; Lk 9,10). Here he speaks to them in private (whispers to

them), and explains the secret of the Kingdom (cf Mk 4,11; Mt 13,11).

This developing relationship between Jesus and his disciples is characteristic of all who respond with the same unconditional and determined 'yes' to his call, and feel compelled to declare themselves for the Master and to follow him. Under the same divine action, as the novice enters upon this time of initiation, he or she desires above all to acquire that loving familiarity with Christ leading to that knowledge of the heart possessed because of the deep unitive love that is present. Thus, if the novice is to respond to what God has done and is doing, there is need for a protracted period of relative withdrawal and of quiet solitude, sufficient to enable the person to be at the side of the Lord to contemplate the One so loved.

Those who accept some responsibility in this time of formation must support this movement and foster this divine action. Animated by the same Spirit, they will endeavour to sustain the deepest aspirations of those who have abandoned all things for the sake of Christ.

If a young person, truly in love, were to be deprived of the opportunity of being close to, of coming to know the one so loved, and did not find in relative or friend the sympathetic awareness and support to live according to what the heart experiences, he or she would be inclined to say: 'you do not know what love is; you do not understand anything about love!' The same holds true for the one who, out of love of Christ, has left home and family, because of the deep and heartfelt longing to come close to the Lord and to learn to know his ways.

With this in mind, it may be beneficial for those involved in formation to recall and evaluate, as objectively as possible, the 'programmes' which governed many novitiates in the past. Priority was given to books of rules, to 'customs' which had to be memorized and practised. Instructions were given on how to act and behave. Many pious exhortations were heard regarding one's own 'sanctification' and how to give 'edification' by being 'virtuous'. The result was that, through this undue stress on externals, life was artificial and stylized, presented in a way that bore no relation to interior union with Christ and the need for sharing the dispositions of heart and mind which shaped his own mission and formed those whom he called to share it. Experience reminds us that, often enough, novices heard little of the person of Jesus Christ. Rarely were they encouraged to use the Gospels in a way that would foster their need for union with him. All too seldom were they offered the

'solid food' based on a knowledge of the Scriptures, an acquaintance with the true theology of the religious life and the rich tradition of lived spirituality in the Church.

Unhappily, though understandably, there was a massive reaction; and the results of it are painful to contemplate. In rejecting what was unhealthy and meaningless, so many have taken a directly opposite tack, a line of action even more devastating than the concentration on outmoded external discipline. It is not uncommon to hear such statements as — 'all that nonsense must go . . . the novices must be involved, in touch with life' . . . 'if they learn from experience, life will form them' . . . 'studies and proper academic preparation in view of the apostolate must be emphasized, so as to keep pace with the progress of today's world, and put us on an even footing with "the professionals" of today!' Such an evaluation of the time of novitiate has, in many cases, simply ignored the very substance of the true life and aspirations of the novices: that is, the need, fostered by God's attraction, to seek out the Lord's presence in a quiet peace, in order to come to know the One who has drawn them to himself, and for whom they have left all that was dear to them. Thus the action of God in their hearts was often ignored. Yet what can we hope to achieve in this field of formation, if we ourselves do not know how the Lord works in the hearts of those he calls, and move with them accordingly, facilitating their growth? Clearly, what is required is that the novice, first and foremost, be given the opportunity to come to know Christ, not in any abstract and theoretical way, but by entering into an experience similar to that of the first disciples, who fortunately have provided us with the authentic means.

As John writes at the beginning of his first letter:

. . . what we have heard,  
and we have seen with our own eyes;  
what we have watched  
and touched with our hands . . .  
this is our subject.

and he continues:

What we have seen and heard  
we are telling you so that  
you too may be in union with us (1 Jn 1,1-3).

What the novices need and long for is to be put in touch with the

One who has now become the object of their love and attention. This requires someone to open the Scriptures for them, so that they are introduced to a way of reading the Gospels enabling them to discover the person of Jesus Christ, and by going beyond the written word, to encounter 'the Word who is life'. The novice has not taken this definitive step simply to be fed on a diet of academic courses in exegesis. This could be obtained elsewhere, without having to abandon home and family and all that this implies. The urgency now is for something solidly based on the Scriptures which will tend towards that 'knowledge of the heart', and thus satisfy the yearning within.

This is not to say that we can dispense with the need for basic and fundamental information and light on the true meaning of the Scriptures, their composition, content, and so on. It is the same with instructions whose object is to deepen the novices' understanding of prayer, and its various forms and conditions; of a practical appreciation of Liturgy, and especially the Eucharist and the sacrament of reconciliation; of the historical development of the consecrated life within the Church, and so on. But all these elements need to be integrated harmoniously into the fundamental formative movement: that is, the growing attachment to the person of Christ and to his manner of life. Whatever is offered should complement this aim. There is no place in the novitiate for 'academic' knowledge for its own sake.

The emphasis, then, will always be on the novices' growing relationship with Christ, trusting their 'inner capacity' to come to know the Master in a way that belongs uniquely to the call. This movement ought to be helped on by instructions and courses of quality, which bring a certain satisfaction to the intellectual and critical faculties; this, however, will never be the primary purpose, which is to develop what the later Fathers called the 'spiritual intelligence', one which promotes the life in the Spirit, a life of union with the Master. It is essential, therefore, that the novices be in contact with a true 'spiritual guide': that is, a man or woman of God whose primary concern is not theory or 'book learning', but one whose life and learning have been integrated, and who has come to know the ways of God by experience. This is the type of person whom the novices need and desire: one who will walk with them, accompany them on their life's journey towards the Lord. He is the One who, though not seen or openly known is truly loved (cf 1 Pet 1,8). Someone like John the Baptist, who, because of his affection

for the Lord, could point him out to others as he passed by, and then withdraw, rejoicing that his disciples had found the Christ they had longed for: someone, that is, who can, with gentle discretion, insert himself into another's life, in order to render that kind of loving assistance which will enable the novice to enter ever more deeply into the mysterious ways of Christ.

The novice-director, conscious of the delicacy and importance of his role, but also of his own limitations, should realize the necessity for calling on the contributions of others, and count on their help to provide whatever is best and most suited to the novices, at any particular stage. These collaborators should be persons whose quality of life renders them really capable of working in harmony with the director of novices; willing to move into the scene when the good of the novices demands their presence, or of withdrawing when God prompts them to efface themselves; flexible and pliable enough to enter into God's plan and to move according to his desires.

If the movement fostered by God is supported and strengthened in this way, the attachment of the novice to the person of Christ is certain to grow in the quality of true intimacy, so that he or she experiences a need to be more like the Lord and to live like him. A true relationship cannot remain at the level of the affections; it must exert a profound influence on one's manner of life. It is thus that the genuine bond of love for Christ nurtured in the novice will produce a change of heart, a gradual conversion. As the novice is helped to watch and contemplate, he is moved by Christ's own attitudes and the ways in which he lived and dealt with people; and, attracted by them, he will desire to make them his own. Hence, familiarity with Christ gradually transforms the novice by fostering in him a deeply-felt need to change his own life. The Spirit of Christ, active and alive in him, prompts him and urges him to be like his Master, 'to put on the Lord Jesus Christ', and to be clothed in his same dispositions of compassion, kindness and self-sacrificing love (cf Rom 13,14; Col 3,10; Eph 4,20-24).

After several months lived in this fashion, the novices should be ready to take a further important step, so as to call forth from their hearts an even greater generosity, and refine further the quality of the relationship with Christ. The object here will be to help them to test the sincerity of their attachment to Christ, to become more aware of what it means to be with him in sharing his attitudes and concern for people. Here again this cannot be done by theorizing over it. It can only be realized by exposing them to situations and



circumstances where the capacity for love can express itself in new and much more demanding ways.

This is the purpose of one of the more carefully considered innovations of the Instruction *Renovationis Causam*, which gave permission for the introduction of periods of formative activity as an integral part of the novitiate. It must be said at once that the true significance and value of these experiences were not understood and appreciated in many congregations. Some considered these periods, which were to be lived outside the novitiate community, as a 'welcome' opportunity of interrupting the monotony of the canonical year; others seized upon them as opportunities for improving the 'skills' of the novices in view of their future 'work'; some have even gone so far as to use them as times during which the novices could 'fill the gaps' in local communities, to help out with necessary apostolic work, which was suffering from a lack of personnel.

In many instances, then, and in spite of the clear definition given by the Instruction to the phrase 'formative activity', they have been interpreted, and even named, 'times of apostolic activity'. This is contrary to their nature, and altogether different from their envisaged purpose and aim. The intention is not that the novice may perform some 'apostolate', but rather that the basic dispositions required of any one called to share the life and mission of Christ may be evoked and fostered. Such dispositions are generosity of heart, self-sacrificing love, forgetfulness of self, patience, real compassion for people who suffer, patient endurance, and, most of all, the experience of one's insignificance before God, and others, which creates a deep sense of dependence on him, and therefore of the need of prayer.

One ought not to be afraid of putting the novices into quite difficult and demanding situations, but to have confidence in their capacity to respond to the demands of God. We need to remember that this is the way in which Christ himself formed his disciples, never hesitating to challenge them, to ask them to act against their personal preferences. It is, however, important to find for each one the type of experience that will ensure that the novices give of themselves something which they feel they ought to give, but have not yet done so: to develop some aspect or other of their lives, some disposition of heart which seems to be weak or lacking, but which is essential in the life of any person who wishes to grow in the likeness of Christ, and thus become a sharer of his mission.

Through such a realistic approach, in virtue of which the novices

are enabled to respond personally to what they feel to be God's true demands, the novitiate can become an authentic initiation to the life of Christ, and hence a genuine introduction to the apostolic religious life. It is obvious that such a way of proceeding aims at fostering a progressive and an increasingly harmonious integration of the various components which belong to a life lived in union with Christ for the good of others; it also ensures that balanced growth which enables the persons to become what the Lord would have them be.

When the novices are engaged in these formative experiences, it is imperative that the novice-directors fulfil the true role of God's fellow-workers, by making themselves available in these special formative situations from time to time, so as to offer affective and effective assistance. There will be moments of profound sharing during which the novices will speak of their experiences, their state of soul, their joys and sufferings, their failures, struggles, discouragement, responses and weaknesses. The novice-director, by an affective presence to them, will help them to evaluate what is happening in their lives, in the light of the Gospels and of what they have previously experienced in the environment proper to the preceding phase of the novitiate. Thus they will become more adept in discerning what the Lord is asking of them; they will better comprehend the ways of the Lord and the implications of a life lived in mission; they will be helped to develop that harmonious fusion between prayer and action which must characterize the life of an apostle.

Whilst they live through such experiences, the novices will also begin to appreciate the beauty and value of true fraternal support. In this journey on which they have embarked, they come to discover the highly personal nature of their response, and at the same time the importance of living side by side with others who are drawn by the Lord along the same paths; they learn to appreciate the experience of a spiritual guide, whose loving presence alerts them to God's demands, while supporting their efforts to respond to him. Thus the novice is existentially and gradually being helped to a sound understanding and a living appreciation of what true 'community' means; he comes to realize that this cannot exist except through the bond by which the brethren truly love one another 'in the Lord': desiring to help one another to respond to the movements of the Spirit. When they have lived experiences of this kind in the midst of the harsh realities of life, they can enter into a new phase of their development. The novice has been challenged, the demands of

a life of union with Christ have become more and more a reality, the importance of a deeper integration of contemplation and action is seen ever more clearly. There is a need now for a period of time when, under God's action, the novice is led prayerfully to ponder and reflect on the real significance and the implications of the call as an invitation to a radical following of Christ.

This is the moment when the novice-director, in keeping with the activity of God's Spirit in the hearts of those he has called, should help them to attain to a truer knowledge, a deeper understanding of the radical form of the evangelical life which God is offering them. They are now ready to look at the theology of religious life with a new vision. Now they need a more ordered study of the biblical and theological dimensions of this form of christian existence. Such an approach will help the novices to acquire a unified vision of the vows; they will see for themselves that these are the necessary facets and expressions of the life which, rooted in and founded on a personal loving relationship with Christ, leads a person to share all in him. First, and before all else, there is the realization that this relationship means the unconditional offering of the self to Christ: 'I want to belong to you . . . I wish to commit myself to you . . . I want to share your life and live with you . . .'.

This interior understanding is the fruit of God's constant action in the heart of the novice. With the right kind of encouragement and help, it is not difficult to grasp that religious life essentially implies a definite choice of Christ. Such a choice is rooted in and flows from a preferential love urging one to leave aside all that is natural, instinctively attractive and precious to the heart and spirit (that is, to have a human partner and family of one's own, and to build one's own future . . .), in order to become a true companion of Jesus and dedicate one's whole being entirely to him, sharing his life and aims.

This sincere and affective bond with Christ, which by now has grown and matured into a very real attachment to him, creates in the novice a compelling need to share ever more effectively in Jesus's constant giving of himself. The words of St Paul echo in the heart — 'remember how generous the Lord Jesus was: he was rich but he became poor for your sake, to make you rich out of his poverty' (2 Cor 8,9) — urging him to live as Christ did; not to cling to anything, but to dispossess himself of everything, with a heart constantly open and intent on giving. Here is found the true meaning of evangelical poverty.

It is a consequence of an attitude of love, which leads a person to

give and share all that he has and is, without retaining anything for himself. Equally it is the same love that creates the need to give, not only all that one has and possesses, but also what is closest to the human heart: its own liberty. Such a gift is possible only because it is love's force to unite; and where a person is called to love Christ with an undivided heart, union seeks to penetrate further into the mystery of the one who calls, to be as like him as is possible here on earth. This is why the Lord invites those who wish to be associated with his mission, to share wholeheartedly his own 'mind': the basic attitude permeating his own human life, whereby, 'making himself obedient unto death, even death on a cross' (cf Phil 1,6-8), he redeemed mankind.

When, in the light of revelation, one ponders the mystery, 'the Word was made flesh', one learns to know, in the experience of faith, that the incarnation has taken place for the sake of 'plentiful redemption', and that this has been accomplished by Christ through a life of unreserved and loving submission to the Father. As the Gospels insist — a point underlined so vehemently by St Paul — his purpose was the full restoration of humankind. It was through his total unconditional obedience that Jesus made up for disobedience of man, so consistently demonstrated in pretending and attempting to be independent of God. This is Christ's own logic: the only way for those who are called to follow Christ, virginal and poor, and to share in his mission, is to make the mind of Christ their own, and thus share his basic disposition of total and loving obedience. So the novice learns, again by inner experience, that poverty and obedience are rooted in and intrinsically bound up with the oblation to be made through the vow of virginity.

This time of deep reflection on the true meaning of the religious life, lived under the guidance of a person who is familiar with God's ways, and presupposing that the novice is now open-hearted and free enough to make spontaneous 'manifestation of thoughts' (to use a very valuable expression which is part of the spiritual patrimony of religious life), he will surely make solid progress in the ways of God, and in a spirit of joyful abandonment, will be ready to follow the Lamb wherever he goes (Apoc 14,4). After such an intense period of growth, it will be opportune to introduce a further aspect intrinsic to life in Christ: true awareness of the spirit of the Congregation.

In fact, all the novitiate experience so far has been acquired in the company of fellow-novices, the novice director and other members of the community; so that the person has already begun to feel at

home in a family of brethren. Now is the time to explain in detail this homeliness, this experience of union.

Attachment to Christ is the basis and core of the religious life. This is and must always be the fundamental element. Yet according to God's plan and call, this very life has to be lived in communion with others, as members of a Congregation that has its own charism and spirit. The novice has felt an attraction for a particular community. To have been accepted, and to have taken one's first guided steps in this congregation, to feel at home in it, must mean that the person is actually sharing in the charism that binds the brethren together. He or she must now be helped to a reflective awareness of these community bonds, and their implications for life in community.

It is true that a genuine experience of mission in the company of carefully chosen brethren, who themselves live their religious life in the accomplishment of the specific mission of the congregation, does much more than any theorizing can do to achieve an existential appreciation of the spirit that animates this particular congregation. Furthermore, such experience enables the members of the community to see how the novice actually lives the life of attachment to Christ, and whether this can be sustained under the pressures to which a person is inevitably subjected outside the peaceful and recollected atmosphere of the novitiate.

Furthermore, the novice will be in contact with the particular spirit of the congregation, as incarnated and actually lived by the brethren, and which they communicate without even speaking of it: an experience which is vital at this particular moment in the individual's spiritual growth. If the novice has been truly called to this community, the action of the Spirit will evoke a response characterized by the charism of the congregation. The seed of that charism, whose fruit so far has manifested itself in no more than a simple attraction, now becomes an experience of affinity with the spirit, the spirituality, the particular manner of living, with the charism itself and the community that lives it: it is all this that the novice is called upon to give and to receive in a total sharing. The communitarian bond will grow at the same time, and the appreciation of its true foundations become more explicit and mature.

These experiences are prefatory to the next step, in which the novice-director and other members who have a deep knowledge of the Congregation, its history, its beginnings and tradition, can help the novices to deepen their awareness of the charism through study,

reflection, sharing and prayer. In this way they are introduced into the very heart of the community; prepared in fact to make their first commitment to God within the congregation. If the entire novitiate has been planned and lived out so as to be a true initiation to the evangelical life, and the novice has generously responded to Christ's constantly renewed invitation to follow him, he or she will have grown into this new phase of religious life.

The *conviction* of being called by God which led the person to abandon all that was dear and familiar in order to be at the side of Christ, and to learn his ways, will have become by now a *determination* to stay with him.

Hence the compelling need to give oneself *unconditionally* to the Master who has drawn to himself the human heart and spirit. The novice will then make the oblation of the whole self to Christ — the commitment to share one's life (virginal, poor, obedient) in the reality of mission: and this according to the spirit of the Congregation which has accompanied the novice throughout the initiation to the religious life. However, the person will make this commitment with the permission of the Community, which must authenticate the vocation and the serious nature of the response to God out of its experience. Moreover, when it welcomes the novice into the family of the Congregation, the community on its part pledges itself to support the person further in the preparation for Profession.

Because of the nature and aim of this important step, taken in view of Profession, the generous and unconditional giving of self made by the novice is not yet accepted unconditionally by God, who acts through the ministry of the Church. It will be only after a certain time of further verification that the Church herself will accept unconditionally, and in God's name, the oblation of the person as perpetual and total; then and only then will God make the person 'his own for ever' and 'consecrate' the religious to himself and to his service.

It is clear then that:

- the novice makes an authentic commitment to God;
- this commitment is thus a sacred bond;
- he commits himself to live his life according to the Gospel, and in particular, to live a life of chastity, poverty and obedience;
- he is going to do this according to the Rule of the Institute which accepts him and which has helped him to persevere through the initiation to the religious life (the novitiate).

Therefore the first commitment is not merely a commitment or contract with the Community; it is first a total commitment to God within the Institute.

Moreover, the first commitment must be envisaged as an essential preliminary which of its nature prepares the person for perpetual Profession/Consecration. For this reason, one does not state that it will be only for a given time. It is made with the deliberate intention to be admitted to Profession as soon as possible.

With regard to the period of time of this commitment: it must be long enough to verify that the person is truly ready to be admitted to Profession and to definitive incorporation into the Institute. On the other hand, it must not be unduly prolonged. Thus a minimum and a maximum period for the duration of this first commitment must be established by the Community and the Church.

The seriousness and the gravity of such a commitment derive from the will of the One who has called the person; it is he who continues to draw the religious to himself, just as it is he to whom and with whom the commitment is made: commitment to a life according to the evangelical counsels, and the charism of the Congregation.

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