

FROM FIRST COMMITMENT TO PROFESSION

THE NOVICE who has been allowed to make first commitment has been led into a covenant with God to live the life of Christ, virginal, poor and obedient, and thus to share his mission in the community that welcomed this person as a member of its family.

The very nature and aim of this commitment which is made in preparation for Profession demands that the person be inserted into the mission of the congregation. It is made in order to deepen one's attachment to Christ amidst the realities of apostolic life; to improve the quality of one's dedication to him in the midst of missionary activity; to verify further whether one is attuned to the spirit of the congregation. In this commitment, the Church asks the person to make an unconditional giving of self, without as yet accepting it as definitive.

In keeping, then, with what is envisaged by the first commitment, and conscious of the reality of the inner relationship, the young religious should now live at the side of the Christ who ministers to people to whom he is sent by the Father: following him in all his movements in spreading the good news and caring for those who suffer. It would seem to contradict the nature and consequences of call and promise involved in this commitment, for the community to immerse the young religious immediately in academic studies of one sort or another.

Perhaps it is not sufficiently recognized how such absorption in studies frustrates the reality of the commitment, and normally mutilates and stifles the religious's growth as a person called to be with Christ on mission. What is needed at this time is a wholehearted insertion into the apostolate of the Congregation and a more direct contact with the world, in all its beauty and its sinfulness. This is the right incentive, the new and authentic stimulus of which the religious himself feels the need, for his further preparation for Profession: the moment when the Lord, having

watched over and tended his progressive growth into his own apostolic action, will accept the irrevocable oblation, making the religious his own for ever by consecrating him to himself.

This insertion into mission is designed to emphasize more vividly and realistically how the demands of God's call never diminish, how they require the constant gift of self to people and to events which must bear the stamp of the true 'disciple'. It is a life imbued with that 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness, and self-control' of which St Paul speaks: the signs that one is 'directed by the Spirit' (cf Gal 5,22-25).

This is clearly what our Lord himself was trying to develop in his disciples, as they continued to stay with him after the first period of 'initiation'. Without wanting to establish an exact comparison between the various phases of the disciples' life with Christ after his first choice of them, and those of the young religious of today; and without in any way trying to read into the Scriptures what in fact they do not say, we can still be enlightened by what went on in the lives and in the hearts of those who persevered in their following of Christ, and grew in their understanding of what it really meant to be associated with him in mission. When we read the Gospels prayerfully and avail ourselves of the contributions offered by sound biblical scholars, we can follow the spiritual journeyings and growth of the disciples. We notice how they felt increasingly drawn by him; and we also realize that the ways in which he thought of people and had dealings with them, often left the disciples perplexed and puzzled. His ways were so different from their own!

Jesus, on his part, never hesitated to call them to task by pointing out that their behaviour was not in accordance with his; that his criteria were very different from their own. He challenged them, and told them openly that they had to change if they wanted 'to be with him': 'Unless you become like little children, you will not enter the Kingdom of God' (Mk 10,15). We see that on many occasions he was not slow to tell them that if they took their standards of behaviour from those of the majority around them, they would be acting just as the pagans did (cf Mt 5,46-48). In other instances, we see them sharing among themselves their reactions, discussing their ambitious dreams: who is to sit at his right hand in the Kingdom? (cf Mk 10,37) All this reveals that while their attachment to Christ was real, it was still mingled with the desire to become important and to lord it over others. Their motivations needed to be purified; their understanding of their mission was still far from Christ's own. He

had to make it increasingly clear to them that to follow him demanded much more generosity, and must eliminate any seeking for personal advantage.

At other times we see that they were bewildered by what he said (cf Mk 4,10); they did not know what he meant. Often they did ask him questions, but at other times they were afraid to ask him what he was driving at.

On occasions they appeared confused even about himself, not knowing what to think of him. Finally, Jesus himself asked them straight out: 'Who do you say that I am?' Thus he gradually called forth that new and deeper understanding of himself which led Peter to make his profession: 'You are the Son of the Living God' (Mt 16,13-16). However, even on that occasion, Jesus made it clear that such knowledge of him is the fruit of the revelation granted by the Father, and pointed out the necessity of a very humble attitude before God and the need to pray for an interior knowledge and understanding: one very different from that acquired in 'the schools' of the time.

Furthermore, we know how in some instances, when his teaching was thought to be 'intolerable' — so much so that many stopped following him — he challenged them directly on the score of their own attachment to him. 'Do you want to go away, too?' Here they experienced such a sense of belonging, that they could not even contemplate leaving him: 'Lord, to whom shall we go?' (Jn 6,67-69). This was obviously due to the fascinating power of his personality. In spite of the sense of mystery that surrounded him, they felt drawn to overcome their fears and hesitations, and experienced an urgency to respond more fully.

In a similar way, this is what happens in the life of the young religious who, filled with generosity, is plunged into mission and progressively confronted with new situations, challenges, disillusionments; yet he feels himself constantly under the action of God, who keeps calling him to give an ever more total response. These are the times when an all-pervading faith must become more and more the motivating force in one's life. In fact, it is only when the attachment to Christ truly increases, and one is deeply sharing his ways in the realities of life, that one is truly 'on mission'. Then almost instinctively, with that spiritual sense which is the fruit of true love, one will be led to fulfil mission as did Christ, when the price to be paid is extremely costly, as it was for Christ. He saw his mission as filling his whole existence, despoiling him of himself.

. . . Our Lord found his whole life absorbed and sacrificed. Not absorbed in the pursuit of grandiose schemes, but sacrificed to the demands of the immediate present and the needs of others. Not a moment of his own, no time 'to play about with'. . . . From morning till night, he had to be talking, healing, listening, explaining, defending himself, to the point of 'not having time to eat' (Mk 6,31). Even when the sun had gone down, they brought sick people to him, and, 'at very early dawn', after hours of solitary prayer, he already pressed on, for he must needs go to the next place (Mk 1,32-38).

. . . Amid this life, taken up with urgent tasks, even prayer was not a time of freedom and oblivion, no mere 'quiet time'. On the contrary, it was a time when our Lord gathered and concentrated all his strength to obtain from the Father the success of his work and the coming of God's kingdom.¹

But in order to facilitate the growth of the young religious for the effective sharing of these dispositions of mind and heart, those who have the responsibility of accompanying them during this important and very delicate stage of their journey, should — like Jesus with his disciples — help them to discover and accept the 'ways' of Christ. Recent studies have thrown light on the way in which Jesus fostered this growth. While they were living together through varied experiences, with his disciples progressively involved by him in what he was doing for the sake of the people, he often went with them to a lonely place, so that they could be by themselves (Mk 6,31). It was then that he would explain 'privately' the hidden meaning of the parables; then he would give them the 'secret' of the Kingdom (cf Mk 4,11); then he would go over with them what had happened in the light of his 'sayings'; then he would make them understand the true dispositions that must be alive in the hearts of those who share his mission.

This important teaching, the synthesis of what Jesus was trying to convey to his own, is contained in the series of parables presented in Mark's Gospel (ch. 4). The parable of the sower was explained to the disciples and its meaning was given to them (Mk 4,10-20); yet, in so far as they were concerned, as persons who had been called to live and work with 'the divine Sower', there was an even deeper significance. They, like him, must be generous in throwing the seed with open hands, without thinking of the results or the success,

¹ J. Guillet S.J., *Jesus Christ Yesterday and Today*, tr. J. Duggan (London, 1965), pp 83-84.

without becoming discouraged when 'fertile soil' seems scarce. One must realize that there are rocks and thorns preventing the seed from sprouting and growing; but one must carry on spreading the gospel and doing good with courage, generosity, and without counting the cost. In fact, as it is stated immediately: 'Take heed what you hear: the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given to you' (Mk 4,24).

There are two other most significant parables which the Lord tells to illustrate the fundamental criteria governing the activity of those who wish to collaborate with him in the spreading of the Kingdom. Here Jesus stresses the necessary dispositions of heart for the missionary. He must do his part with great generosity; but he must know that it is God himself who makes the seed grow. He thus invites the disciple to share that deep and serene detachment permeated with the confidence that the Lord will make the seed grow. 'How it grows you do not know' (cf Mk 4,26-27); the Father knows it. The missionary is the one who, after having done his part, says with conviction: 'we are useless servants' (Lk 17,10).

In The Parable of the Mustard Seed (Mk 4,30-32), the Lord speaks of the mysterious reality of the Kingdom of God which has its own laws. God himself has said of them: 'my ways are not your ways . . .'. His are not like the ways followed by the world; they are ways of meekness and humility, in contrast with the principles of those who seek for greatness, achievement and success. No, the Kingdom of God is like the mustard seed, which is the smallest of seeds; and as such it must be humble and little, different from the kingdoms of this world. Yet because it is such, it will grow and spread in the hearts of men. The missionary, then, cannot be ruled by the laws and principles which are used in this world in order to become 'great'. He must remember that it is not by force, by showing power and might, by impressing people with big things, by promising prosperity and advantages, by making the elaborate plans common in human enterprises, that he will effectively collaborate with God.

Finally, the parable of the lamp (Mk 4,21-22) clarifies the matter even more. It speaks of the quality of life of the one who is with Christ on mission, and who, because of the union with him and the sharing of his ways, becomes transparent and a real light, the light that comes from the One who is the Light. The explanation of the parable presented by Mark and Matthew is given by Luke: 'The lamp of your body is your eye. When your eye is sound, your whole body too is filled with light; but when it is diseased your body too

will be all darkness. If, therefore, your whole body is filled with light, and no trace of darkness, it will be light entirely, as when the lamp shines on you with its rays' (Lk 11,34-36).

Reflection on these parables, gathered together by the disciples as a summary of his most important lessons imparted to those who were sharing his mission, makes it obvious what Jesus was trying to do, as he lived with them the experience of unpopularity, apparent failure, opposition and rejection. He was introducing them into his ways, the ways in which his kingdom has to be built; he was sharing with them the inspiring principles and the force which must guide and drive those who wish to share in his mission.

It is not difficult to see how this applies to ourselves, especially when we consider what happens in the life of young religious after they have made their first commitment. They are beginning to be inserted into the mission of the Church and of their congregation. They must gradually improve the quality of their life as followers of Jesus, and the quality of their response to the needs of the people, who, whatever their own experience of life, are consciously or unconsciously in search of something and someone who can speak to them of God and reveal to them his goodness.

The desire to respond to the needs of humankind and to share in the apostolate should not be blurred by more immediate tasks. The young religious who generously enters into the vineyard of the Lord may be touched by human situations that leave him perplexed and hesitant, or with a desire to rush in and get involved, offering instant solutions to complex problems. It is then that he needs help to see and understand that those whom Christ has chosen and sent have the task of continuing his mission in his way. How often we run the risk of forgetting that the essence and the purpose of the mission is to bring men and women to God through Christ!

We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church. It is a task and mission which vast and profound changes of present-day society make all the more urgent. Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of his death and glorious resurrection (Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 14).

Yet the very experience of being among people in order to bring to them the message of salvation, will often confront the religious with

other people's doubts, with the hopes and fears which dwell in their hearts, with the conflicts which are present in their lives. Such an experience, often painful and disconcerting, when it is lived at the side of someone who is 'wise in God', should become an incentive to deepen one's knowledge of Christ's message; to enter more deeply into the mystery of salvation as revealed by God; to listen to the word of God . . . so as to be able to love in truth and to share effectively in Christ's mission. But this requires assiduous concentration and personal application.

It is at this moment that one also experiences that intensive theological study has become a priority. This is a search for truth accompanied by that disposition of heart fostered by the desire to be among those who not only hear the word but who in truth fulfil it (Jas 1,22). This type of study does indeed meet the demands of Christ's call. In fact, in making his disciples his companions, he prepares them to be sent to proclaim the Good News of salvation. But how can they be sent if they do not know what Christ has revealed to them? Our 'profession' is above all to proclaim Jesus Christ in word and by our life. Any professional activity that we undertake should always be developed and lived as an experience of our true profession: that is, to reveal Jesus Christ and the One who sent him.

Certainly we must be in touch with human reality, because it is to the men and women of today that we must convey Christ's message. At the same time, however, we must recognize the dangers inherent in all forms of 'instant' apostolic action, which are essentially less demanding because they persuade us to set aside the obligations of intensive study. People expect us to be competent; to know our work on the intellectual level, and to share it with them in a way that they can understand; to know it from the heart so that it is a living reality, so that they can see that Christ's message is one of life that they also can live.

The Gospel in fact must be proclaimed by a witness which radiates in an altogether simple and unaffected way their faith in values that go beyond current values, and their hope in something that is not seen and that one would not dare to imagine (Paul VI, *ibid.*, 21).

At this stage, then, it is particularly important to sensitize the young religious to the problems relevant to human conditions, sufferings, injustice, thirst for peace; but it is equally important and absolutely necessary to help them to see all these realities with the eyes of faith,

so as to enable them to respond to the needs of men with a heart filled with love of God. The studies to be pursued, therefore, should be oriented and guided in a way that always fosters a deeper integration of contemplation and action, of personal relationship with Christ and love for men, knowledge of revelation and the proclamation of it in every form of apostolic activity.

The young religious need help and guidance here; and the community which admitted them to first commitment is itself committed to assist them in the further preparation for Profession. The people responsible for the formation of those who are living this phase of the religious life must truly accompany them, 'walk with them', so that their knowledge of the mystery of salvation may affect the quality of their lives ever more deeply, and simultaneously prepare them for that authentic proclamation of it which can never be seen as something 'apart' from humanity. Formation personnel need to be aware how difficult it is to preserve a balance here. Excessive preoccupation with studies tends to destroy that evangelical and missionary dimension of religious commitment which should itself determine the particular modalities of our intellectual apostolate.

The religious should be helped to grow into a real maturity of faith, which will lead them to understand that certain involvements are incompatible with the intentions and the mission of Christ, to whom they have chosen to give their lives. The risk inherent in all important activities is that they tend to become by nature a dominant concern capable of mobilizing the person's entire life. This kind of obsession can be incompatible with a religious vocation.

Another risk, still more serious, is that which brings a religious to profess an ideology that is incompatible, not only with consecrated life for the Kingdom of God, but with christian faith. This again calls for serious discernment, because the struggle against injustices becomes very frequently the monopoly of totalitarian ideologies. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that political involvements today are almost always directed and motivated by a concept of man which is in opposition to the christian vision of humankind and its destiny: that is, its relationship to Christ.

This is not the place to develop the question so often asked these days, concerning the participation of religious — or of any Christian — in the movements linked to the concept of violent revolution as the only means of liberating man. At the same time, we can hardly speak of the absolute nature of religious commitment, which leaves

no part of our activity or intentions — not even our reasons for existing — untouched by the love of Christ, without facing these particular aspects of it. To do so would be to admit a certain dichotomy in the life of the religious.

What is important to remember is that continuous participation in activities governed by a particular ideology gradually brings about, in the name of the coherence inherent in the basic unity of man, a transformation of our mentality, our intentions, and finally the adherence of our intelligence to that same ideology. It is then that faith, together with the attitudes it fosters, becomes progressively insignificant, marginal, in relation to that other ideology which has been accepted existentially. This situation is the one which Christ faced when he stated simply: 'No one can serve two masters at the same time' (Mt 6,24). The disciple who has offered himself wholly to Christ, in order to share his life and mission and thus proclaim his message in its entirety, can hardly follow conscientiously a systematic ideology which pretends to convey the whole truth of man's destiny, and yet does not consider God (cf Paul VI, *ibid.*, 32).

All these remarks will help to understand the importance of establishing 'communities of formation'. The persons in this stage of life require a certain atmosphere of friendship, of understanding, and of love; they need support in their efforts to respond to God's action in them. One of the priorities to be established by religious congregations should be to set up communities of people involved in different forms of apostolate; but, most of all, of people who are united in the Lord, who love one another and are capable of forgetting self in the common search of God's will, capable of setting aside personal opinions, if need be, in order to help their younger brethren to continue to grow. Because of their qualities and levels of proficiency, they should also be able to provide valuable complementary aspects within the group. However, there must be one person in charge of the overall direction and orientation: the young person needs this clarity of guidance with its consequent wholesome security; otherwise the religious will be tempted to drift, seeking advice, even under 'spiritual' pretexts, from every side: and ultimately, perhaps, from those inclined to encourage them to follow their own wishes rather than God's.

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