

# FORMATION FOR DEATH AND DYING

From the age of retirement  
to the end of one's life

**T**HE YEARS that people live from the time they have to withdraw from a more active involvement in mission up to the last days of their lives have seldom been reckoned as a period of formation. Yet, when the religious life is considered and valued for what it really is, such a time is the most delicate and demanding phase of religious formation.

In fact, it is the time when the religious is progressively drawn and more intensely called by God to live his oblation up to the point of consummating his consecration.

As one reflects on this, the words addressed by our Lord to Peter as he was about to go on mission continue to echo:

Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go. (This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God.) And after this he said to him: Follow me! (Jn 21,18-19).

As life unfolds, the religious who has responded to God's call in the midst of apostolic activity has gradually been introduced to a deeper understanding of the demands of his union with Christ.

When Jesus first called, he did not mince his words:

If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it (Mk 8,34-35).

To deny oneself . . . to carry his cross . . . to lose one's life: these and the conditions that he lays down for following him; and they

are possible only when understood in terms of the fruit of an attachment.

To be with Christ implies union with him; to follow him with a heart filled with love implies a sharing of all that is his; to love him as the 'one necessity' means the surrender to him in self-forgetfulness, and to accept all that love demands, without even knowing what the future holds.

As each day goes by, we are introduced into a deeper understanding of the exigencies of this union. By following Christ in the fulfilment of his ministry and in his dedication, by living in union with him who, sent by the Father and 'possessed by him', gives himself to people, we are gradually drawn to the heart of Christ, made to understand 'his ways' and 'his thoughts', made to share in the disposition of heart that prompted him throughout his earthly mission.

To those who follow him, and in loving fidelity allow themselves to be formed by him, he slowly reveals the secret of his life and mission; the Child of the Father, belonging to him, knowing that all things come from him . . . acknowledging this in life and through one's life . . . to the point of giving up into the hands of the Father the life received from him. Jesus,

knowing that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father . . . (Jn 13,1),

. . . knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God . . . (Jn 13,3),

enters freely into his passion in order to live to the utmost the disposition of heart by which he redeems fallen man; he wants to save those who refuse to recognize that everything, and especially their lives, comes from the Father.

It is for this that he sacrifices himself and consciously delivers into the hands of the Father the life that he had received from him.

And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him . . . (Phil 2,7-9).

During the years in which we live as disciples of Jesus Christ, he prepares us, he forms and fashions us to enable us to live in union with him the supreme test of love that urged him to give up all, to surrender himself totally for the well-being of all. It is as if he had said one day to each person he has called what he once said to Peter,

'where I am going you cannot follow me now; but you shall follow afterwards' (Jn 13,36). This 'afterwards' eventually becomes a reality for each one. It is the time of retirement, the time during which one becomes aware that one no longer has the same energy as before, that one's strength diminishes, that one must withdraw to make place for others, that death draws near.

This is a very sensitive and most valuable moment: sensitive because one can so easily fail to hear the Lord's invitation to live an intensified commitment; a moment that is most valuable because if one responds to his formative action, one will be more intimately united to Christ, share more fully his interior dispositions, and be more closely united in spirit to his mission. This participation in his mission will no longer be in the field of activity, but rather in a deeper union with Christ, living his 'hour' with him.

It seems necessary to insist that the ability to see matters in this perspective — that is, to recognize the apostolic value of what is happening, to understand that at this moment in life one is called upon to participate more fully in the mission of Christ — depends very largely on the basic principles of authentic formation. In fact, if religious life were to be understood primarily in terms of 'activity', of 'service', one would find it difficult to comprehend the apostolic value of retirement and of the final encounter with God.

If, on the contrary, we see our life as an attachment to Christ, as a relationship of strong love which unites to the person of Christ; if we have tried to live out this relationship in loving fidelity, despite frailties and shortcomings, we shall know that it is precisely because of this bond that we are called to be united in a very special manner to his passion, to his humiliation, to his utter dependence on the Father. Deeply conscious of this faith-dimension, as the last moment draws near, we shall come to realize how closely associated we are with his redemptive sacrifice.

It follows from this that when one is gradually detached and detaches oneself in many ways from life and its activities, one does not become bitter, sad or complaining. On the contrary, the deep-rooted conviction that mission is fulfilled in self-effacement, in humiliation, in the cross — and finally in death — makes it possible for the religious to live in peace and joy, knowing that the Lord acts through those who surrender themselves totally to him, knowing that he is drawing them to him, that he awaits them.

All this requires self-preparation and a constant awareness of the interior movements of his grace. But it also implies that a certain

accompaniment be provided: that supportive 'walking with' the persons who are entering into their 'hour', and recognize it as a consummate reality.

In fact, when a person is compelled to withdraw from certain forms of apostolic activity, but still has sufficient physical strength and mobility, he or she can be helped to undertake initiatives, quite different perhaps from previous ones, which can enable the person to establish fresh contacts with people, often of a greater apostolic value because they are more human, more direct, and in a sense, more deeply religious. Yet it is evident that, in order to become involved in such new ways, the person must be ready to give up certain positions or types of work to which he or she was accustomed and even attached. These new initiatives can take the form of a presence in nursing homes, in families, in homes for the aged, a presence among those in need, in small districts where it is possible to meet people in their own milieu. Then, while establishing new contacts marked by the spiritual maturity that age has brought about, one can often understand and sympathize with people more fully, with their personal sufferings, struggles, pains and joys, and can speak to them of the Lord in a language that touches them. Thus the age of retirement can become one of the most fruitful apostolic periods of one's life, because of one's experience and wisdom.

There can be little doubt, then, that the years during which an older religious graciously withdraws to make room for others can bring new forms of activity, even though on a smaller scale. They can be, and often are, the years during which one touches the hearts of others with a truly discerning love; when, indeed, one is led more and more by God, and no longer need think of 'things to do'. Thus the Holy Spirit is given room to act and to move the heart.

For reasons such as these, whilst it is desirable for and even incumbent upon a congregation to pay special attention to the requirements of those who have reached the age of retirement by giving them the opportunity to live in a certain tranquillity, such concern should not take the form of organizing 'convalescent homes' for the elderly — residences for 'pensioned-off' members. Such arrangements, no matter how well-meant, to ensure their 'happiness' could well inflict a serious injustice on those religious who, after having spent themselves wholeheartedly, might feel that they are being 'put out to grass'. Very frequently, the result is seriously to undervalue their spiritual wealth and depth, as well as their desire to continue to live, through sacrifice and suffering, their relationship

with him who called them, and who constantly invites them to follow him, particularly in their old age. Certainly they need attention and loving care; but what they need above all is to feel the support of their brothers or sisters during these last years of their life.

Equally, if it necessary to help them in the apostolic endeavours that are possible for them and towards which they feel particularly drawn, it is also important to be mindful of their longing to continue to grow in the knowledge and love of the One who will not delay in coming. Their life with him, their love for him, and especially his love for them throughout the years, have fashioned their hearts, given them interior insights and a spiritual intelligence that help them to find the Lord easily and in all simplicity. Consequently, these persons have a special capacity for reading Scripture and for meeting God there; but they must be given the opportunity to develop this talent. They need assistance from people who have a real understanding for and sympathy with their longings. This can be given in various ways: for example, through short courses carefully planned to help them draw nearer to the Lord.

It must also be remembered that for these religious, their congregation is their family, for which they have deep love and affection. It is essential, then, that they do not feel cut off from the life of the community to which they have given their all, that they are not considered as 'the old' who are of no further use. It is not uncommon for such people to feel — even when others are trying to be compassionate towards them — that they are being 'humoured': or isolated and secluded, as if they no longer belonged to the living community. When things like this happen, communities are unknowingly depriving themselves of untapped resources of wisdom and goodness, of the warmth and understanding of the 'aged': not to mention the sufferings inflicted, the injustices committed and perhaps even by those who constantly speak of justice, love and respect for the other!

The presence of those who have grown old gracefully and with serenity has a very positive and precious influence on the community. It is a fact of experience how much those young religious who are living their vocation with zeal and conviction feel at ease with the 'elderly' and are happy to be with them, to sacrifice themselves for them, to learn from them that which experience and spiritual wisdom alone can offer.

Then there comes that period of physical weakness and failing health that precedes death. This is the moment when one is confined

to a room, bedridden in an infirmary or hospital; '... with Christ I am nailed to the cross...' (Gal 2,20). This is the moment when one accepts to live the 'hour'; it is the moment when, in union with the Master, one consciously and freely enters into the passion. This is the moment when one lives even more radically the gift of self made years ago: this is the moment when Christ invites one to say with him 'yes, Father, your will be done; take my life — the life that you have given me'.

If it is true that during the first years of formation, when one perceived that God was calling, drawing to himself, asking that one leave father and mother, and so on, there were interior struggles and the fear of saying 'yes', of losing what one held dear, what was part of one's life, the same process undoubtedly continues in the final phase of the formation span. God calls, he draws... he asks for total surrender of oneself, of one's life... This time is equally painful, and difficult, with its interior conflicts and fear of saying 'yes'.

At the same time, the God whom the person has loved and followed during a whole lifetime has introduced the one whom he has loved first (cf 1 Jn 4,10) to his ways and his thoughts. The person has developed a certain intimacy with the Lord, is familiar with the signs of his presence and with the action of his Spirit: the person 'knows' that self-surrender, saying 'yes' to his invitations, are a source of deep peace. He knows by experience the full truth of God's word: 'Whoever would save his life will lose it' (Mk 8,35). He wants to respond to this word of God, seen now with its most demanding implications.

When the religious experienced the beginning of a very personal loving relationship with God — those first moments of response to his word, in which the dialogue was established — the delicate and discreet presence of another person capable of understanding, of helping to discover God's movements, of giving the support and encouragement needed would have been valuable, even indispensable. Likewise, throughout one's lifetime, there was a need for the loving wisdom of another to enlighten our path in certain important and decisive phases of our life. So then, especially in these final moments of our existence, when we are called to live the gift of self with an intensity yet unknown, the presence of someone who is capable of loving and of 'staying with', of showing gentleness and compassion, of respecting the silent pauses of a dialogue with the one who is coming: this is one of the most valuable graces in the whole of a consecrated life. It follows, therefore, that those who bear

the responsibility must reflect and plan how to meet the Lord's expectations, in such a way that religious who are preparing for the definitive encounter with God are able to live out their deepest aspirations.

In this context, it is not unknown for a superior to withhold the truth about the fact of imminent death from the person. One must seriously ask whether this is not to commit an injustice. Normally speaking, one would conclude that it is in conformity both with God's will and the innermost desires of the religious to tell him or her that the end is near, that God is approaching. Whilst appreciating fully that physical fear of and revulsion from death which is endemic to the human condition — Jesus himself experienced it — it still remains true that one who has given his life to God will desire, consciously or unconsciously, this meeting face to face with him to whom one has abandoned all things, in order to belong to him, even through suffering.

If this is indeed true, it would be unjust towards the person not to tell him of God's imminent approach. Not to do so means in practice a lack of confidence in and appreciation for the love the person has in his heart. It is, in fact, to depreciate the love he or she has for God: to act as though the Lord were not the centre of one's life.

At the same time, when religious are told that the end is near for them, there should be someone to help them, to be 'with them', so that they wait in joy and serenity; to speak to them of God, to listen to them in turn as they speak of their suffering and also of their joy in being united to the sufferings of Christ.

In addition, one must not be oblivious of the value for a community to have in its midst religious who have accepted this 'hour' with an open heart. The serenity that typifies those who are happy to be united to Christ in his passion, and to draw nearer to the One they have loved and long to meet, speaks eloquently to and forms those who assist them. There is a certain transparency, a glow that speaks very strongly of God and helps to comprehend existentially how, when God is loved 'with an undivided heart', he does indeed become the 'one necessity'.

On hearing his voice, 'Yes, my return is near!' (Apoc 22,20), the true disciple answers, 'Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!'

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