

# FORMATION AND COMMITMENT IN THE NEW CODE

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CANON LAW as it relates to religious can provoke two very different responses. First, the desire for clearly defined formulations which will give security, and therefore a certain sense of righteousness and freedom; secondly, rejection and frustration stemming from a sense of oppression and denial of the movement of the Spirit. A close look at the few canons concerned with the formation of temporary professed will evoke either disappointment that so little is said, or relief that there is leeway for congregations to formulate what they wish without external imposition. What is clear is that each congregation is responsible for the planning and execution of the formation of its members. This is to be a priority overriding personnel needs, apostolic commitments and positions of responsibility which might be taken up. It is stressed, however, that when drawing up programmes the needs of the Church must be kept in mind as well as the conditions of the people being served, the times and circumstances and the potential of the religious. The Code recognizes that there are differences in spirit and apostolic involvement in religious congregations, but the corollary of differences in expression and form of the way of living religious life is much less clearly allowed for. This touches the inevitable tension between law and spirit.

‘Law in the christian community should be seen not as an instrument of authority, but as an instrument largely for safeguarding the freedom of the individual’, so spoke Paul VI. Law is meant to catch hold of the living Spirit, but structurally it has as its function to order and legitimize practices of power in relation to other powers. Thus seldom do we feel that the Code is going to help us rediscover the vision, fill our sails with the wind of the Spirit, and launch us into a life where God is allowed to be all for all. Truly no law can adequately express the life of the Spirit. Paul knew that only too well (Rom 7,6). We must accomplish the law, but go beyond it. External determination must become the source of internal growth if it is to be of any value. So we can take heart from the few directives that allow

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for change and adaptation, although a strong sense of protective fear, which tries to eliminate chaos and darkness, predominates. In come the regulations that are meant to produce order and discipline, although inner order and outer confusion are not incompatible. It is in darkness, desolation and chaos that potential for creativity will be discovered (cf Gen 1,2). If, individually and collectively, the Church and religious can accept this and work within it, hidden strengths will be discovered and made available, and disintegration, alienation and destruction avoided. We are all caught up into the projection of 'badness' outside ourselves, followed by protective reaction from its insidious corruption. Consequently, institutions are used by their members to reinforce mechanisms of defence against anxiety and the recurrence of early paranoid and depressive fears first described by Melanie Klein.<sup>1</sup> It is as though members of congregations and church authorities place part of the content of their deep inner lives outside of themselves and pool them all in the emotional life of the group. Canon law can then easily be grasped as a social defence. This does not deny the true purpose and place of law as it finds an echo in the unconscious defence against anxiety. The collusion, individually and intrapersonally, is so great that reformulation of law to give greater freedom and responsibility to the congregations where it belongs becomes fraught with difficulty. It is as though at this moment we are struggling towards new insights, but, without a language or commonly perceived symbols, we create a fear of being deviant, out of the ordinary. Those working in this area run the risk of being treated as scapegoats, pushed into the desert, as has been the constant experience within the Church: John of the Cross, Ignatius of Loyola, Teilhard de Chardin and Yves Congar bear witness to this. It is against this backcloth that we need to look at the formation of today's religious, who will be unafraid of being true to their calling, which is so prophetic and challenging. Sadly, survival and security have become confused. There is no assurance of survival in safe conditions: 'He who would save his life, must lose it' (Mt 16,25). Let us not fear change as much as a decaying aristocracy fears revolution. The Church has not been given a spirit of timidity but of power and of love (2 Tim 1,7), and so does not need to be encased in an insulting protective custody. An old risk does have a comforting familiarity about it, while a new one inevitably arouses greater apprehension. The uniform and institutionalized apostolate for which previous formation was orientated felt safe, right and good; but if today this would deny the possibility of increasing or changing apostolates to meet new needs, then a formation must be sought that takes account of change, mobility, insecurity, justice and fraternity.

There are basics which remain essential, but within the context of

each congregation's spirit and calling, new approaches have to be tried out, and old values reformulated in ways perceived to be appropriate today. The Code mentions a formation that is spiritual, doctrinal, apostolic, practical, intellectual and adapted (cc. 659, 660). It is presumed that only those who have suitable maturity and stability, and whose vocation has been truly discerned, have been accepted to the novitiate and admitted to temporary profession. It hardly needs stating that those who are to be for the service of others in the Lord's name must be capable of altruistic service, not constantly demanding attention for themselves. If someone is continually sensing rejection, he or she will be unable to go out and serve rejected or rejecting people. During the noviceship there must have been proof of their ability to be for God and others, not deflecting others to be for them; community is the place where this formation and growth will take place. There is, sadly, little recognition in the Code of the role and significance of community in religious life, yet it is through and with community that formation must take place. If this were more emphasized the strong stress on one-person-directed formation would be better balanced. Religious orders today have a role in developing the idea of the kingdom of God as a kingdom in which the members interact with each other, and not just with the father-figure in a subordinate and highly organized manner. This latter concept inflates too much the idea of fullness of power residing in one person. There is only one image of God the Father, that is his Son. We are all his brothers and sisters, and we represent the Father to the degree in which we live truly as brothers and sisters of the Son, the suffering servant. No monopoly. The call is to mutual charity, sensitivity and service.

Formation is mutual, individual and collective. All are engaged in the formation of genuine, apostolic communities and individuals. The obedient community involved in a corporate search and response to the Spirit can give hope to all, and strength to the individual member. Against an atmospheric and factual background of a faith-life, the community should allow young religious to explore their own faithfulness, develop personal accountability towards themselves, the community and superiors. They must constantly be made aware of the call to live in truth, justice and renunciation of power for love. Vatican II has highlighted the fact that the sanctification of the world is a collective duty. This is what underlies in part the importance of community, and at the same time leads to a diminishment of a rigid centralism with distinct channels of imposed authority. It is now a 'we' involvement. A significant aspect of formation must be the testing out and the growing ability to assume a 'we' identity without the annihilation of the 'I'. Those who have a poor self-image, no sense of their

personhood, will be too threatened to assume the 'we'. They will be fearful of change and will appear to be model religious because they apparently adapt and conform, but their personal integration in community is lacking. These people could well be casualties in the future.

This whole process of discovering and then risking self will take time, and, if the canon about adaptation to the individual is taken seriously, then there must be a real sense of freedom about the time between the first and final profession. There is a feeling of rigidity about the Code's statement concerning time, while experience indicates that for many people a long time is necessary. Especially is this so if there has been a protracted period of professional study apart from the apostolic way of life. The anxiety behind the spelling out of strict time limits is that people will be allowed to stay on in religious life when this is not the right choice of christian commitment for them, with damaging consequences for them here and now as well as in the future. It is hard to know whether, given time, individuals will reach the decision for themselves or not. But if there is a chance of this being achieved, time should be allowed. An inner conviction that, in spite of a desire, the Lord is directing them elsewhere is far better than a quicker but imposed decision which can create bitterness, a sense of rejection and injustice. What is needed is growth in discernment as a constant way of life within communities, and in those more directly responsible for formation. Also, the responsible authorities need to be able to discuss their own anxieties and disquiet whilst they bear with the confusion, or alternatively, they need support in communicating a decision which the individual is not clear about, or is unwilling to accept. There are pressures in these situations, but the imposition of a time-limit may not be the best way of handling them. We do, however, need to take seriously the importance of vocational discernment as part of the ongoing process. Canon 655 is not out of place so long as it is seen alongside canon 657 n 2, and expansion of time is not regarded as abnormal when it is considered necessary.

Given the complexity and diversity of the world in which religious are working, and the multiplicity of demands, there is a greater need than ever to form religious individually and collectively with an inner discipline which will be appropriate to the time and place and to the commitment to live an authentic gospel life. This, by reason of its very authenticity, will ensure continuity. It is not efficiency, competence and order which will necessarily be the sign of the true apostle and disciple. Young people who come to religious life will — as we do — experience the drive for instant, efficient and tangible achievements. The possibility of periods of withdrawal for prayer, solitude, study and reflection, interspersed by the experience of the active apostolate, is therefore very important. There is an ongoing

process in which all these elements are essential, as each person comes to terms with 'who I am' and 'who I wish to be', both personally and as a member of a particular congregation. By living in community the individual develops and exercises personal capacities. However, the recognition of shared needs, common goals and values will inevitably lead to questioning what limits should be placed and accepted by a group when individuals freely surrender part of their personal freedom to increase the general good, while they are aware that collective action in a fragmented world is better than acting alone. Personal freedom is indispensable for the complete person, and formation must take cognizance of this. But those who choose to live and work together in order to achieve a more effective evangelical witness have to face the restriction that this imposes on personal freedom. The time of temporary profession should certainly raise these questions more acutely than during the noviceship. Then a certain newness, or *élan*, helps the novice to live with the situation without always coming to terms with its implications. Still more will this be a grave issue if the ability to move from 'I' to 'we' has not been accomplished. The young are traditionally seen as disestablished, rocking the boat, as they look for a brighter and better future in a manner often feared by the community as irresponsible. On the other hand the community can be felt to be restrictive, holding to past experiences rather than adapting to a changed and changing world, where ultimate questions of existence can no longer be avoided. Both sides, reacting with fear, should face tensions together, work out boundaries, think hard, share risks and questions. That is formative for everyone. Whether it leads to breaking new ground, or the reformulation of old truths and values is not known in advance.

In practice this means coming to a deep understanding of obedience and its significance in the life of the community and individual. There is no question of either giving up personal autonomy or falling into a self-indulgent infantile dependence. Formation is for adults, living in a mature manner their christian commitment and faith, as they search the meaning of living mystery. Again we return to the need for withdrawal periods, where the God within is genuinely and personally experienced. Many questions we and the young are asking have no easy or obvious answer, so the meaning of our lives must be constantly sharpened and re-assessed. So, spiritual direction and accompaniment are a prerequisite at this time of formation, and remain so, in some form or other, all through life. Little mention is made of the place of direction and accompaniment in the Code. A novice is 'actively to co-operate with the director of novices' but that is all. As the young professed become more aware of the problems of integration and of the tensions involved in living

under the disturbing impulse of the Spirit, they need help in discernment, in coming to terms with the unchristed areas of life. Living from day to day, simply reacting to all that comes, could lead to a failure to heed an invitation from Christ. The recognition of two spontaneities at work within is necessary, and calls for an ability to reflect and discern, with enlightenment and, if need be, authentication coming from fellow-pilgrims in the faith. Help too is needed in reflecting on decisions, whether they be just personal decisions or community ones, highlighting as these do personal choices and values. Learning is through experience, but experience reflected upon. For individuals to discover gospel values, and make them their own takes time, and should preclude over-activism, for if this is allowed to take over no deep interior life can develop. The manner of personal response to situations, demands, disappointments and inner and outer calls, and the interpretation given to signs and reality all need the mirroring of a guide. The collective attentiveness and search of the community is also needed as effort is made to clarify, objectify and discern. Emotional reaction, as against genuine response, has to be tested. Questions must be allowed to surface from life itself, from the media, apostolic commitments, leisure, social conditions, prayer, scripture, study and community life and service. Structures need to be such that there is a large area for choice, experimentation, failure and success. The community and formation personnel need to communicate a lack of fear and prejudice as these new members search their way, and with them sustain the tension that comes from exploring and living a new inner movement, aware that all movement creates counter-movement. Those in formation — as well as all of us — have to face, deep within the heart, questions which touch on ultimate detachment and ultimate involvement.

Our purpose is to form responsive people. If we succeed, they will certainly challenge us, our congregations and perhaps they will rightly be seen to be fulfilling the prophetic role of religious in the Church. The reflection on experience is always made under the Word. It is this that is conscience-forming. This is why the continuation of scripture study is so necessary, linked always to integration with the world around, so that response and action can be truly evaluated. This integration calls for knowledge of national and world situations, the socio-economic, cultural, political and religious aspects that modify a first impression, or call for serious rethinking. We too often unthinkingly collude with social structures which render people voiceless or oppressed. What happens if we start reading papers and books, or listen to those who represent the 'other side' from the one in which we feel we can comfortably survive? This, together with the holding of life under the scrutiny of the

Word, is the basis of formation, and the development of a contemplative outlook which should be the very heart of our life.

Apostolic commitments which mean contact with certain aspects of poverty, labour and awareness of exploitation will be, as it were, a litmus paper exposing prejudices. They also increase knowledge and understanding of others and allow for an awareness of emotional attitudes. These should be followed through so that their source can be discovered and new patterns seen to be possible, whilst all the time a faith-response is nurtured. It is important to discover the inner world and its mechanisms for coping with anxiety; important too to open up psychic pain constructed in childhood which, if not seen for what it is, can sooner or later become a very real barrier, maybe a totally crippling one. Counselling is not only for those who are neurotic. It can be a realistic way of leading an individual into greater freedom, release from residual guilt or from depression and towards a truer integration of sexuality, love, power and even aggression. These components then become no longer dreaded skeletons in a cupboard which has to be kept locked with the key thrown away. To incorporate this inner change there has to be inner space and time — which of course does not mean opting out of other realistic commitments. Celibacy can lead to segregation, a sterile isolation, unless this whole area of life is understood. Sex is forgone, but sexuality is an ever present reality, which has its rightful place in our human and spiritual lives. Limits of behaviour for all religious are to be dictated by the extent of our love and our degree of service. In a culture seeking self-fulfilment there is in this whole area a letting go to be achieved, rather than a tightfisted holding on. This can be hard, but it must not be side-tracked. It will involve a recognition of limits, as well as the development of potential, both personally and in every relationship. Discipline is there in order to expand in a freeing, warm, sensitive, gentle and human manner. There is pressure in all of this, a difficult balance to be maintained as the need to find God in all things, to be a contemplative in action, confronts the sacrifice involved in struggling to resist consumerism, superficial relationships, instant success and popular appeal. The time of temporary profession is a period when the call to a life of union with the one who continues to call is not lost sight of. The initial desire and will are tested and supported by a faith-sharing community, in spite of a strong and powerful pull away from God as centre. There is need for much openness and honesty at this stage of religious life; there are many fears connected with sexuality, masturbation and relationships. Opportunity for this area to be talked through, as well as lived and grown through, allows for the underneath meaning of what is being experienced to be brought into the open. When explored it is so

often so much less sexual than feared or believed, belonging much more to conscious or unconscious experiences of deprivation. This in itself can help to change the inner attitude and experience, release potential and remove crippling fear and guilt. Encouragement of emotional sincerity is as important as intellectual honesty. Many will often go out of their way to promote the latter, whilst neglecting the former to everyone's detriment. Ability to form relationships at work, with one's peers, with the community and with authority as adult to adult is an area in which growth should be expected. There will be an increasingly strong awareness of human limitations, both their own and other people's, borne in on these religious. A capacity to bear with the necessary frustration of limits, inadequacies, and differences of personality will be an indication of realism. This capacity indicates a willingness to rise above difficulties and to discover the wounded heart of Christ in the midst of people. It calls for an assessment of ideals, seeing that some perhaps are illusions and need to be sacrificed in order to live out commitment in a real incarnational world rather than a fantasy one. Matching inner vision with external reality is a constant testing of congruence. Accompaniment in all this is essential. There is much to be integrated, and alone it is well-nigh impossible. We do need each other. Accompaniment should also test out and foster trust. This is another basic quality which is often lacking. We are so afraid of exposing ourselves to each other, and yet this is a key factor in formation. All too often we fear this, trying to hold on to some security which, in the end, is the most harmful obstacle to real communion and fraternity.

It is difficult to write about formation because basically it is a relational process. Consequently a good blueprint may or may not be effective. Everything will depend on the relationships of all concerned. The process calls for openness, communication and sincerity, and this with God, others and self. This is surely an inescapable fact of growth into being truly human, and then fully christian. Religious formation after all is concerned with just that: human and christian development. Religious formation should not allow for any one of the triad — God, others and self — to be eliminated or inappropriately highlighted. Consequently it seems strange that one of the essentials has been so disregarded in the Code, namely community. The Church surely knows and believes that the action of God is within the whole community, yet the total absence of a theology and of a sense of community in the Code does pose many questions. How can there be a true authority present in a code for religious that has not recognized such an important aspect of religious life? The role and importance of the community in formation is not mentioned, and the need to try to live out Christ's command of unity is overlooked. The struggle to achieve unity



through community and diversity is an urgent witness for a world which is fragmented and divided as never before. Community today is important because, only if others can see that it is possible for peoples very different from each other to come together and work together, is there the smallest hope of changing from a self-centred, competitive and possessive stance to one which will strive to remedy sinful injuries. Community is where peace-making, resolution of conflict, reconciliation and creativity can be lived and offered as an option to others.

The double aspect of individual and community prayer and faith experience in the Code is clothed in a language that makes it seem either not present or incomprehensible to lived experience. There is no mention of the ups and downs, the light and darkness of this relationship; so the strength to be gained for everyone from faith sharing and accompaniment is overlooked. However, if we are looking for this in a code of law perhaps we are working with false expectations. The continual directing of life so that it is constantly God-ward, and the result of a true, free and internal response, is a lifetime's work. God, community and the individual interact, and the sincere, open communication that integrates all these relationships is finally what is formative. To provide the directives and norms as well as the spirit which would en flesh this is the part of the constitutions.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Klein, Melanie: *Envy and gratitude* (Hogarth, 1975).