

WHEN LIFE AND MINISTRY ARE ONE
"The crisis of adulthood"
A psychological problem

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"Make no distinction between the duties of your state and those of your salvation and perfection" (R 16,4).

For an in-depth reflection on the sanctity of the disciples of Jesus, an essential element can be found in the conciliar decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (PO 14): "the unity of life and ministry". We read in this document: "Unity of life can be achieved by ministers in the exercise of their ministry, by following the example of the Lord whose food was to do the will of the one who had sent him to accomplish his work".

These few words give us the essence of sanctity through the "sequela", with its decisive expression of the will of God, its total and perfect response to this will of God through the act of divine consecration.

When we study a divine act, we become aware of a variety of elements, some of which are of the natural order, while others are of the supernatural order. These elements interact and merge together in a well-defined unity in which it is difficult to distinguish what comes from nature and what comes from grace.

The following theological principle is well known: "Grace does not destroy nature". By subsuming nature, grace raises onto another plane all that is good in it: character, needs, inclinations, dispositions, etc. And so nature is not only elevated, but it is also necessary, indispensable, required by grace as a condition, as a presupposition, since the life of grace is present in the psycho-biological activity of a person and consequently depends on past and present data.

One of the more interesting aspects of psychology and of the contribution it can make to the consecrated life, is the correspondence between the requirements of the spiritual life and the requirements brought to light by psychological research, which have to do with the full development of the personality. In fact, if the latter is to achieve its unity, self-control calls for a kind of asceticism, that is, commitment, the evangelical practice of renunciation. Of course, this is not a negative renunciation and like the refusal of something, but is a capacity to love and give oneself, which is presupposed by a correctly understood educational process.

In this process of personal unification, what is particularly decisive for us is the extent and type of integration that a person is able to establish between **faith and life**; integration which, in its turn, is measured in terms of the capacity to give oneself to God.

As we can see, we are speaking here of an ideal: the goal of our personal life. Daily experience brings us face to face with difficulties and obstacles which are intrinsic to spiritual growth.

1. Intrinsic obstacles

In-depth psychology has shown the existence and influence of subconscious and unconscious difficulties. The unification of our being does not follow a straight line. It is a slow process and a struggle. As Pascal said, a human being is "a tangle of contradictions".

St Paul described this human struggle in strikingly powerful terms: he had first hand experience of the "human condition": "I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate" (Rm 7,16).

There is one clear psychological conclusion that can be drawn from these considerations: if we treat man solely as a "loving being" without taking into account his resistance, we subject him to a form of tyranny and we do violence to his nature. Human relations would be those of perfect charity if people were pure spirits, that is, perfectly transparent to themselves and to others. But there is in each one of us an opaque and silent area: we do not know ourselves entirely any more than we know others entirely.

The three most common "cases" in our communities

Observation and case studies by experts have brought to light a great variety of **cases** linked to the psycho-affective and characterological structures of a person. Members of communities affected in this way are said to be experiencing "difficulties": they have affective and behavioural problems. While they may be as intelligent as anybody else and gifted from a professional point of view, characterological difficulties cause disturbances in their behaviour and in their relations with others: they seem incapable of becoming part of the group, or adapting to community discipline.

There are other cases, affected by subconscious factors. These include persons with "complexes". A complex is defined as reactive automatism accompanied by an intense affective and emotional element. Reaction is not entirely automatic, it is "an emotional state" (eg. inferiority complex, persecution complex, the complex of feeling abandoned, etc).

Such a complex functions as a "system" always ready to be triggered off in the company of others. It is obvious that such a complex isolates individuals in a community. It constitutes "an abnormal behavioural system", always there to influence a person's conduct "despite himself". The negative reaction always takes the same unchanging form and never varies.

A third group of cases includes religious affected by depression or **stress**. These cases are quite common nowadays in industrialised countries. Frequently cases of discouragement and defection take the form of "moral" depression.

Apart from the damage caused by depressing emotions (intellectual fatigue, hypertension, digestive and circulatory problems), sadness causes two kinds of damage in particular, which can be summarised by the two verbs "to slow down" and "to paralyse".

2. The "Crisis of adulthood": a moral crisis

A recent work *"The crisis of religious in their 40's"* (A. Grün, de Müstterschwarzach) gives a practical analysis of the problems of adult religious "in difficulty"...and of the defections of some of them.

In most cases, the first part of their lives is intense, professionally committed, but not always motivated sufficiently spiritually. The second part can be seriously disturbed by a crisis of identity or religion, which often involves their vocation. There is a general dissatisfaction with oneself, an unconscious search for "something else", discouragement, the

temptation to leave.

The most complex element of their crisis would seem to be **religious doubt**. We are told that this doubt has three main sources: a crisis of identity, pressures of sexuality, a crisis of confidence.

1° Crisis of identity

Taking the risk to be oneself is doubtlessly one of the profound causes of the difficulties experienced in this period of religious life. The apostle, enthusiastic in the past, but perhaps also sentimental and idealistic, now has to admit before all "what he is": he must recognise that Christ alone has meaning in his entire consecrated life.

Psychologically speaking, this whole process cannot be successful unless the religious succeeds in "being himself" in relation to others. Only then will he be able to find his true role, establish brotherly contact and recover his "equilibrium".

2° Pressures of sexuality

Another factor encouraging doubt is the intensity of erotic disturbances. It can happen that the desire for sexual pleasure, its total possession of the religious and his affective union with someone, can destroy completely all views based on faith. Simone de Beauvoir describes this very openly in her autobiography. Unsatisfied desire (frustration) produces a state of tension and suffering; the person is tempted to reject moral and religious law for the simple reason he thinks it inhibits the normal development of his affective desires.

In this way, the unconscious becomes a source of **impulses** trying constantly to find release. Their effect is to create a permanent repressive force which diminishes the Ego and which explains the occurrence at certain moments of uncontrolled reactions (impulsive actions, neurosis, defection)

3° Crisis of confidence

His peace of mind destroyed, not believing the reality of the love shown him by fellow Brothers, parents and friends, the religious "in crisis" sometimes experiences a very intense feeling that life is absurd. Experience shows that the sick person, who is agitated and highly emotional, can become a danger to himself, and in his depressive state commit suicide (*raptus melancholicus*).

C. G. Jung, a psychologist who studied the second half of life, tells us that the problem experienced by the adult is qualitatively distinct from that of adolescence or childhood. His conclusion is that one must find for him a **different road** to recovery and "self-liberation".

3. Overcoming the crisis: part played by help

In what does healing consist? According to C. Rogers, the condition which makes possible the personal change through which the healing process will come about, is the possibility that the patient realises or rediscovers what is happening inside himself and accepts to be what he is. The cause of the illness, complex or neurosis, is the fact that genuinely experienced feelings are blocked and denied by the Ego.

As he learns to listen to himself, so he comes to accept himself more, to accept himself as he is, and in this way he becomes ready to go forward in the process of becoming. Finally, by listening more carefully to his interior feelings with less evaluation and more self-acceptance, he achieves greater congruence. He finds himself in a position to abandon the facade behind which he sheltered, to give up his defensive behaviour, and to be more openly what he is.

These basic conditions (receiving the communications of the Ego, the lowering of defences, increasing self-confidence and being what he is), open the door to another process, natural this time, which is a dynamic source of strength, a vital force, in other words, the process by which the Ego grows and develops.

The place of the Ego with its complexes, its divisions, its hardness, its self-negating or negative attitude towards itself, its defensive and automated responses, is now taken by an Ego which is evolving, integrated and dynamic, having rediscovered the flexibility to adapt to changing and creative reality.

1° Process of healing

In the first place, Jung speaks of spiritual conversion, of a "return to spirituality".

For a religious, "to become converted" means accepting and committing oneself totally to the world of values of Jesus Christ; seeing happiness and the demands of life in terms of the Gospel; accepting into oneself, into one's heart, a new mentality, which is that of the Spirit.

"Returning to the Spirit", this is where the problem lies. Believing means converting one's heart, it means changing the direction of one's life, no longer within oneself according to the selfish rules of self-love, but according to the law of charity of the love of God. As Paul Claudel said, "*To be ad Deum*, means to change one's skin"; it means leaving the world of the immediate for the world beyond.

It is obvious that this complete change of being will not take place without resistance. The results of enquiries and numerous interviews show clearly that interior conversion comes about only at the price of a serious struggle.

2° The need for religious integration

As we have just seen, conversion is always a religious re-interpretation of the past. The religious person is able to discern in the past, understood in the light of faith, signs of a positive future. St Augustine gives us a admirable example of this in his "Confessions", where he recognises retrospectively his previous life in the light of faith.

"Religion correctly understood is the sole psychological factor capable of integrating all the components of the personality" (W. Allport, *Psychology of the personality*, p. 26). This is so because it is totally in keeping with St Paul's "how much more" in Rm 5,9. In the eyes of faith, nothing is lost, no suffering is in vain. From this point of view, the integration of the past is a necessary condition for the religious orientation of the person. On the other hand, this integration is encouraged by religion by reason of the principles of truth and trust with which religion provides persons.

Recent experience and the results of research into converts of days gone by, seem to confirm this point of view. Whether it was a rapid or a slow journey that God found suitable when he accompanied them on the road to conversion, all recognise that from the moment they started to listen to the divine voice they were shown what they were, what they ought to have been, and what they could become. They were no longer able to bear the accusing voice of their own heart: they judged themselves so that they would not be judged.

As the converted person advances in grace, his being becomes formed and organised: his religious integration takes place through identification with models. In this way, his entire personal life is profoundly affected by this **search for unity** - this willing effort to marry nature and grace, the world of flesh and the world of the spirit. •

Basic reading list

Adultes dans le Christ, A. Liégé, O. G. du Livre, Paris.
Unité de vie et de ministère, P. Griéger, "RM", Rome.
La crisis de los 40-50 años, A. Grün, Narcea
La psicoterapia de Jung, C.G.Jung, Ed. du Mont Blanc.