

AFFECTIVE MATURITY AND CONSECRATED LIFE

Br Paul Griéger

What we said in a previous article regarding problems of affectivity leads us now to consider crises associated with growth in the religious life. We note that there are religious at the present time who leave unexpectedly, and that there is a decrease in the number of new vocations (See *Lasalliana* 30-1-O-56).

Jack Dominian writes as follows: "As far as I am concerned, there is no doubt that, whatever the reasons given, there is in the heart of these persons in difficulty the feeling that their integrity, in terms of growth and the fulfilment of their potential, is threatened at a very profound level. Sometimes this can be expressed verbally; but sometimes it leads to tension or an inexplicable frustration, which finds its expression in symptoms of depression, anguish, agitation and in a feeling of profound unhappiness".

This distress can be complicated by other factors. For example, the community does not understand the dilemma of the person in question and accuses him of a lack of generosity, of love of Christ and self-sacrifice for his sake. Even more negatively, it can accuse the person of being too selfish, too independent, too attached to material goods, etc. (Dr. J. Dominian, *Affective Maturity and Christian Life*).

In these situations, the concepts of growth, self-fulfilment and integrity can provide us with valuable means of interpretation. There are certain questions that we can ask even if the answers are not easy. For example: Was the person in difficulty properly trained? Was the formation he received in the past suitable for the present day? Is the work he is doing in harmony with his vows? Is he given active encouragement and sufficient support so that he can accomplish the mission for which he is consecrated? Is enough attention given to the changes that take place over the years in each one of us and in communities? Above all, if there is a conflict between the needs of the community and those of the individual, does everybody understand it sufficiently to recognise the sacrifice being made by the individual and to end it as soon as possible?

All these questions lead us to reflect upon the crises associated with growth in the religious life. Recent research by psychoanalysts, who have now gone far beyond the classic psychoanalysis of Freud, can help us to examine some important elements of this complex picture. In particular, they can help us to reflect on the crisis of actively engaged religious between the ages of 40 and 50. Today, almost three-quarters of a century after the first writings of Freud,

we can examine his theories with a certain detachment, and go beyond the fears they inspired in the past.

1. Crises associated with growth in the consecrated life

In men and women religious involved in an active apostolate, one can observe, at certain points in their life, profound changes and crises properly so-called. The first part of their apostolic life was generally intense, professionally committed, though not always sufficiently motivated or "integrally" assumed. The second part can be profoundly disturbed by a moral or religious crisis which often has an effect on the vocation itself, and is characterised by general personal dissatisfaction, the unconscious search for "something else", discouragement, abandonment...

Disciples, who wish to follow Christ and be faithful to him, need "integrity", that is, need to have an awareness of themselves, which includes necessarily an awareness of their body. They may be prone to tiredness, irritation, tension or simply to moodiness. These are universal characteristics. It is all a question of degree.

By affective maturity, psychoanalysts understand essentially the ability to cope with affectivity and sexuality, and to express them in an appropriate manner. Clearly this appropriate manner excludes all one-to-one relations (in the case of consecrated persons), which is precisely the nature of marriage. But genuine bilateral relations are not forbidden. The ability to form such bonds is the result of a previous relationship with our parents, and is a sign of human integrity.

In the past, communities were forever worried about "particular" friendships, as they were generally called, which would fragment the life of a community. There exists a vast amount of evidence, however, which shows that community life can be an illusion, when persons live side-by-side, and none of them is capable of actually making contact with the others because no personal and reciprocal bonds exist.

The "communion" community, on the other hand, considers such bonds as essential. They develop and constitute the rock on which each member bases his personal growth, his renewal and his basic inspiration. If these feelings are solid, they will provide in addition the necessary impetus to reach out to those with whom there is less reciprocal attraction.

The absence of these personal bonds and the lack of the resulting integrity produce what are known as "negative cases", characterised most frequently by frustration, aggressivity and especially moral solitude.

The new type of community life, which religious congregations try to build up nowadays, takes into account the following principle: the "disciple" called to live and to fulfil himself in community and in personal communion with others, finds his fulfilment precisely in his personal relations. This is an existential ideal based on reciprocity. The development of the individual and that of the community are interactive: "giving of oneself and receiving" integrate a person into the community.

The primary reason for existence of our communities is this profound union among its members, a fundamental condition of our communion with Christ, which leads to true friendship, which presupposes always a spirit of sacrifice and abnegation, the redeeming factor of all human love.

Gradual progress along these lines implies a certain degree of personal human affective and spiritual maturity. This, I think, is a most important observation which will prevent us from being fooled by a very damaging sentimental idealism. Many difficulties and crises, which affect commitments both in community and apostolic life in the future, can probably be explained by an inadequacy of faith, which has remained infantile or adolescent, and incapable consequently of giving solid motives for decisions and commitments, which have no meaning apart from this faith.

And so we are back to the question of personal maturity. Everything seems to point to the need for a certain degree of maturity in order to express clearly the meaning of life in the Church of Jesus Christ. St Paul says this, echoing the words of Our Lord: "Then we shall not be children any longer...we shall grow in all ways into Christ". "In this way we are all to come to unity in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God until we become the perfect Man, fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself" (Ep. 4,13-14).

2. Gradual personal human and spiritual maturation. A pre-condition: "a return to the spiritual".

The first and doubtlessly the most important observation we can make is that all personal human and spiritual maturation can take place only gradually. Psychological research and its results help us to indicate the various stages of this personal growth.

We have to point out a pre-condition for this: the need for a "conversion", that is, the need for a "return to the spiritual". This involves responding to the continuing call of God no longer with only the riches of subjectivity, but with renewed evangelical motivations: the spiritual values of the world, of love, of justice, of a creative presence in the world in the process of becoming, etc. The enthusiastic apostle of the past, who is now perhaps sentimental and idealistic, must attribute to Christ absolute significance in all aspects of his religious life. When this is so, Christ appeals clearly to his liberty, to his whole personality; his heart is called upon to declare itself and to be converted.

Such a return, psychologically speaking, cannot be efficacious unless the person in question takes the risk of being himself vis-a-vis other people. It is only then that he will know that he is capable of being a new person, of establishing a fraternal contact with others and re-establishing his affective equilibrium.

As C. Rogers wrote: "Accepting to be oneself, is without doubt one of the stages which leads to the destruction of the crisis and to genuine relations with others" (Psychotherapy of human relations, Turin).

We have to add that the crisis of integrity, as all other major crises in personal development, cannot be overcome by the individual by himself. This is an adult crisis which can be overcome by the concerted effort of colleagues and by the fraternal help of the community.

The Epistles of St Paul can help our thinking about this matter on a spiritual level. For the Apostle, spiritual maturation means becoming christocentric, achieving together unity in faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, a unity which must lead us gradually to "become the perfect man, fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself" (Ep. 4,13-14).

In this way, there takes place in the believer not only natural growth, but also a second kind of growth beginning with spiritual infancy and leading to the full maturity of the Christian.

We can say in conclusion that, for this to happen, what we need is not education based on preservation or personal or community influence, but one which consists in making religious translate their faith constantly into action, into activity, by a lively attachment to a teaching which is constantly brought to their attention, to induce them to convert their hearts and commit their lives.

In this way, faith will vitalise the everyday life of the religious. "The just man lives by faith", in a secularised world, in which he must live so that the Kingdom of God may come through him. This is a concrete expression of faith, based on militant witness.

All this is surely the aim of all formation to the religious life. Why do we choose to transmit the living Word of God if not to form true disciples of the Lord who, having answered his call by the conversion of their lives, return to the world to be witnesses in it? This is the horizontal dimension of faith.

The expression adopted by Vatican II, "accommodata renovatio", describes well this dynamic process of renewal. It calls upon us to adapt our internal renewal to the rapidly changing world of today. This is for us the real meaning of continuing formation.

Reference works

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