

Under the guidance of the Spirit (3/3)

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The personal programme

This section is based on the work of S.M. Alonso, *Proyecto personal de Vida espiritual*; M. Martinez, *Los proyectos personales y comunitarios*; and on Circular 429.

Spiritual discernment is important in helping the individual establish his relationship with God, others and the world around him. In fact, man is defined as a being-in-the-world. This goes beyond the simple cosmic plane and gives him a place in the universe, the work of God's wisdom, power and providence. Man is not a being intended ad unum. Rather, he is created in the image of God and, consequently, endowed with intelligence and free will. This original relationship makes him part of a context which includes vocation, mission and programme. He is capable of analysing his past, present and future. He is not given everything at the point of departure. He must decide for himself the direction he wants his future to take. To be able to do this he must know himself well, be aware of his capabilities and his limitations. It is up to him to decide what he wishes to do with his life and his freedom.

God's plan is not something determined by the sovereignly free will of God, but a plan of salvation which expresses his very being, his Agape, lived in the communion of the Trinity and made accessible to man by Jesus Christ. Each person is confronted by Jesus Christ, the Word incarnate, who offers him his Word. This unique word awaits a unique answer. By creating each person in his own image, God calls him to give this image a special resemblance, which constitutes its originality and uniqueness (cf. Is 43,1,4; 49,16). «It is this aspect of God that we must learn to accept if we wish to come to terms with the will of God. When we do so, we will see that it is not a diktat, fate, but rather an appeal to a common creation» (M. Rondet, *Does God wish something special from each one of us?* in *Christus* 1944-1989).

As a Christian, man enjoys a special relationship of dialogue, call and response, responsibility for his own life and for all that surrounds him, accompanied by a capacity for growth and creativity. He has to seek a way of becoming a part of the loving plan that originates in God and has God as its object. As the Founder says: «You must strive to enter into these dispositions from today, wanting only God, and wishing to belong to him alone, for our heart, as St Augustine says [Confessions 1,1], will never rest but in him» (MF 125,3). That is the basis of the Christian programme. It is the soul of all human life, which gives shape and direction to existence, which puts tendencies and energy to work, concentrates all efforts towards its centre, and provides criteria of discernment for its implementation.

For the Brother, the personal programme plays a more decisive role in the dynamic tension of vocation and response. Vocation and the response to this call of Christ must not be thought of as a process completed once and for all: they must be seen as elements in a dialectic which is constantly renewed. The will of God has often been thought of as something fixed for all eternity which has to be accomplished as faithfully as possible. Nowadays, we understand better

that it is not a question of discovering and fulfilling a pre-established programme, «but to give birth to fidelity» (M. Rondet, *op.cit.*). This calls for discernment «in order to distinguish among our desires and wishes those which can be seen as coming from the Spirit of God» (*id.*).

The context of the personal programme is this dynamic tension of love and dialogue: a dialogue between two freedoms. The Agape of the Father was revealed when he sent his Son to take on our nature and to show us how far he could go, becoming a man just like ourselves (Ph 2,7-8). «As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love» (Jn 15,9-10). And now the risen Christ calls everyone to follow him: «You did not choose me, no, I chose you; and I commissioned you to go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last» (Jn 15,16). As love attracts love, so freedom awakens freedom. It is up to each individual to respond to this personal invitation by means of a completely original response which he has to re-invent each day: «God never ceases to create us by his Word: we exist only by means of this Word which calls us today into being. It is up to us to recognise the multitude of words which translate this creative word, just as a child becomes attentive to words which invite him to go out of himself» (M. Rondet, *op.cit.*).

Article 58b of the 1987 Rule of the Brothers reads as follows:

«In order to respond in faith to the successive calls from God, an invitation is offered to each Brother to develop a personal programme of his own. Such a programme engages the Brother in a process of ongoing conversion that will give unity and direction to his life.

«In the development and evaluation of this programme, the Brother takes into consideration his own spiritual growth, as well as the needs of the community and the programmes of the District.

«If he so desires, a Brother may share his personal programme with the rest of the community».

Apart from the fact that the use of the personal programme is becoming increasingly common in religious life, it is also something which the Founder drew up for himself in the Rules that I have imposed upon myself (EP 3). In the past, we would speak rather of a plan of life, which we drew up at the end of the novitiate and, in more realistic terms, at the end of the Great Exercises which preceded perpetual profession. This new approach, introduced in the 1987 Rule, does not seem to have become yet an integral part of the Brother's life, perhaps, because it has not been properly understood. It is not an imposition, but something vitally necessary for us.

In the personal programme, what is required is to express in a simple and coherent manner the personal response we wish to give to the call of Christ, by drawing all aspects of our life together around a central point. We have the example of St Paul, whose life was completely changed as a result of his encounter with Jesus Christ. First of all, he discovered his own identity. His encounter with Jesus brought him face to face with himself in the depths of his being before God. «For him I have accepted the loss of everything, and I look on everything as so much rubbish if only I can have Christ and be given a place in him. I am no longer trying for perfection by my own efforts, the perfection that comes from the Law, but I want only the perfection that comes through faith in Christ, and is from God and based on faith». (Ph 3,8-10). He goes on to explain: «Not that I have become perfect yet: I have not yet won, but I am still running, trying to capture the prize for which Christ Jesus captured me» (Ph 3,12-13). After that, the only knowledge he wishes to have is «about Jesus, and only about him as the crucified Christ» (1 Co 2,2), and he can say: «I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ» (Ga 2,20), and «Life to me, of course, is Christ, but then death would bring me something more» (Ph 1,20).

A vocation is not something static: it is dynamic, and subject to growth, stagnation or regression. It is exposed to all kinds of dangers: dualism between contemplation and action, activism, false realism which ceases to believe in ideals and is easily satisfied with its anaemic state, various forms of disillusionment, etc. In the light of this, the personal programme represents a means of promoting overall growth, beginning with the state in which a person finds himself, pursuing clear aims by means of well-defined concrete means. It begins with a serious self-examination.

A serious self-examination

The starting point of this self-examination has to be an analysis of one's identity, origins and background, beginning with the question «Who am I?». It is useful to analyse one's situation as a human being, one's origins, family influence, physical state, the integration of one's sexual impulses, one's intellectual formation, its strong points and its weaknesses, one's psychological equilibrium, one's self-image, the extent of one's independence, willpower, the most and the least appreciated of one's human qualities, one's personal growth up to the present time...

Secondly, one needs to examine the level of one's spiritual life: the origin of one's vocation, the quality of one's faith, one's personal relations with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one's Institute spirit and the ways of maintaining and increasing it in oneself, the radicality of one's consecration, the vows, one's life of prayer, mental prayer, one's way of living out the paschal mystery...

Thirdly, one can consider the question of continuing formation: the extent to which the formation received has been integrated, the formation one has organised for oneself over the years, the conviction that continuing formation is necessary (what it consists in), the amount of biblical, theological, moral and pastoral formation received since the end of initial formation, professional formation and the upgrading of one's professional competence, more or less integrated Lasallian values...

In the fourth place, one can examine one's apostolic identity, the values on which it is based, the manner in which one unifies contemplation and action, the quality of one's professional work, the apostolate of being a sacrament of love for young people, the various components of one's ministry, the means used to be an «ambassador of Christ», the apostolic dimension of prayer, the integration of one's consecrated and one's apostolic life, one's accountability regarding this apostolate to God, the Church and society.

Finally, there is a form of identity which includes all the others: community identity. How does one see one's presence in the community: sociable, individualistic, timid, inhibited? How does one participate in community life: in community meetings, prayer, service? Is one available, open, welcoming, willing to share? How does one help to build community: dialogue, helping others, respect in one's words and actions, forgiveness? What is the quality of one's relations with other Brothers, the Brother Director, other communities, Superiors, young Brothers, old and infirm Brothers?

It is good to make a careful and detailed analysis of the various aspects of identity mentioned above, preferably in writing in order to bring out more clearly strong and weak points. The second stage could be to compare the results of this analysis with what is said in the Rule. Such a comparison will serve to indicate to what extent the image one has drawn of oneself corresponds with what is written in the Rule. It would be useful to note down in two columns the points of resemblance and difference.

The Rule leaves a certain number of specific duties to the personal responsibility of the Brother: the responsibility for his personal prayer life (art. 72; the 1996 Pastoral Letter of

the Brother J. Johnston on The Year of Prayer: A Postscript, in which he shows how personal prayer includes various different things: recalling the presence of God, recollection, purity of intention, mental prayer. It does not consist only of mental prayer), responsibility for his spiritual reading (art. 68a), «for the life of the community, the power of its witness, and for its pastoral commitment» (art. 49a), for his continuing formation for which he «is invited to develop a personal formation programme» (art. 101a), for the examination of conscience, spiritual guidance, the sacrament of reconciliation in order «to grow strong in charity and to persevere to the end in fidelity» (art. 75), for awakening and accompanying vocations (art. 85a), for the vitality of the Institute (art. 145).

On the basis of the analysis of the five aspects of identity mentioned above, each one should be able to identify which aspects leave most to be desired, and make a firm decision to remedy them. He can also identify strong points he may wish to develop. Next, on the basis of this same analysis, one can set oneself a number of specific, precise, concrete and verifiable aims. Then, on the basis of these first two points and as a means of making both the aims and the means chosen effective, one can determine the activities in which this effectiveness can find expression and be verified. It is useful to specify the time and the resources which will help these activities produce the desired effects. Finally, one should not forget to indicate when and how an assessment will be made. (M. Martinez, *op.cit.*, offers a number of outlines and even exercises as a help for drawing up a personal programme).

The discernment of the Founder

The Rules which I have imposed upon myself, in which the Founder set out twenty points to which he wished to pay special attention (cf. Blain 2, 318-319) are very instructive. He identifies the focal point of his life: «Every day I will take a quarter of an hour to renew my consecration to the Most Holy Trinity» (EP 3,0,2). Regarding the will of God, he gives himself a practical rule: «I should often consider myself as an instrument, which is of no value except in the hand of the Worker. For this reason, I should wait for indications of providence before acting; nevertheless, I must be careful to follow these signs once I perceive them» (EP 3,0,9). Seeing a point of weakness in himself, he chooses a precise means to remedy it.

«In whatever situation I find myself, I will always follow a daily programme, counting only on the grace of God because I have never been able to hold myself to a schedule. Should my situation change, the first thing I will do is to draw up a new programme. To accomplish this, I will always make a day of retreat» (EP 3,0,10).

He chooses the means to help him observe better a point of Rule he seems to neglect: «In the past I have often failed to say the rosary even though it is a prayer of rule in our community. In the future I must not go to bed without having said it» (EP 3,0,16). He does the same thing for another Rule he considers important: «It is the Rule of the community to pray to God and renew attention to him whenever we enter our bedroom or any other room in the house. I will see that I am faithful to this practice» (EP 3,0,19).

One could analyse the Founder's personal programme in greater detail in the light of what we have said, to show the importance of this means, its place at the very heart of Lasallian spirituality, and the fact that it is at the same time eminently practical, realistic and verifiable regarding its effects. An examination of the Founder's programme as we prepare our own could prove very useful in helping us to see things in their true perspective, and in stimulating our various faculties as we go about our work of self-assessment, as we compare ourselves with the ideal, and as we draw up our own programme. Also, it can help us to listen, to welcome the Spirit and be docile to his inspirations. •