

THE FIRST YEARS OF APOSTOLIC LIFE

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Speaking of ongoing formation, Vita Consecrata states: «In the consecrated life, the first years of full involvement in the apostolate are a critical stage, marked by a passage from a supervised life to a situation of full responsibility for one's work. It is important that young consecrated persons be supported and accompanied by a brother or a sister who helps them to live to the full the freshness of their love and enthusiasm for Christ» (Vita Consecrata, N° 70). In its turn, the Guide for Formation notes that «It is in the course of this stage, during which the young Brother enters fully into the life and mission of the apostolic community, that the young Brother will discover what it means to be called and sent» (N° 250).

This period is characterised by apostolic activity. After a period of supervised formation, this first direct contact with the demands of professional life calls for a special kind of follow up. How can it be provided? What follows is an attempt to offer an answer, by providing a number of questions intended to serve as a basis for an assessment of apostolic commitment.

Assessing one's life in the light of apostolic commitment

1. The experience of a life totally devoted to the apostolate

- How do you find your professional work as a teacher? What words would you use to describe it?
- In what ways does your experience as a teacher confirm or not confirm your expectations? What discrepancies do you see?
- What have you discovered about yourself on the basis of what is said above?
- To what extent does your consecration help you in your work? What difficulties do you note in this connection? What solutions would you recommend?
- To what extent does your work help you to live out your consecration? What difficulties do you note in this connection?
- What limitations do you feel you have in your professional work? To what do you attribute them? What do you intend to do to remedy them?
- What connection do you see in practice between the exercise of your profession and your commitment to work for the Kingdom in the footsteps of Christ?

2. Your experience of being totally involved as a religious in the concrete reality of the life and mission of the Institute:

- In what way does the exercise of your profession differ from your previous apostolic experiences (when you were in the novitiate or scholasticate)?
- How would you describe this change of situation? What are the main differences?
- On the basis of this new situation, what is your attitude towards:
 - the people you work with?
 - the young people entrusted to you?
 - the community in which you live?
 - the local Church to which you belong?
 - the District?
 - the Institute?
- Who are your collaborators in your teaching and pastoral work? What do you think of this collaboration? Who helps you to assess it?
- How do you see, in the present situation, the mission of the Institute today? How do you contribute to it in concrete terms? In what ways especially?
- What is there about your work that shows that you are sent?
- What shortcomings do you see in this connection? How can you remedy them?
- In the exercise of your profession, how do you make the «means of salvation» accessible to young people?
- How, in practice, do you share the mission with lay people? By what activities, experiences, achievements? What difficulties do you see in connection with this sharing?

3. In the light of this newly begun apostolic life, what are your views about:

1st - Yourself

- Give some reasons why you feel good (or bad) in the present situation.
- How does your profession enable you to fulfil yourself?
- What do you think others (colleagues, fellow Brothers, students, superiors) expect of you? How do you try to live up to their expectations?
- How do you organise your time? What time do you give to your personal formation? In what areas?
- What kind of balance do you maintain between the generous gift of yourself to the mission, and a certain control over your other activities and personal relationships?

2nd - Your community

- What are your overall expectations of your community at present?
- In practice, how are you involved in it? By means of what activities?
- How much time do you devote to it daily? Each week? In what ways?
- What do you find positive about it? Have you contributed to it?
- What limitations do you see? To whom (what) do you attribute them? To whom have you spoken about them? What can you do to reduce them?

- How has the community helped you to exercise your mission and live your consecrated life? What do you expect from it in this connection? In what form?

3rd - God

- How much time do you spend each day in prayer? What form does it take?
- What can you say about your prayer today? What part does prayer play in your life?
- In what way are the others (students, colleagues, fellow Brothers, etc) included in your prayer?
- What spiritual nourishment do you take? Reading? Word of God? Liturgy? How frequently?
- How often do you go to Mass and to confession?
- What are the usual ways you see God at present? How do they differ from the way you saw God in the novitiate and in the scholasticate?
- In what way is God present in your life? How do you practise the spirit of faith in your everyday activities?

Some criteria for discernment

At this stage in the formation process, the young Brother needs to be helped to live his religious life as part of a community in a new context, to do his work properly, and to pursue his mission in the Institute with joy, serenity and perseverance.

What is needed, therefore, is to provide spiritual and apostolic formation through the full-time involvement in teaching, as well as to prepare the young Brother for a definitive commitment to the Institute.

He must be helped by personalised accompaniment to complete this stage by understanding the connection between the exercise of his profession and growth in the spiritual life. The context in which the Brother of the Christian Schools experiences God, where he finds him present and acting, is precisely that of his professional work.

The questions listed above, which need to be adapted to individual needs, are intended to be a means to identify various **attitudes**:

- **An ability to take the focus off oneself**, that is, to be a religious, first of all «for others», shown by an ability to communicate at work and in community, by a flexible, tolerant and understanding approach to daily contact with others, by being willing to listen to the problems of others, to understand their point of view, and by the discovery of God present in the world and in history.
- **An ability to make a generous and clear-sighted gift of oneself**. The ability to give oneself must be accompanied by clear-sightedness: competence in work, awareness of difficulties, maintenance of relationships.
- **An ability to be realistic**, that is, accept certain things when dealing with concrete situations. For example:
 - when implementing resolutions regarding prayer life, relations, community life;
 - limitations, one's own and those of others;

- giving up personal projects that are not realistic;
- the need to organise and use one's time intelligently in order to lead a well-balanced life.

- **An ability to serve others**, that is, replacing the idea that we are «owners» by that of being the «servants» of the young people and adults with whom we work. This is shown in particular by:
 - a spirit of service: being capable of «wasting time», of giving attention to the weakest;
 - the ability to understand others: being affable, solicitous, welcoming;
 - the ability to communicate properly: listening and dialogue, team work;
 - the ability to move: willingness to be changed, ability to «let go»;
 - daring and clear-sightedness: openness to life, courage to undertake something.
- **The ability to work with the Church**: the mission is pursued within the Church. This makes it necessary for us to work with lay people and priests, take into account vocations other than ours, and to take part in evangelisation.
- **The ability to accept the mission of the Institute as one's own**, to understand this mission from within, to devote one's strength and abilities to it, to associate with lay people and promote the cause of the laity, to question one's own aims in pursuing the work of the apostolate.

Using this document

The questionnaire is intentionally detailed and structured in progressive steps. The material cannot be exhausted in one meeting. The questions can be used by a variety of persons:

- A Brother responsible for accompanying someone in a variety of situations.
- A young Brother, as a means of regularly assessing his own activities, or as the basis for a discussion with other young Brothers.
- A community which has a young Brother, during a meeting when this topic is discussed.
- The Director of a community, during the personal interview with the young Brother, as a way of assessing the situation with him.
- The Formation Commission, when it wishes to assess the first years of a young Brother's apostolic and community life.

This questionnaire can be used also, with a few changes, as part of the ongoing formation of Brothers.

Reference texts consulted

- Guide for Formation, especially pages 179 to 197.
- An article by J.M. Arnaiz, a Marianist, translated from Italian. The material comes from a talk given on this subject in Rome in January 1997 with the title: «The first years of full-involvement in apostolic work». This article summarises well what constitutes this stage of formation and the aims it should achieve. It makes suggestions also regarding implementation. I found it very useful when I drew up the questionnaire for the present article. •