

Pre-Novitiate Formation

Letter from the Master of the Order. September 1987

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The introduction to the Instruction on the renewal of Religious Life - *Renovationis Causam* reminds us of the need "to make a better adaptation of the entire formation cycle to the mentality of younger generations and modern living conditions, as also to the present demands of the apostolate" while recognizing the "irreplaceable and privileged role" of the Novitiate "as the first initiation into religious life". It suggests that its goal cannot be attained, "unless the future novice possesses a minimum of human and spiritual preparation which must be verified but, very often also completed." "Most of the difficulties encountered today in the formation of novices are usually due to the fact that when they were admitted they did not have the required maturity... all institutes... must attach great importance to this preparation for the novitiate." (RC4).

In a more recent document the Congregation for Religious reiterates the important role of the pre-novitiate. "Formation is not achieved all at once. The journey from the first to the final response falls broadly into five phases: the pre-novitiate period in which the genuineness of the call is identified as far as possible... ". Here the pre-novitiate is recognized as an integral part of the process of formation. (The Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life as applied to Institutes dedicated to Works of the Apostolate. Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes. Rome 1983 No. 48.)

I would like to share some reflections with you on this initial period of formation, having discussed the matter with the General Council during our meeting 11-13 November, 1986.

Experience suggests that a number of those who enter our novitiates are insufficiently prepared to benefit from it as they ought. The novitiate should come at the moment when the candidate "has reached that degree of human and spiritual maturity which will allow him to respond to this call with sufficient and proper responsibility and freedom" (RC4). This needs careful reflection. In this regard the advice of Fr. Vincent de Couesnongle is instructive: "It is better to defer entry into the novitiate if there are doubts about the maturity of candidates, otherwise brothers will leave the order in greater or lesser numbers during their first years of formation, and this is good for nobody because the fervour of the novitiate or studentate will inevitably suffer."

Christian Formation

Sometimes, we assume in others our own pattern of belief. While it is often true that young people have a much wider knowledge than those of a similar age of ten or fifteen years ago, it is not always accompanied by an equivalent Christian formation. Their life of faith is often based on an elementary knowledge of doctrine in contrast to their knowledge of the secular.

This is not only a concern regarding those entering religious life. It is a concern of the whole Church, and should be a concern for Dominicans as preachers.

To enhance Christian formation and to impart doctrinal knowledge must be one of the chief concerns of the pre-novitiate. "Teach me goodness, and discipleship and knowledge."

"*Perfectae Caritatis*" reminds us that the "fundamental norm of religious life is a following of Christ as proposed by the Gospel ." Meeting the Jesus of the Gospel is basic to any formation that is called Christian. The Gospel's Word shapes the thought, the behaviour and action of the candidates and initiates them into discipleship in Christ. It also initiates them into the Jesus spirituality of the Order.

The Rhythm and Tempo of Modern Life

The rhythm and tempo of religious life, however carefully adapted, and the rhythm and tempo of secular life are different. Transition to the religious state needs a certain delicacy of understanding of younger people and their world. The Pre-Novitiate permits a gradual transition from lay life allowing the time for a gradual spiritual and psychological adjustment, and prepares them for the necessary changes they must make on entering religious life. It also gives them a period of independence from their families and from the Order.

Development of Human Values

One of the important benefits of a pre-novitiate is the opportunity it gives candidates to develop their human values so that they begin to accept responsibility for themselves and can appreciate their own strengths and weaknesses.

This leads me to reflect on the policy of recruiting candidates immediately after schooling to the novitiate or directly from apostolic schools or minor seminaries. "Renovationis Causam", has already questioned the wisdom of such a policy. It asks, whether it is not more advisable, "in order to assure better preparation for the novitiate by a fitting period of probation in order to develop the human and emotional maturity of the candidate." (R.C.4).

Before they enter the novitiate - young people need to develop a certain independence in the responsible use of material things. Secondly they need the space to develop the power of decision making. Thirdly, they need the time to develop normal relationships with others - both men and women. It would be a mistake if candidates entered the novitiate before these had been adequately developed. There is a danger that premature recruitment to the novitiate might leave unresolved the issues which ownership, the exercise of personal autonomy and coming to terms with one's sexuality imply. The Pre-novitiate year should help to clarify these issues. Furthermore, in their living together, it should help candidates in developing on-going relationships as a preparation for community life and help them to appreciate the gift of human friendship and the choice of celibacy.

To enable candidates to develop these qualities the climate of the pre-novitiate must provide sufficient freedom for them to do so. To overstructure the pre-novitiate or turn it into a mini-novitiate would defeat the whole purpose of the pre-novitiate programme.

Place and Duration of the Pre-Novitiate

The time, form and location of the pre-novitiate period is to be determined by the Provincial Chapter or by the Provincial and his Council cf. (LCO 167).

For myself, I agree with the recommendation in R.C. that it should not be in the novitiate house, and concur with the suggestion, that it might be in a house other than one in which the regular life of the Order is observed, so that the pattern of life can be better adjusted to the growth of the candidates and the needs of this transition period.

The thirty three replies which we have received from various entities of the Order indicate a wide variety of pre-novitiate programmes. For some the emphasis is on developing human and spiritual maturity and a time to complete the Christian education of candidates. For others it is a period used to complete their formal education, study languages and even study philosophy'. Still others put the emphasis on choral office and initiation into Dominican Life. All of these elements may be valid in a particular programme but the emphasis must be on the human and christian development of the candidate and the giving of space to each individual to have a certain independence as explained under the paragraph on human values. Hopefully, a healthy independence will lead to a healthy interdependence. I hope that what I have said above may help to clarify any misunderstanding that may exist regarding pre-novitiate formation. It is not religious life but a preparation for same.

I find it hard to see that the pre-novitiate can achieve its purpose in less than a year. Likewise some form of living together seems to be desirable. For many candidates, it is their first experience of living and adjusting to a life lived with others in community.

Entrance into the Novitiate

The work of the pre-novitiate is completed by the procedures which lead to entry into the novitiate. These are outlined for us in LCO 170. Many of the requests for dispensation from vows might have been avoided if greater care had been taken at this stage. While it would be too much to expect that all those who enter remain, there should be positive signs of hope that those who join will remain. At the same time, we should recognize that growth in religious life is a gradual process. None of us became religious overnight.

As part of this process a number of provinces engage the help of those qualified in psychology. This is a delicate matter and the rights of the individual must be carefully respected, (cf. Can. 646, 220). Such help can be extremely useful in guiding candidates in their future growth as human beings and religious and in guiding the admissions board - the right of admitting candidates remains with the province LCO 171.

LCO 155 clearly outlines the hope of the Order in the whole process of formation when it says:

"To engage in formation profitably, on the part of the candidate the following qualifications are required: physical health, psychological maturity proportionate to his age, suitability for social life, a consistently sound Christian life, aptitude, the right intention, and the free will of consecrating himself to God and the Church in the Dominican way of life."

Fostering Vocations

The work of fostering vocations is the duty of every member of the Order. It is not to be left to the vocation promoters alone. If we believe in ourselves we must promote vocations. Fidelity to prayer, the witness of our lives, the witness of preaching, all contribute to this. But we must also actively pursue vocations. Dominic didn't wait for young men to come to him. He went out to meet them, visiting students in their hostels and calling young men to join the Order, Frequently in his letters to Diana, Jordan of Saxony, requested her prayers that "others will join us" ... and "for your part pray to the Lord that he may turn hope into reality." Can we do less?

To be indifferent to vocations is to refuse life. Fr. Vincent reminded us that "just as there are families who do not want any children, there are also communities who discourage the young because they are afraid they will have to change their own life style." I repeat his words.

Vocations are slowly recovering in certain parts of Europe and North America and continue to grow in Africa, Asia, Central and South America and the Pacific. Indigenous vocations must be encouraged and fostered everywhere. Writing to the King of Spain in 1525 Rodrigo de Albornoz said that one indigenous vocation would be more effective than fifty missionaries. An exaggeration? Perhaps. Yet, no one understands the mind, the heart, the thought patterns of a people like one of themselves. Every community needs its own religious and priests. In countries where there are different communities, based on culture, language... we should have the courage to take the initiative in fostering vocations from among these peoples.

The Order still waits to be restored in countries where it once flourished and in other countries it waits to be established. It is sacrificial work but there is no life worthy of the name, which does not demand sacrifice.

In conclusion, many provinces have done a great deal and made many sacrifices in money, personnel, in all kinds of resources to discover what is best for initial formation in the pre-novitiate, novitiate and years of study. The experience of these past years shows that those

provinces which have developed carefully thought-out formation programmes have stability in the Houses of Formation and can face the future with confidence.

How often we talk about our survival but do we have the courage to ask - survival for what? Our response to this question will determine the importance we give to formation in all its stages. The quality of the next generation of Dominicans will depend on the example and training that is given those entering today. In this process pre-novitiate formation has a key role.