

First Assignations

Letter of the Master of the Order. May 1990

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In the reports from provincials there is a recurring concern: their difficulties in providing suitable assignation for brothers in their first years of ministry.

It seems to me that there are two basic problems. First, because of a lack of vision, planning and will at some Provincial Chapters a provincial may be expected to fill too many gaps to the detriment of young religious. Secondly, sadly, there are often only a few communities in a province that are open to be challenged by the value that younger members represent and whose communities give promise of a community life and apostolate in accord with our legislation.

Planning

As some of our provinces decline in number, their ability to continue their apostolic commitments become progressively more difficult. Provinces which confront this problem and reorganize their commitments are in a much healthier position than those who fail to do so. Postponement of necessary reorganization only compounds the problems which eventually have to be faced. Two examples of a successful reorganization are the provinces of Mexico and England. At successive Chapter they closed a number of houses enabling them to deploy their personnel elsewhere and engage in new apostolates. Such reorganization is never easy but the future health of provinces and vicariates depend on it.

The Constitutions and recent General Chapters insist on the need for planning. It is the responsibility of all, not just superiors. It must be done in our houses as well as in our provinces and vicariates. (cf. Walberberg No. 17c, 78, 201).

It is easy to examine commitments and identify new deeds in an abstract way but when we are faced with closing a house or withdrawing from an apostolate we are often unable to act. You can see this in a small way when a community comes to revise its Mass schedule. How often the preferences of individual brothers come before the actual needs of the faithful or the demands of the liturgy with regard to participation and preaching.

What Donald Nicholl writes about the search for truth and knowledge and the pain that is involved in giving up old formulations, images and symbols can equally be applied to giving up places that are dear to us:

"I puzzled in vain over this feature of our longing for the truth for many years until one day when illumination came to me:.. from Thomas Aquinas' commentary on the beatitude, "Blessed are those who mourn". There St. Thomas says that this beatitude is the special beatitude for those whose calling it is to extend the boundaries of knowledge. St. Thomas assertion is, to say the least of it, intriguing and naturally provokes one to ask why this is so. The answer Thomas gives is that whenever our minds yearn towards some new truth then we become afflicted with pain, because our whole being wishes to protect the balance of inertia and comfort which we have established for ourselves. To lose them feels like losing part of ourselves, and the pain is a symptom of our distress at its disturbance. Moreover, we experience a sort of bereavement ... For those formulations, images and symbols have over the years become part of ourselves. To lose them feels like losing part of ourselves. And we mourn that loss as we mourn the loss of a limb". (Sedos; February 1990).

We must be able to die in order to live. The pruning of the Gospel extends not only to live but the houses in which we live and our apostolates. In a number of places we are over attached to buildings which are really museums. Perhaps the State does us a service when it takes over

some of our buildings and keeps them open for the public who thus continue to share in our material heritage. Could we preserve priories like San Marco in Florence and Santo Domingo in Oaxaca as well as the State does and if we did so what would be the purpose? Young religious cannot be assigned to communities living in old dilapidated buildings.

Furthermore, some provinces face the challenge of having, foundations in locations which are no longer centres of population or in areas which are adequately served by others. If we tie our preaching project to such foundations are we being faithful to our vocation "to be present to God and the world" of our day? In the spirit of the Gospel we should have the courage to "launch out into the deep" and move to the new centres of population. Jesus places people over things. This does not mean that everything old must go. The maintenance of some foundations may be the springboard for new apostolates. It has been said that "the conditions for hope and the conditions for despair are often exactly the same". This is certainly my experience. It is our attitude and response or lack of it, that makes them so. Together, in the Spirit, at Chapters and at the level of local communities we must plan for the future. Traditional ministries must be scrutinized and evaluated and new ways of preaching developed.

In particular, we need to pay attention to the number and quality of our parishes. The Avila Chapter recommended that every request to take responsibility for a parish should take into itinerant apostolates. It also reminds us that parishes should not be accepted easily and should be subject to periodic review at provincial chapters. These principles must be applied to the parishes we have everywhere.

A similar evaluation must be made of our universities, colleges, shrines and hospital chaplaincies.

Community Life and the Insertion of Young Religious

My second concern is the first assignation of young Dominicans after completing initial formation. As I have already said, in many provinces there are few communities which offer young religious a place where they can live their religious lives in accordance with a present day understanding of community life and of an apostolate that is specifically Dominican. There should be continuity between institutional formation and the experience of the community life of the province.

They must be received as adults, not as children. We must not look upon them merely as replacements for ourselves. They have their own vision, their own hopes. As we learnt from making mistakes, they must make theirs and learn from them. I still recall the comment of an elderly priest who said: "The young priests are our children, they have to learn from us and they are not prepared to do so". I replied: "Father, they are not your children. They are adult people who come to an adult community. They have much to learn but they also have a great deal to give and it is not the relationship of a father or a grandfather to a child. It is a relationship of adults who have much to learn from each other".

I think that we have to be very careful where young religious are placed. They need an assignment where they will not only find a welcome but where they can be very much at home and be encouraged in their ministry. The advice of those responsible for formation should always, be sought. Remember, that for many, the first assignment means a transition from stability to instability. One of the problems seems to be loneliness, the feeling of being left without support. We cannot take away all the pain; the loneliness, the failures of the first years in community and ministry. But we can be present to them. If possible, let the new .brother be a part of team or let him work with at least one other Dominican. In the beginning, try not to assign them to projects by themselves even if they are living in a community. Do not assign them to fill gaps in old projects which have lost their meaning. The apostolic team, the quality of life in the house of assignment and a good relationship with one or more members in the community are three points of a triangle. The weaker one of them is, the stronger the others must be.

I fail to understand the mentality which assign young religious to live and work alone or assignations to communities in which there is not a healthy community life. How can they survive? Furthermore, I question the wisdom of sending them for further studies immediately after initial formation. They need a year or more to settle into the rhythm of their ministry. How many examples there are of young religious who undergo a crisis in the years immediately following ordination! There is no certain way in which we can predict how effective a supportive community life can be. When does anyone of us cease to need encouragement and affirmation in our work? Have some of us forgotten what it was like to be young? Have we forgotten our first tentative beginning to preach, our anxiety, failures, hopes and fears?

We need to question ourselves regarding our attitude towards young people and their world. Do we make the effort to understand the feelings of the young who often have a different cultural and religious experience to our own? Are we able to enter their world, as they are expected to enter ours? Many speak of the "good old days" but of the promise and hope of today? The Chapter of Avila challenges us when it says:

If you really want to be open to the future a fundamental requirement must be fulfilled: learn to really trust the young. If we achieve this we will be able to accompany them, able to maintain patience, able to understand and share their hope, able to welcome the newness that the young bring us. Moreover, we will be able to entrust them with serious apostolic work, not only among people of their own age : . but at the heart of our Christian communities. We will also learn from them how to promote the evangelization of the world (Chapter IV, NQ 67.3).

Young Religious and the Four Priorities

Another aspect of first assignations is the proper use of talents. To think that a young religious can do everything or even most things like the person before them is naive. A community can provide the context of a ministry but it is the individual religious who enlivens it according to his own ability and talents. We allow others, not the privilege, but the right to do things in a different way; allow them the space to fly their own kite, whether it is a striving towards excellence in preaching, studies and teaching, human relations . . . We allow them room to develop their initiative, creativity and organizing ability - in a word, a climate which enables them to grow and be themselves:

For us, this development takes place within the Four priorities which offer enormous scope for the development of a brother's talents. In this regard each province might ask itself the following questions: Is there evangelization among those who do not believe in Jesus? Do we have young men engaged in the intellectual work needed to preach and in the culture of today? Are there some who identify themselves with the poor and the struggle for justice and peace? Are some involved in the social communications media?

As an Order we have a long tradition of apostolic creativity. It is not the prerogative of youth. I still marvel. at the creative response of an elderly German missionary in Taiwan confronted with the rapidly changing society of that country. But we must also encourage creativity among the young.

For centuries, one of the ways in which artists depicted Dominicans was by putting books under their arms. Two centuries before the print revolution the order played an important role in making books a familiar communications media. An incomplete list of Dominican authors includes over five thousand names. A similar creativity was found in the missions. In 1226 Honorius III, granted brothers working in Morocco permission to adapt their dress to that of the people to facilitate their work. In another area Albert and Thomas adapted and assimilated the thought of Aristotle putting it at the service of the Church. There is a 15th century copy in the Vatican Library of the famous moralized game of chess (De Ludis Scacchorum) of Jacobus de Cessolis of our house in Genoa, about 1290. The first drawing is of a Dominican in a pulpit with a chess board hanging over the front of the pulpit, an early attempt at effective communication. Each one of us is likewise challenged to write his own chapter in the ongoing story of the Dominican family.

In the pulpit; the media, in the development of Christian thought and in the work of evangelization the Order has demonstrated a high degree of creativity and adaptability - so must we. The great danger is complacency and a preoccupation with our own security.

Again, young religious must have the courage to engage in frontier apostolates but frontier apostolates need community and careful preparation.

Above All Preachers

Above all we are preachers. In many provinces the preparation for preaching in the years of formation is better than ever before. They learn their skills in groups or a community which encourages them to preach. I believe that there should continue to be some communal experience in the preparation of sermons and sharing of faith. I continue to recommend communities to come together and share their reflection, insights, experience in preparation for the next preaching event. The ideal would be to have some lay participation, sisters and others involved in pastoral ministry. This could be the structure on-going formation in preaching.

There are over a thousand brothers in formation, a healthy number in relation to our overall strength. It even suggests that in the near future our will begin to rise again. The future is theirs.