

How Young People are to be Received and Trained in our Communities

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Almost everywhere people speak nowadays of a definite increase in religious vocations. And sometimes it is said that the young people who present themselves are quite different. So, straightaway, those in charge are faced with very worrying questions, especially after the recent crisis in vocations. They wonder how communities will react to these young people, and how these latter should be trained.

Some years ago this problem did not arise. I can still hear the Prior telling me as I was being clothed in the habit: "During the coming year you will have the chance to see if the life of the Order suits you, and we in our turn will see if we find you a suitable candidate. If both sides agree, you will be received to profession; otherwise both you and we will regain our liberty."

In our days however it is a little bit more complicated. It is true that communities still accept and set about training novices, but they must also agree to being themselves questioned by the newcomers. Young people do indeed agree to accept the yoke of the novitiate, but from the beginning they ask upsetting questions, which the community must listen to. From the first day a sort of dialogue - is opened between the two parties, and while their points of view are not the same, they are often complementary. Just like any dialogue, then, this chapter will question both communities and young people about some of the problems which arise in the reception and training of novices.

This is a vast subject and I intend to concentrate especially on the way in which young people should be received and, in respect to training, the way in which they should be integrated into the community.

I. Do our communities discourage young people ?

The first contact with a religious order is not when one enters it, and the problem is not just one of novitiate houses, as young people are no longer satisfied with making contact with just one community. They want to know what goes on in the various houses of the Province or Institute, and it will only be after a serious and far-reaching enquiry that they will make their choice.

Of course some communities just put people off. In one of our missions, which for many years had no vocations, a young man came along wanting to become a Dominican. He shared the life of the Fathers and started his ecclesiastical studies at the same time. After two years he left us, exactly one hour before he was due to take the habit: "I am leaving," he said to the Novice Master, "because the community makes no attempt to live the life in which you instructed me, the life I was looking for".

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. Others have lost faith in the religious life, and, giving as their reason, for example, the absence of proper training, as they see it, in their congregation, they unfortunately do their best to discourage possible vocations. This is a new kind of Malthusianism . . . Is it possible for such communities to give a real welcome to someone who joins them in spite of their opposition ? No condemnation is too strong for religious men and women of his kind who refuse life and are unaware that the desire to live is the first requisite for good health.

On the other hand there are other communities who encourage people too readily in the sense that their principal aim is greater numbers. This does not necessarily improve the quality of life, as the saying goes "quality is no more than quantity in its building stage". Or else communities may be too hospitable in the sense that they welcome anybody and anything provided it is new, unusual or untried and still developing. Communities like this are always looking for something else and change their plans for the most whimsical reasons. Creativity may be very important in our days, but in their case it runs the risk of anarchy. They remind me of the wandering monks of olden times, but these new wanderers stray along imaginary paths where no structures exist, but only limitless freedom.

I suppose we may have a certain amount of sympathy with these "religious gadabouts" and not so long ago many young people seem to have been attracted by a life like that: But I think that today they are looking for something more stable and less uncertain, being unwilling to build their lives on moving sands. And if it happens that for the sake of playing their part in the world and being up to date they take up this way of living after some years of life in an Institute, this is often because they have become dissatisfied with what was provided or else because they had no adequate formation. It seems to me that deep down this is not what they were looking for.

II. What do young people look for in the religious life ?

What young people today find most attractive about the religious life is something which is part of the general Christian vocation: to live with Jesus Christ according to the Gospel. In this they are perfectly in line with Vatican II which stated clearly that all Christians whatever their state, are called to perfection. It also stated, when talking of the religious life, that nothing is of more importance than baptismal consecration.

Young people today want to find the inspiration of their lives in this basic truth: Christ as found in the Gospel. Candidates for the religious life then are under the impression that they have found in the life-style of some Institute or other, a way of living based on the evangelical counsels, which, in the ordinary course of events, should enable them to reach the highest ideal of every Christian.

In the past our postulants were much more aware of the framework of the religious life: life-style, observances, structures, work, traditions . . . We were inclined to say to them as if it were a value in itself: "Live this life, and everything else - even Christ himself - will be given to you." There is the well known remark, attributed to Pius XI, "Show me a religious who follows his rule perfectly and I will canonize him".

In our days these ideas are not cast aside, but people deliberately want to live them in the light of Christ himself, as a way of meeting him, following the demands of his love. And it is in its relation to its capacity of serving and announcing the Gospel in an effective way, that young people nowadays judge between what - is essential and what is not essential in the religious life which is offered to them. We could say that yesterday the call to the religious life was lived in "a more institutional way", whereas today it is lived in "a more kerygmatic way".

The fundamental constitution with which the new Dominican legislation opens, arranges the whole of our own life around two axes: communion, and mission, each word taking on the full meaning given to it in the New Testament. But then every religious institute will recognize itself in these two words. However, what I want to stress is that these two axes are no other than the fundamental demands of every Christian life: to love one's neighbour and to proclaim the Saviour.

Now, what is characteristic of the religious life is that it is a radical acceptance of these two demands. By means of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience, it carries them to their logical conclusions. In the religious life, rather like in the first community in Jerusalem, love of one's neighbour is built into the structure of community life. Like the first apostles setting off with neither stick nor purse, neither bread nor money, religious want to be free, and have no other worry apart from announcing the good news of salvation.

Following Christ, mission and communion: before they join us, our future religious have already had a certain experience of each of these three sources of vital energy. The whole aim of their training then will be to deepen their grasp of these and develop them in their full human and spiritual dimension.

I do not think I am mistaken when I say that among these three the one of which young people today are most aware is communion. This is because they belong to their age, and are all the more aware of the need to get together, to exchange views, to share, to live in groups, because the world in which they live is harder and more forgetful of people whom it steamrolls and in whom it sees no more than automatons who produce and consume. Besides, even if they have discovered Christ and learned how to live with him, this is usually because they have belonged to prayer groups or Bible study groups. And surely it was along with others that they discovered the transforming power of the Word of God in the world. In other words their experience of Christ and of the apostolic life has come to them in a very special way through their experience of community and group living. No wonder then that they attach so much importance to the community aspect of the new life to which they are introduced.

Many examples spring to mind. There are those young people from North America who spent some months with very small religious communities who divide their day between intense prayer and working for the poorest sections of the district. The young people want to give themselves completely to this sort of life which attracts them so powerfully . . . and so they join that congregation. Ten years ago in some countries of Latin America it was chaplains to universities or to Catholic Action groups who came across vocations among university students. Nowadays it is in barrios and favellas that you meet young intellectuals fired with these ideals. Lastly, in Italy, many young people find they have a religious vocation while they are working with the focolarini, a community movement if ever there was one.

III. Under what conditions does a community give to young people an opportunity of discovering what they are looking for ?

The community in question used to be the novitiate, which had very few dealings with the convent or religious house of which it formed part: an occasional recreation in common on big feast-days; special permission necessary to speak to a priest (one did not go to confession every day); at the beginning and end of the novitiate an interview with senior fathers for canonical examinations etc.

In our days however, while the novitiate is still distinct from the larger community, it is very much part and parcel of it. The whole community is involved in the reception and training of the newcomer. Indeed even the very basis on which Fathers are assigned to houses of formation is no longer the same. While the old Constitutions, for example, would only accept in these houses religious "who lived a perfect community life of strict observance", the new Constitutions simply speak of a life in common, in which the young religious should share actively and progressively, apostolic activities included. Now, though both speak of life in common, it is clear that it does not mean the same thing in each case. Formerly the important thing was "to do the same thing, at the same time, in the same place"; nowadays what matters is togetherness, sharing, mutual help, openness to people, etc.

The fundamental principle therefore which underlies formation today is the desire to help young people to live in concrete and progressively the very same life which they will live tomorrow, and to do this by gradually integrating them into an adult community. Where the past held for a complete separation we now believe in a gradual development based on sharing time with people.

This is a revolutionary idea and however necessary it may be, it gives rise to more problems than it solves. Could any reformer be bold enough to claim that he can steer clear of all reefs, knows precisely where he is going and can safely work up to cruising speed ?

I would reduce to three the conditions which make a community, understood in this way, an opportune place for religious, in their first years of formation, to find what they are looking for. It is obvious that there are many different ways of organising these early years and I shall not consider details like this and the problems they give rise to, but rather deal with the question in general.

An atmosphere of evangelical renewal

Somebody said recently that "religious life - and indeed every community - is authentic, inspiring, effective in the world and worthy of praise only in its early stages". But what did he mean by "its early stages"- In reference to institutes he was naturally thinking of the first years of their existence as these years for most institutes witnessed extraordinary vitality and energy and one can speak of the dynamism of new ideas. You only have to think of Saint Dominic, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, Saint Teresa of Avila, or Saint Anthony Mary Claret, to mention only a few founders.

But according to its author "in its early stages" means also - indeed especially - that religious life must always be in its early stages, in other words in a state of perpetual renewal. Surely this is precisely what young people are looking for, perhaps in a confused way. They want to practice in their own lives, in the modern Church and in the modern world, what the first brothers or sisters lived in former times as they gathered around their founder.

Naturally there is a wide gap between what the young would like to do and what they succeed in doing. But if we on our part were aware of the founders' sensitivity to their own times, more aware also of the, often vaguely expressed, wish of young people to share the inspiration of their founding fathers, we would find it much easier to understand them, though this is going to demand a lot both from them and from us.

But what exactly is a community "in its early stages" or "in a state of perpetual renewal" ? It is simply a community in a "state of continual conversion". It is not just because of the danger of gradually running down or of communities becoming too-heavy, that we have to keep on taking stock of ourselves and trying to work at being converted. In a constantly changing world we must constantly readjust ourselves if our actions, our words and our lives are to remain in touch with people in the reality of their lives today. If in some fields a thirty-five year old engineer is already old, what are we to say about a preacher or a catechist who has to speak the word of God to people of every age and every kind, people whose mentality and problems are changing as quickly as the world in which they live ? We shall never succeed in converting people to Christ and the Gospel unless we learn to look at things in a new way; indeed a rigid way of looking at things is usually the quickest means of growing old. Our eyes grow tired and can no longer adapt to what is new, and young people are quick to notice this. If we do not take steps to change this - a pair of spectacles is not enough - they will begin to have doubts about the effectiveness of our apostolic work and of our ability to understand them.

A true apostle is anxious about the salvation of his contemporaries, dissatisfied with what he is doing and filled with a sense of urgency faced with the immense task that has to be done. Things seem to have gone awry with the Gospel parable of the sheep, and young people are filled with astonishment at the way some communities take so much care of the one well-behaved sheep and do not seem to bother at all about the ninety-nine who are lost. Have these been completely forgotten, and are we making any serious effort to try and reach them ?

An atmosphere of real prayer

What the new generation needs above all is a place, an atmosphere where their search for God will be shared and understood. Instruction and even example are no longer enough. What, then, is real prayer ? I think that this longing for prayer which is both intimate and shared, and which we hear of almost all over the world today, should be looked

on as a "sign of our times". Young people are not afraid to talk of prayer, meditation, or contemplation - words which some of us were very wary of using in the sixties. This is something new in the Church, something nobody could have foreseen. Prayer groups are springing up everywhere, and I am not thinking especially of charismatic groups. It seems to me that these latter are only more spectacular and, at times questionable, manifestations of a more general spiritual movement, which I think is far more important. And it is only this movement towards, longing for and interest in a return to God that can be looked on as a true sign of our times. We have no difficulty in arguing all day long about the signs of the times, but it is not at all easy to see them in practice and to take them seriously at the proper moment. So we must be open to new movements like the ones I have mentioned, and a comparison with the recent past might throw light on the subject.

The years 1930-1960 were marked by an extraordinary development of Catholic Action. This could be seen as a Christian version of that dedication which in those times inspired many political, social or trade union groups, and indeed it is still with us. But another attitude seems to be developing due in part at least to something more characteristic of this present age.

Reacting against a world which takes no account of individual people, our contemporaries seem to be trying to find themselves in what is deepest in them. More and more people from every sort of religious and ideological background are turning towards Eastern systems of thought: transcendental meditation, Zen, Yoga etc. Leaving aside these methods I think that the desire for a more interior prayer which is felt by the new Christian generation, is not unaffected by this more general tendency. Within the Church, and on the spiritual level which is proper to it, this is the privileged way in which a person can become himself. As someone has said so beautifully: "I only begin to be, when God calls me by my name" (" Je ne suis que si Dieu me tutoie."). Prayer then is searched out and lived as the means of bringing about this dialogue. Consequently it allows modern man, attacked from every side, to open himself in a decisive way to existence, even to existence without limit.

Contemplation, meditation, personal prayer are no longer abstractions for most of the young people who come to us. Some of them have belonged to prayer groups: one hour, two hours or more spent listening in silence to the Word of God, sharing ideas on the sacred text or on the experience of their daily lives, interior reflection, and a shared inhaling of the breath of the Holy Spirit.

It may be that it is carried out in a clumsy fashion, from mixed motives and that it may last no longer than a morning mist. Emotion and imagination may play too much part in it and those who practice it may think they have "arrived". But it cannot be denied that it is their experience, that the Holy Spirit himself has made a path through this undergrowth and that God's call came to these young people while they were keeping this sort of vigil. What they expect then from the community which receives them is to be accepted as they are with this divine mark on them.

In what spirit are we going to listen to them ? With a sort of knowing smile ? In a skeptical and rather distant way, which runs the risk of hurting them in what they look on as most precious to them ? In fact, are we tempted to think: how could young people discover anything of importance in such a specialized area ? But it is not priests or experienced professors of spirituality who are opening up new ways of prayer. It is mostly young people who are not clerics, and most of whom have no desire to be. The Spirit breathes where he will.

And what have we got to offer them ? There is of course the Office and the Mass. But have we really understood that the "Liturgy of the Hours" is not just a revised and corrected version of the old breviary ? Rather is it strictly a new way of praying with the Church. With its periods of silence, its sharing of intentions, do we know how to make use of all the possibilities given us by the post-conciliar liturgy ? Is it not unfortunately true that many of us do not get any further than a material fidelity to a prayer which should be worthy of the presence of God and stir us up to uniting ourselves with his glory ?

However there is another aspect of the question which I would like to mention. Listening to the Word, shared prayer: these are new words in our Christian vocabulary. Novices and postulants look forward to finding in our life something, a great deal more rather, of what they have already experienced in the world. And what do we give them ? Something much less, which disappoints them very much ? Or perhaps they can practice prayer like this only as a minority group within the community, with some like-minded people, in a little oratory or cell, on their own.

I must make a confession. The first time I took part in "sharing the Gospel" some twelve years ago, it was with some diocesan priests. After that I had the opportunity of repeating the experience a few times, but it was always with diocesan priests. I am ashamed to say that it took seven long years before I succeeded in sharing prayer in this way with my own brethren. This was during a canonical visitation when I was accompanying Father Aniceto Fernandez, Master of the Order at that time, and the Dominicans in question were "priestworkers". Was it their common involvement in a situation - and what a situation it was - that made them more open to a kind of prayer which I had never before experienced within the Order ?

To recapitulate:

- Not just prayers, but an atmosphere which creates a real relationship with God.
- Not just empty formulae, but a real effort to be open in heart and in mind.
- Not just words, but a true meeting with God and one's brothers, in silence.

A community in touch with modern man

Nothing is foreign to the Gospel, which is a true light for the life of the individual and the family, for bringing about a more just society, for the protection of the individual, and for the full development of man in relation to all other men, and to the universe at large. It is in reference to this 'world-wide' dimension that one can speak of the 'full Gospel message', and young people are particularly sensitive to the role of the Church in this respect. They see this as a necessary part of their vocation, and in all honesty can they be blamed for this ?

That religious must of necessity be involved in our modern world, should be one of our major preoccupations, for the temptation is great, for the individual as for the community, to keep on doing what one has always done. Things were very different twenty years ago, or thirty or fifty years ago. The world did not change very much then - or at least not as rapidly as we experience today - and the way of tackling problems, which was not difficult to work out once and for all, remained more or less the same. But nowadays it would seem that the sin of omission, to mention just this, is growing more widespread every day in number and in seriousness, for man now has the capability of changing many things which only yesterday were quite beyond his power. He can set the world off in a new direction: destroy mankind, or develop it, blow up the world or make it more entrancing, increase or diminish the gap between the "haves" and the "have nots". Faced with a situation like this, those who take the Gospel seriously must be ever on the watch.

All these questions and many others too should be continually before our minds, and be the subject of reflection for communities who want to pull their weight. Who are the people who are shaping tomorrow's world in this district, town, village or region ? During the 19th century - according to the Popes - the Church lost the working class. What group, what class, what sector of the world are we in the process of losing at the moment ? It is technicians after the workers, the women after the men, the children after the adults ?

Nearly every founder of religious Institutes pondered over questions like these in his or her own time. They were deeply moved at the sight of misery, physical, intellectual, moral or religious, and sought to do something about it, and so become founders. Need I add that young people today are watching closely what we are doing about this. They are waiting for us to make our choice, our decision, waiting with great interest, and great hope too. Our choice is a test-case for them, by which we stand or fall, and new vocations depend, at least in part, on it.

It is well known that there are congregations who are still getting vocations, and even if these are not very numerous, the congregations are continually growing in numbers. On the other hand there are also congregations whose vocations are getting fewer and fewer. It would remind you of the words of the Lord: "for the man who has will be given more; from the man who has not, even what he has will be taken away" (Mk 4:2g). If this is the way of things, surely it is because, unlike the latter, the former are more aware of the needs people feel nowadays. Life produces life, whereas the inability to adapt to the surroundings brings death, in this case as always. I am not saying that here we have the complete answer to the delicate problems of religious vocations, but it is something we should bear in mind.

The need to be in touch with people brings up another question.

To be in touch with people means that you are acquainted with their problems and that you know the persons who are faced with these problems and suffer from the situation they are in: the very poor, those out of work, migrants, etc It is the duty of every Christian, and especially of every religious, to be acquainted with these problems and with people like this. The Gospel contains teaching and sheds a light on life which we have no right to lay aside, and we must work to make them known, and help people to make use of them in the concrete situations of their lives.

However, we must be careful of the resilience of the world. If we work closely and sympathetically in situations like this, we run the risk of being absorbed in them, of being quite swallowed up by them. There is no place in our lives for separation and distance from the world, without which the religious life becomes anemic. Would we do this in the name of the Gospel which preaches justice and mercy, condemns the dishonest publican as well as the self-satisfied Pharisee, chases away the merchants from the Temple and defends the widow and orphan ? Indeed much of the Gospel deals with social problems, and it is possible to talk all day long about it and mention only its social aspects. But social problems are only one part of the full Gospel message, and there is another and more important element: the Gospel meaning an interior attitude, a relationship with God, with prayer, with a break from the world; the Gospel meaning poverty, chastity and obedience.

Some time ago a provincial superior told me the story of some of his religious who were deeply involved in a poor area, helping emigrants to find work and improve their miserable situation. After some time these religious began to say to themselves: "We are not married. We have no children. But leaving that aside what makes us different from

those we are living with ?" So they set about praying once more. This was probably an extreme case, and it would be wrong to think that the danger of being absorbed by the world exists only in the poorer quarters. No, it is everywhere and affects every part of society, and is doing so more and more. All the more so then is it necessary to find our balance once again, and if this presents difficulties to our generation, it is going to be even more difficult for the generations to come. So let us show young people communities that are open to the world and to God. Training young people, after all, does not mean in the first place protecting them from a difficult world, but rather, granting a prudent break from worldly things, it means showing them how to face up to the world. It is through communities which are truly alive, and not through advice and abstract teaching that they will learn how to go towards the world which awaits them, not empty-handed, but carrying the cross of Christ, which they have loved and contemplated.

IV. Young people forming part of a Community

An atmosphere of evangelical renewal and real prayer, a community which is open to men and women: this is how I have described the ideal which young people are looking for in the religious life. But they are not going to find it . . . God grant they will find many communities which come near it or are striving to reach it, as this would be a certain sign of life.

But how can a community, considered in itself, train its young members ? Let me say in passing that I am considering the formative role of the community only and not the function of the Master or Mistress of Novices. But do not jump to the conclusion often heard today: "There is no need for Masters and Mistresses of Novices. The community as a whole is responsible for formation." No! The Master or Mistress of Novices leads the way . . .

At the beginning formation should aim at three things: a preliminary evaluation of the vocation, initiation into the religious life - each of which will demand both instruction and dialogue especially with the Master of Novices - and thirdly, integration into the community. And the specific role of the community in this formation is precisely integration.

A newcomer is welcomed on the doorstep, even if later on you will continue to welcome this new guest according as you discover new aspects of his personality. As time goes by, this welcome will become wider and warmer, and the guest will feel more and more at home: "Make yourself at home". He becomes a member of the family, in our case of the community, he is integrated into it.

It is difficult to describe an operation which in large part defies explanation. Barriers begin to come down on either side, and there is dialogue, often unspoken, between the community and the postulant who feels ever more strongly the desire to belong, as in this matter what is done is more important than what is said. Thus, bit by bit, the community discovers in the newcomer a personality which seems to mirror itself. The postulant or novice takes more and more part in the life of the group, and helps the others by his work, his care and his kindness. Even his failings are seen to be rather a sign of good will and of the affection he is beginning to feel for the others. He shares the troubles and the worries of the community and identifies with their aims. He feels more and more part of the house and is looked on as one of its members. Almost unawares, he himself no longer says I and you but instead uses the first person plural: we.

This leads me to make two remarks. First it is obvious that true integration is a progressive thing, which must be related to the people involved, the individual himself of course, the community too, but also and especially, to God's grace.

The second is about the relationship between the group of novices and the rest of the community. With regard to this it must be admitted that we have gone from one extreme - the old-fashioned novitiate attached to the community, to another - the novitiate swallowed up by the community. In the latter case, as it cannot be progressive, integration can no longer play its formative role.

If he is all the time with his elders, sharing every event of their lives, their hopes, their doubts, their confidences, if he is considered by the other religious as equal to themselves, the novice will not be able to withdraw as he must do if he is to examine whether he is in the right place and take stock of the genuineness of his vocation. He runs the risk of becoming interested in the problems of his elders and adopting their mentality, while he deals only superficially with problems which are more rightly his own. Where too great a separation of the two groups produces immaturity - the young members being completely cut off from real life in the present or the future - one is in danger of a depersonalization in the other case, as time is needed to learn how to integrate without losing one's identity.

Properly carried out integration is the source and criterion of maturity. As it works its way out and also in its motivation, it can help or hinder the deepening of a personality and can reveal true development.

Some novices want to make their mark straight away; and shortly after their arrival consider themselves complete members of the community. People like this should tread warily: the community will be slow to accept them, if it ever does. Others are shy, remaining apart, and are slow to thaw. It is not easy to make them out, and we must not judge them too quickly. Some always do what has to be done simply out of fear of being sent away or to get on well with

superiors. Integration in their case may be quite superficial and only later - too late perhaps - will it be seen how little there was behind the facade. One could go on and on. There are, for example, people of character and strong personality. And it can happen that their character is strong only because it is bad, at least in the opinion of superiors who think that the cardinal virtue of a novice is above all to be a model of passivity.

I suppose that the integration of newcomers will not follow steadily the line I have just traced. There will be ups and downs, crises and high points. But in spite of this and indeed on account of it, integration is indispensable for formation. These difficulties themselves pose a problem, about which I cannot unfortunately speak, the problem of the composition of communities who receive young novices.

V. A community which listens to the ideas of the young will be able to understand them and will agree to question itself

Two stone age men, dressed in skins, were sitting outside a cave, looking at a large collection of objects of all sorts, made of stone, clay and bone. One of them said sadly to the other: "There is no future in research. Everything has been invented!" It reminds me of the saying which seems to come straight from Ecclesiastic's : "Everything has been said, and we have come too late." However history does teach us to take a saner view and to turn this sentence around: "Nothing has been said and we have come too early". Too early because when people hear something new, they will not accept it, but rather turn on the messenger and burn him to death. Nothing has been said, because there is always something new to discover. If it is true that "nothing has been said", surely young people then have something to teach us, or at least they can make us aware of new trends which they are sensitive to ?

I hope I do not give the impression that I think that young people have a special claim on the Holy Spirit, but if you recall what I have said for example about their desire for prayer and their sensitivity to the needs of people, surely we should not turn a deaf ear to what they say ? I admit that at times they act without finesse and want us to swallow everything and make no distinction between what is obviously true and what is questionable. At least they invite us to be aware of what is new, to keep our eyes wide open and not to be drowsy. Nietzsche said: "Blessed are the drowsy, because they will never sleep". We must always be afraid of falling asleep before the time. So we would be less than true as well as hopelessly out of date if, on principle, we turned a deaf ear to everything young people tell us.

In all this, of course, we must have a critical sense of judgment and be able to separate the corn from the darnel. And surely the community is the most appropriate place to exercise this judgment, where we can at once develop our own personal discernment as well as a community discernment ? Young people can put forward their point of view and the whole community can decide on how much of this can be accepted and adopted. Such an exercise can be an exceptional chance of exchanging ideas and consequently of learning from others, and can also be very helpful in training the younger people and integrating them into the community.

All this may sound very idealistic, I admit; but dreaming about utopias is a help to progress. What we need most when trying to carry out community renewal, as anything else indeed, is what one might call "the little finger syndrome": you begin by putting your little finger into the machinery, your hand gets caught pretty quickly, then your whole body and then the community at large, and this latter is transformed in the process . . . "How good, how delightful it is ..." (Psalm 133:1).

However it is not enough to argue and discuss. Everybody must get involved and be ready to examine himself or herself (and not just other people) in a new light, from the point of view of mentality, religious or professional outlook, new fields of apostolate etc. To reflect together on all this will deepen the bonds that bind a community into one, and will make it more alive and more open. And this is just what young people want, while our efforts to share our discoveries and our decisions with our brothers and sisters will be the source of new strength for ourselves.

Yes, we have a lot to learn and a lot to search for, but we must not make an absolute out of this search. That word "search" has been so misused in our days that at times we shy away from it. Let us strive to give it its proper place and meaning. Then all of us together will be more capable of being the mouthpiece of him who has been rightly called "the most contemporary of all people" ? Jesus Christ.

VI. Young people willing to identify their lives in practice with that of their institute

To deal with this question properly would need a complete treatise. To identify one's life with that of an institute used to be rather straightforward. At least a person knew pretty accurately the sort of life and precise type of apostolate to which he was committing himself for life. But things are not quite the same today. I would describe the problem as follows: Institutes in our days are engaged in specific apostolates which have been handed down to them over the years - parishes, chaplaincies, schools, hospitals etc. The years to come (ten years, or more if there is not a great increase in vocations) will witness therefore a serious reduction in the numbers of our workforce. Can we then continue to be engaged in these fields ?

At the same time most dioceses are facing the same problem and many who did not need to do so in the recent

past, will ask religious priests to help them. Bearing in mind the charism of each institute, how can we answer this call and in what way ? Then new needs are going to make their presence felt at exactly the same time (new fields of apostolate, new ways of preaching, the growing importance of social communications, problems of "Justice and Peace" etc.). Who is going to take up these ministries ? Should we lay aside some of our traditional occupations ? And if we do so, who will take them on ? In the normal course of events young people will, in the near future, have to see to the support of their elders, who are more numerous nowadays as people are living longer. But is there not a danger that this need will have too much influence on the choice of apostolic work, so that economic motives become more important than apostolic ones ?

Young people are asking themselves these questions with more and more urgency. To identify with an institute means to identify with its province, with other provinces, with the whole congregation or order, with the universal Church, and with various local Churches in which one is called to work. In other words in accepting the need to identify their lives with the institute of their choice, postulants must not refuse to advance in a kind of obscurity which most of those who went before them never knew. Their understanding of the ideas of the founder and of the notion of serving the Church must be all the more sure, or they will run the risk of calling into question sooner or later the specific nature if not the very existence of their institute.