

GUIDE FOR FORMATION – 5 –

THE ACCOMPANIMENT OF YOUNG BROTHERS IN COMMUNITY

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In the article that follows, I should like to speak of the stage of initial formation called "the period of temporary vows in community", and to put it into its historical and present-day context.

Formerly, at the end of the scholasticate, or even sometimes at the end of the novitiate, we used to speak of "going to community" or of "leaving the house of formation". In the years following the Vatican Council, this period of temporary vows in community came to be considered as a stage of initial formation for religious.

There is nothing original about saying that, at the present time, this period of formation is becoming daily increasingly important. More and more Districts are making provision for it in their annual programmes.

The Guide for Formation (245-261) contains an outline of the doctrinal thinking and pastoral practice which have guided the Institute over the last few decades in its treatment of Brothers with temporary vows. It sets out for us also some guidelines for the future.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A glance at the Church's and the Institute's attitude and feelings about our young religious with temporary vows can help to give us a clear idea of the question.

* In 1965, in *Perfectae Caritatis* (18), we read: "Religious men other than clerics...should not be assigned to apostolic works immediately after the novitiate. In suitable residences and in a fitting manner let them continue their training in the religious life and the apostolate, in doctrine and technical matters..."

* In 1966, in *Ecclesiae Sanctae* (35), we read: "the training to be continued after the novitiate...should normally last for the whole period of temporary vows".

* In 1969, Circular 392, which comments on *Renovationis Causam*, speaks of the period of temporary vows and concentrates its attention on the topic of consecration and the vows. It gives much space to considering the question of vows or promises. It is a pity other areas are not considered more thoroughly. The Circular simply follows the same lines as *Renovationis Causam*. Its treatment of the period of postulancy is excellent, but it is much too juridical in its approach to the period of temporary vows.

* In 1971, in connection with the intercapitular meeting of the Visitors, Circular 393 (p.27) states that: "Basic formation does not end with the novitiate...This requires that the young be given the indispensable conditions of time, Directors, programmes, etc."

* In 1977, a year after the 40th General Chapter, Circular 404 notes that 3,748 Brothers with temporary vows left the Institute in the ten year period between the previous two Chapters, and adds (p.32): "The stages of formation that follow the novitiate must be carefully supervised by the Brother Visitor. In each District or Region, the Formation Commission will be particularly in charge of (this) period... Special plans will be drawn up for the formation of student Brothers."

* In his Christmas Letter of 1977, the Superior, Br. Jose Pablo, spoke of "the very important period which follows the canonical novitiate". He continued: "Because of the great dispersion of student Brothers, it is impossible in practical terms to give them the follow-up they require. Such an attitude does not seem to be an adequate reaction to the losses and poor results suffered by Districts because of a lack of serious consideration of the requirements of this stage of formation".

* On December 8th 1980, Br. Jose Pablo again wrote as follows: "The weight of the continuing crisis falls on the fluctuating rates of perseverance among Brothers who have not committed themselves definitively by perpetual profession".

* The 1981 intercapitular meeting (Circular 415, p.65) states that: "It must be clear that in every District, initial formation continues up to perpetual profession."

* In 1983, Circular 418 (249) goes more deeply into the subject, and notes: "The fact is that this period is often left without any precise organisation and without any "animators" in charge of it. There is no step-by-step progress towards final profession, and thus the results of the best novitiates can be put at risk."

* In his Pastoral Letter dated January 1st 1988, Brother Superior John Johnston wrote as follows (p.35): "But, frankly, there are very few sectors of the Institute with strong programs from beginning to end: that is to say, from the early stages of the pastoral work of vocations, through aspirancy, postulancy, novitiate, post-novitiate, accompaniment of young Brothers in community, and preparation for perpetual profession." I hope that this brief historical survey will help us to put this question into its true historical context of the last 25 years.

A NEW MENTALITY

It would be good to recall once again the statement of the 1976 General Chapter (Circular 404, p.33, footnote 6): "This stage is largely a new one. Formerly limited to the scholasti-

cate, the whole period extending from the end of the novitiate to perpetual profession has to be organised."

There is clearly a conviction, especially among a great many Visitors, that it is urgent and important to extend this new way of seeing things to all the Brothers. It is urgent for all Visitors, supported by their administrative team, their District Council and Formation Commission, to make subjects in formation, individual Brothers and communities adopt this way of looking upon this period of initial formation.

Circular 418 (252) made the following statement: "The community which receives the Brother during this period is by its nature a formation community, even if it is fully involved in a school or some other institution." On reading this, communities have wondered what they ought to do, what formation programmes they ought to offer and, in a word, what exactly was being asked of them.

Following the guidelines laid down by the Guide, I suggest that a community which hosts a Brother with temporary vows can offer him essentially two things: a lifestyle and accompaniment. This will be the formation programme it offers.

A LIFESTYLE

The young Brother who arrives will have read the present Rule with as much faith and devotion as we did the old Rule during our novitiate. Throughout his novitiate and scholasticate, he will have been introduced to a lifestyle described by this Rule. He will have taken to heart all the means the Rule itself offers him to help him build up his lifestyle, and which the Guide for Formation traces out for each stage of initial formation (see, e.g., 201).

The most enriching formative element a community can offer the young man who joins it is perhaps simply a lifestyle which includes all these means. The young Brother will find in it the right climate in order to grow in maturity and realism.

It is not a question of creating something new or special for the young Brother who joins the community. It is more a question of integrating him into the community as it is. In fact, despite even its limitations - which themselves are a formative factor - it should offer the new arrival a lifestyle which conforms to the Rule, as well as the practice of the means that support it.

The community which hosts a young Brother in order to accompany him in the last stages of his initial formation must have the courage to review its lifestyle and bring it up to standard. The arrival of a young Brother in the community constitutes a real grace from God and a very special opportunity for continuing formation.

ACCOMPANIMENT

Although it might seem paradoxical to say so, it is in the first years of community life that accompaniment is most needed. It is neither in the novitiate nor in the scholasticate that the young Brother can discover the identity of the Brother of the Christian Schools. It is only now, through contact with a real community and with the reality of apostolic work, that the young Brother has to find answers to the many questions life will put to him. The reality of community, of school, of society, of university will make him question many values and principles. He will have to arrive at his own

answers and assert his own identity. In the course of these years in temporary vows, the longest stage of initial formation, every young Brother has to discover his own personality as a religious and then decide to make his perpetual profession. If he does not succeed in doing so, he leaves.

It is in the course of such a process, which is far from easy, that our young Brothers sometimes feel isolated. In such a situation, it is difficult for them to find answers to a whole host of questions with which life assails them. It is not protection that a young Brother needs, but simply accompaniment, and the feeling he is not isolated.

Young Brothers say they need accompaniment in three areas:

* Accompaniment in their teaching

Despite all their teacher training, many of them find themselves for the first time in their lives directly involved, and involved full time, in the life of a school. They ask to be accompanied and express their gratitude when they are, even though at first sight, they often give the impression of preferring to manage on their own.

They ask to be accompanied when they are prematurely given responsibilities for which neither their training nor their experience has prepared them. Because of a lack of staff, we are sometimes obliged to give them these responsibilities. They are happy to take them on, but we cannot leave them to carry the full weight of them on their own.

* Pastoral accompaniment

Thank God, the theological and catechetical training of our young Brothers is more and more thorough. This leads us to give them, possibly prematurely, important responsibilities in these areas. However, we should not forget that in order to exercise them competently they need not only doctrinal training, but above all the kind of experience life alone can give and which they will acquire only gradually.

It is important to know how to offer this personal help to a young Brother. The young Brother in his turn has to learn how to work with an older Brother. The real key to this accompaniment consists in knowing how to marry experience and academic training.

* Personal accompaniment

This is perhaps the fundamental element. The young Brother needs it, and we all need it in our own different ways. The personal interview is a means which builds up community, the whole community.

The real wealth that a community should offer us and, in particular, the young Brother is, for example, someone we trust, friendship, an atmosphere in community conducive to dialogue, informal moments of leisure enjoyed together, quiet conversations with someone, and so on.

Other values that we and especially young Brothers admire and are grateful for in a Director, are accessibility, sensitivity, the ability to wait or to take the initiative. This is what young Brothers feel and speak about.

I hope that these few thoughts have helped to explain the context of this new approach which is gradually gaining ground and creating a new way of seeing things, not only among Visitors, but also in certain of our communities. The responsibility for formation has spread beyond the confines of the "houses of formation" and now concerns each and every one of our communities in which the living strength of each District lies.