

GUIDE FOR FORMATION – 10

POSTULANCY: FOOD FOR THOUGHT (1/2)

Brother Bernardo Villar

The European Union of Major Superiors in 1989 summoned the first Congress on Formation. It took place in "Villa Cavalletti" (Grottaferrata) and aroused wide interest. The period of initial formation known as postulancy was the item upon which reflection concentrated and to which most time was dedicated at the congress.

1. A real issue.

When we analyse the postulancy stage in our institute, we recognise several different aspects; however one aspect seems more significant than the others. Over a short period of years the postulancy, which used to consist of just a few months prior to the novitiate and in the same house, has become an autonomous stage in formation, with definite identity and objectives of its own, and clearly it is taking on a purpose of its own. It has been lengthened by half a year to become a full year in most districts, and there is even a move towards a two year postulancy, which in fact in some districts is already a fact.

What follows is an attempt to make some useful reflections on that part of the Guide to Formation, numbers 163-188, concerned with the postulancy.

2. A stage to clarify.

In our Institute today we find some districts which have had a good twenty years of experience in placing the postulancy within the context of documents like Circular 392 on "Application of Renovacionis causam" of June, 15, 1969; Circular 418 on "Orientations for the Ministry of Vocations and for Initial Formation" of March 19, 1983, and the "Guide to Formation" of January 26, 1991. In contrast, there are districts still asking why the postulancy is necessary since novitiates are quite sufficient. The programmes of various other districts lie somewhere between these two extremes.

Although the expression "period of probation" was the traditional term referring to Novitiate, we nowadays prefer

the definition: "A unique and important experience in the process of being initiated into the religious life of a Brother" (Rule 90). So the novitiate is a time of "initiation" and a "unique and important experience". Postulancy has on the other hand changed its role into one of "probation and discernment". This change should be carefully noted. We must send to the novitiate only those young men who have completed this discernment satisfactorily, who have shown their suitability and have freely decided to begin the experience of religious life found in the novitiate.

3. Making the journey.

* Renovacionis Causam had pointed out the growing distance, even greater since that publication, between the values held in the society in which our young people are born and grow up and those of the Gospel, which they hope to make their rule. Therefore a period of time is needed for "adaptation and examination". It was clear too that the postulancy should be **long enough**. The objectives were to **discern**, to become sufficiently mature, to make a **free choice**, to begin a kind of **separation** or change of mentality and values.

* Our Rule of 1976 insisted that the structure of our new Postulancy was a **district responsibility**, and that an important part of that responsibility rested with a **formation commission** (art 225). One element stood out: the need for a **formation team**; and a sound piece of advice was given: it must **keep in contact with the novitiate team**. Those were important guidelines in keeping with the wisdom of the Rule.

* Circular 418 gives a few more indications. It focuses the postulancy on two key points (cf nos 226,228,229): **discerning** the call, the motives and the decision, **investigating** the aptitudes and the beginnings of the process of leaving things behind. All this had to be experienced in an atmosphere of faith and **with freedom and a down-to-earth attitude**.

* The 1986 rule incorporates the objectives of Circular 418, emphasizing the autonomous character and the special organisation which the postulancy should have (Rule 89).

* The Guide to Formation gives detailed outlines of the whole phase, and what follows is an effort to help reflections on that phase. They are thoughts which arise from the contrast between principles and reality, which are so diverse and varied in our times. I think that the reflections have a richness from their having first been lived, and you are the ones who have given rise to them and shared them with me; for this I thank you. They might seem at first rather disparate and isolated, however there is an element which links them, and they make only sense from that link, just as life itself does.

4. Looking on life:

a Ensuring the novitiate is successful.

By visiting the postulancy of any district one can see what the novitiate is going to be like. That might seem rather a presumptuous statement, but all congregations agree with it. Quite a few young men come to grief because we are asking them to move too quickly. They have plenty of good will, but they lack preparation. There might apparently be need to

hurry because the mission needs men, and it is with that excuse that some candidates are accepted to the novitiate too easily. Perhaps we still think the novitiate is the probation time.

It is simply impossible for young men these days to understand and assimilate what the novitiate is about without a calm and careful preparation in the postulancy. Sending to the novitiate young men full of good will but without enough preparation is to mortgage the work of the novitiate and to ask the novitiate team to do the impossible.

From my experience as Director of an interdistrict novitiate, I can thank God and the teams working with the postulants, that I was always sent well-prepared young men, who were aware of what the novitiate meant and were determined to profit from it. I must also point out that we had to discourage certain visitors from sending us young men who had not been in the postulancy.

b. Values.

This is a matter we have to be aware of, for these days, young people are affected by an instability in society which makes values unstable too. Frivolous values are in evidence and these make a pretence of giving the answer to problems and of making one appear worldly wise, but they are in reality just a mere fleeting appearance of values.

Permissiveness and subjectivity are two forces which have great conditioning effect. The scattering of disparate ideas rather than making a unity out of diversity, whether within society or in education, make it hard for young people to form an integrated set of values.

On the other hand, certain values which were formerly rather underemphasised, are nowadays gaining a great following among the young: communication, sharing, solidarity. Dialogue on and clarification of such values from the Christian point of view is absolutely necessary. I would say that the **nucleus** of the work in the postulancy should be on this matter. Content is determined by it. Keep your eye on the academic mentality at the time of formation for there must be content of course, but content must be within the context of values.

That "pluricentrism" or lack of definite focus which even adults turn to these days in the slightest upset is disconcerting. This affects people at their work, in the family, in their relationships, and yet we have to guide our young people to make Christ their only centre and for the whole of their life.

c. Achieving a certain freedom from one's milieu.

"One thing is lacking to you. Sell all that you have, and give it to the poor..., then come and follow me" (Lk 18,22). Our young people find reasons for following an ideal, but often enough they do not find reasons for giving things up. It is an everyday struggle; it is our struggle and that of the young religious who want to follow an ideal, but do not succeed in abandoning anything. It is an internal strife; a wish to serve two masters. With this attitude, consecration can remain a kind of superstructure, something unassimilated and which weighs heavily on us like a burden.

Circular 418 (nos 117 to 123) talks about the thresholds we have to cross. The Guide to Formation systematically

uses the compound word **choice-breaking away** (101, 172).

Autonomy with regard to **one's family**. The role of the family in the process of formation of a candidate has changed remarkably in the past few years. These days, as one of the elements in the formation of the young religious, it plays an important role. One has to be able to direct the candidate towards autonomy with regard to his own family, with which we nevertheless should keep in touch throughout the formation period.

We "formators" have to know the families of those we are forming. We need to know first hand the family, the home, the surroundings where our candidates come from. Our young men even ask us at times to give instruction to their families on what vocation means, so that they will know the type of life their son is going to lead. When the family understands and backs his choice, it is a great support to their son.

Today quite a number of those in formation have real family problems. We should help them to know these problems, to face up to them and conquer them. This is not an easy task. We have to place our young candidates within the setting of this adjustment between autonomy and relationships. The family is not understood in the same way in every culture, yet the commandment of the Lord is the same for everyone. The way one works has to be adapted to circumstances, but the goal is the same. We cannot send to the novitiate a young man who still "depends" on his family. This might seem too rigorous a statement, but it is based on experience. The young man has to become autonomous with regard to his family and its setting.

Autonomy with respect to **social relationships**. Our young people have a whole world of relationships like the rest of us. We don't have to break these relationships off, but we have to feel free, to experience friendship from the point of view of the religious choice we have made in our life. It is knowing how to preserve friendships within the context of choice and values which are not necessarily going to correspond. This is a difficult kind of liberty, which one has to master. True friendship does not condition, it liberates.

With this healthy kind of diversity, and as our young men make progress in their formation, their friendships become more centred on the Brothers themselves, for unless that happens, an imbalance occurs, leading to division and dependence.

Autonomy from one's **surroundings**. One's means of communication form one's surroundings, as does one's way of talking, dressing, one's way of organising one's life and leisure... We are all children of our times, and our young men are children living in the final years of the twentieth century.

Autonomy does not mean ignorance. It is informed freedom. To be young today and to be a young religious of today: there lies the plan for liberty; the battle for it is a daily duty.

What I believe is that we cannot send to the novitiate a young man who has not faced the theme epitomised in the compound expression "choice-breaking away", and who has not begun the struggle to master his own autonomy. One has to begin the battle, but it must continue throughout life. Without that, our religious life is a mere superstructure, which limits our person, and which will end up by destroying our personality.