

GUIDE FOR FORMATION – 10

POSTULANCY: FOOD FOR THOUGHT (2/2)

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d. To be at one with oneself.

When you live in close proximity with candidates following our postulancy programme you soon realise what a different life they now live compared with some years ago.

Many of them, a high percentage in fact, when dealing with their own personal, family and social history, have to face situations of real poverty, violence, insecurity, relativity, permissiveness, drugs, sex and exploitation. Many of our young people when they begin the road to self-knowledge and self-acceptance, have first to become reconciled with themselves, which is not always easy, but certainly necessary. The Lord calls young people today just as in former times he called Saul and Zaccheus. Everyone has to take up his own story.

This is quite serious work for the postulancy; here too is a challenge for us formators. The starting point for formation is not where we want to say it is, but where the young man who comes to us really is at that moment; and the truth is that the situation is often coloured by the ingredients of our present day society. Reconciling young people to themselves is a personal undertaking which is slow, and needs patience. What is certain is that, if the young man who arrives at our novitiate is not fundamentally reconciled with himself, with his family and social surroundings, it is going to be very difficult, if not impossible for him to concentrate on the work of the novitiate. Here is another criterion for admission to the novitiate.

e. Discerning one's vocation.

Thank God that in most of our districts our young men reach us after a more or less prolonged period of pastoral counselling; this they have had in our schools or in movements we are involved in. I believe that during this time of counselling, interesting work of discernment takes place.

However, when he has opted to enter the postulancy, that is the time when the young man needs greater help and closer counselling, so that he can find out the true motives for trying his vocation with us. It is then that we carefully examine these motives with him to see if they are conscious or to discover motives which might be unconscious. It is important to know what is the starting point, which are the basic motives which drive the young man. After that begins the task of clarifying, purifying and enriching them.

Such work needs an atmosphere which is free, and which allows for spontaneity, and a style of relationships which is close and brotherly. Come and see. Come and let us find out together. The trial period of shared life is the atmosphere which best allows us really to get to know our young men. It is best not to intellectualise problems too much. Knowledge has never been a hindrance, it is true, but the knowledge of empathy in which the young man feels loved rather than observed, or what we might call a kind of existential frame of mind, is the true key to this work.

Discernment is a delicate matter which cannot be performed alone. We undergo formation as a group, and let's hope that our formation groups can all have a wealth of persons and values. The group itself, in the way it lives, is constantly helping us in one way or another to discern. Community dynamics, call them meetings, revisions, interviews, brotherly correction, shared leisure, shared prayer... are moments to meet, for dialogue, when we are all undertaking together the work of discernment.

The team which animates, plays an important part in this dynamic situation. And we talk of teams, because young people need models to identify with, and we ourselves need a difference of point of view. Logically, discernment becomes clear through the valuable task of personal counselling, which consists in the systematic and frequent dialogue between the candidate and the Brother Director.

f. The formation community.

Deeds are what convince. Most recent experience tells us of the unviability of small groups, which sometimes cause asphyxia among their members, especially among young people experiencing their first living together. The group is a formative element of the first order. A healthy, sensible group is ideal for good formation.

I recall the remark of a very experienced formator. See to it, he told me, that the atmosphere of the group is healthy, and you will see how problems, which of course will never be lacking, will be brought to light by the group itself, and the group will face up to them and find ways of solving them. How right he was. One of the things which will especially concern us will be ensuring that the channels of communication within the formation community are free, easy flowing, unencumbered at personal and institutional level. When the channels of communication are underground, and when what can't be said openly is muttered among little huddled knots, the atmosphere is tainted, and we all become its victims.

Some years ago, when a group of postulants had become rather small, they tried to solve the problem by sending the postulants out to communities. This experiment is interesting, but it is not the moment to analyse it now, and it has not been repeated. But it brought about the creation of postul-

ancies at district and regional level. This was a good idea, because it allowed for joint plans and projects between districts, and it strengthened the formation teams as well as those under their care.

g. Formation in Faith.

There is great diversity in the Christian background of our various candidates as well as in their religious experience. Usually in the period of counselling previous to their novitiate, they receive some rather systematic experience in apostolic commitment, in educational work, in helping the poor, which reveal their good will and a readiness to do work with others.

At the same time, a certain absence of systematic formation in the faith comes to light. Their religious formation often stops at the adolescent stage, with confirmation. Sometimes we even have candidates coming from a first generation of Christians, with hardly any experience of personal or family Christian life.

It is rather common for them to find difficulty in expressing their faith in their own words, to justify it or defend it with solid conviction, to prove the authenticity of the church or of the sacraments which they are constantly receiving.

To profit from the novitiate, they need a foundation in basic doctrine which we must give them in the postulancy. That is the reason why we should know what stage our candidates have reached, so that from there, we can give them a systematic review of our faith. Adult catechisms, some of which are superb, will give us an excellent tool for this work. They are not school books, they are rather books for adults to reflect on, prepared within the community under the direction of an expert catechist. This synthesis of the faith for adults is the kind of book that our candidates need, rather than tremendously deep works coming from learned theological reviews. They will have time for that later. This type of synthesis of doctrine directed to their personal life and apostolic interests is the best foundation on which to base their novitiate experience.

There will doubtless be cases where the programme must be made more personal. At times the very situation of the groups will require us to centre on specific and definite questions or to insist on explicit points to help them in their prayers and their sacramental life which they are actually living in the postulancy itself.

h. Solitude and personal prayer.

These are two things that they are going to meet more fully in the novitiate and which we should help them to know a little about in the postulancy. Discovering solitude, having a feeling for it and beginning to savour it are perhaps "novelties" which the postulancy should offer to candidates who come to us fresh from surroundings of rush and constant noise, coming from such things as walkmans.

It is patient work, whose results do not come when we want them to, but when each candidate is ready for them. Patience is needed and work on choosing as right a moment as possible. This is how mental prayer and the meeting with

oneself and with God are born. This is when solitude begins to be filled with sound. Our young people need this preparation and this initiation so that they can profit from the novitiate. We need to prepare for it gradually.

i. Knowledge of the Institute.

This is another item which the young men wanting to join us should be told about. It should be straight forward knowledge, not overloaded with facts. They just need a first contact with our Founder's life, with the district they have joined, with a broad outline of the history of the Institute.

We must not be in too much of a hurry. There will be time to stop and concentrate on certain items. The best we can do for the postulants is to give them a taste for Lasallian things, to make them want to know more about and begin to enjoy facts connected with the Founder, the district and the Institute. "Initiation" rather than indoctrination is what is required, initiation into something alive, which we pass on, rather than some notional matter which we teach them. I believe that this is the way to proceed.

j. Counselling, often called "accompanying" these days.

We have already insisted on this topic. From the standpoint of "initiation" in its existential meaning, which is how we understand initial formation, "accompaniment" is the key word (Guide 110).

In the processes we have been dealing with, whether they be called self-knowledge, reconciliation with self, mastering autonomy, values, discernment... it is only from the aspect of accompaniment that we can work on them.

There is existential accompaniment, which we all offer one another in a sensibly structured community life. We also need the doctrinal accompaniment, which we have just mentioned. But, in the end, it is up to each one to make his own synthesis, according to his own style and rhythm. The wisdom of the formator appears in being at the side of each of the candidates he is accompanying in the formation process, which though personal, cannot be achieved alone. Personal, sincere dialogue, which is open and brotherly, followed through systematically and at frequent intervals, is the way that formative work should be done. That is why the Guide (173) insists that the Director of the postulancy will consider it is his primary duty to be available and habitually accessible to candidates so that they can have an interview with him.

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Let us end these reflections with the following thought: The postulancy is a **stage which needs a new definition**. The reflections which I have shared with you are the result of this effort at presenting a new definition, and which we are all attempting gradually to clarify. I would venture to suggest that these reflections echo the circumstances which surround us, and which we have learned from. Let us hope that they will help us to make the steps necessary to suit the actual situation of the times we live in.