

Obedience and Responsibility 87

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It is, by now, a truism to state that one of the major problems in the traditional forms of religious life is that they tend to attract and conserve immature personalities. So does marriage, of course. In both cases the state of life entered upon is not viewed objectively in all its stark reality, but as offering an immediate assuagement of the craving to be loved. It is an effort, not to give love, but – without necessarily earning it – to get love and, through it, an assurance of personal value which, for one reason or another, was denied in the earliest formative years.

Whatever names psychologists give to the various compensations and defence mechanisms which the ego develops in reaction to primary experiences, the trouble is always born of fear out of devaluation. Whatever ideal self-image the individual sets up, and for which he seeks recognition and affirmation, the burning question in every relationship is always, at bottom, 'Do you love me, accept me, value me . . . ?' When the proffered 'me' is not the actual person but a 'persona', a construct based on who knows what borrowed notions, the quest is bound to be a disappointment for all concerned.

A mature person is one who is free from the compulsion to play a part, who is content to be himself to the best of his ability and who is, therefore, free to pour himself out in love of others, and of another in particular. Maturity is developed by accepting and exercising responsibility. Therefore, the opportunity to exercise responsibility for oneself and towards others is a necessary condition for maturation. This is the crux of the problem: how to combine the state of subjection and dependence on superiors and fixed rules by a vow of obedience, with the exercise of free personal choice without which there is no responsibility.

To point out that freedom is an essential condition for the valid profession of vows is no answer; it is the daily acting in accordance with profession which is the essence of the gift of self. It is no more legitimate to count on the initial emission of vows as precluding any further exercise of responsibility than it is to end one's life by suicide and call it a holocaust.

There are two distinct classes of suiciders: those who have never developed the basic will to live and who, at the slightest pressure, seek death as the easier option; the other type are those brought up suddenly before what, at the moment, they feel to be an intolerable situation. Dramatisation is the underlying impulse behind the gesture which is meant to convey a tit-for-tat: 'Tomorrow I'll be dead, then

you'll all be sorry.' Usually this sort of suicide is not completed, except by accident, and a loop-hole for rescue is unconsciously arranged. The subject does not really want to be dead, but he does want urgently, in the stressful here and now, to communicate his despair; so he hurries on to put himself beyond the point of no return, before honest commonsense breaks in and faces him once more with the intolerable situation from which he was attempting to escape.

Too many supposed 'vocations' get through to the religious or the priestly state, driven by much the same unconscious, unrecognised motivation. Which is the better, the more self-possessed, autonomous, worthy of the human person: to renew freely the self-commitment at each succeeding conscious moment of decision, or, to burn one's boats so as to make it practically impossible *not* to go on? Yet marriage vows and religious profession cannot ultimately rest on a negative. The commitment is a gift, not a loan, and the purpose of a gift is that the recipient shall henceforth have dominion over the gift, 'to have and to hold, for better, for worse . . . till death do us part.' In religious profession the gift is unlimited, 'of each one of us Christ longs to say "This is my body"'. So it comes back to the point first made: what is the driving impulse, to give or to get, God-centred or self-centred?

In marriage, certain natural pressures can often effect the transition from the attitude of 'out to get' to 'out to give'. The bridegroom finds himself faced with the necessity of providing for his family, the bride obliged to maintain the functional aspects of the home. Both have to face the problem of easing two different personalities into an unbreakable unity. Sheer everyday interdependence conduces to an abandonment of self-centredness for other-centredness.

But in traditional forms of religious life the pressures are more remote and more easily evaded as personal obligations. Mgr Huyghes, Bishop of Arras, and a member of the Council's Commission for Religious, wrote in 'Equilibre et Adaptation',

'The distinction between psychological and affective motivation on one hand, and spiritual motivation on the other, is that the former must be realized in its essentials *before* entering religion, for community life inhibits development in this domain, or stops it altogether, even if it does not cause a regression. Whereas spiritual motivation, though perhaps at first quite rudimentary, may well, in the course of the novitiate and throughout later years, strike deeper roots and grow to full flower.' (Translation and italics, mine, SMA.)

What are the factors which seem to produce this state of affairs?

1. *Institutional living* which eliminates the immediate pressure of daily necessities. Uniform food, shelter and clothing are provided by those in authority, while any deviations in taste, convenience or suitability are discouraged. A fixed routine of tasks, requiring little

or no initiative, and allocated without room for choice, sometimes reduces individuals to the role of automata.

2. *The family pattern of association.* The relations between the members of natural families are seldom ideal; even where they have approximated to the ideal, they must be outgrown if the individual is to reach independent maturity. Repetition of the family situation accounts both for the attraction felt by immature personalities for the traditional forms of religious life, and for their later difficulties arising from fixation in or regression to earlier stages of personality development.

3. *The system of authority* which is vested in a single superior, and exercised in a paternalistic-maternalistic spirit, forces the rest of the community into the complementary mould of the nursery-school-room. Young people today frequently complain that communities are too large, 'too much like school' from which, however, one never graduates. Biologically adult persons are being treated as children, whereas the pattern of association in a religious community should be that of the work-team, as, for example, in an architect's office, or a clinical team, or a research unit. The cohesion required to make a community is forged by the processes of living and working together for a common purpose.

2. *The conception of the Rule and Constitutions* as primarily a juridical piece of legislation, has evolved inevitably from the authoritarian form of association. The religious is assumed to be, not only a child, but even a hardened delinquent. Most existing constitutions are made up largely of penal legislation, not unlike the regulations governing nineteenth century reformatories. What is even more curious is that they take for granted an inconsistency of purpose in the ordinary religious which is positively schizoid: there are exhaustive enumerations of the particular penalties attached to particular offences most of which would never enter anyone's head to commit. One would think that if any religious had reached the point of deliberately and persistently breaking the rule freely accepted by profession, she would hardly be likely to submit to penalties, and that repeatedly. In order to prevent the commission of these same possible offences, there is often an elaborate system of supervision: grilles, where still imposed, escorts, double locked doors, opened letters, and many other ways by which it is made clear to the individual that she is not trusted to behave in a manner consistent with age and state of life. These things should have been assured by the training received in the novitiate. That some will occasionally abuse liberty is certain; but that is no reason for a global distrust. The fundamental arguments against censorship in any form apply to all these situations.

5. *The lack of exercise in carrying responsibilities.* 'Religious give up neither the rational nor the social qualities of their human nature . . . To do so is impossible for any human being, since to be a person

means to be the responsible agent for oneself. (Unfortunately, a false concept seems to equate obedience, rather than the three theological virtues and especially charity, with the goal of religious life.' (S. M. Liam 'Subsidiarity', *Sisters Today*, Oct., 65). In the nursery-school system of community life, 'mother' or 'father' always 'knows best'. Even the recent Council's pronouncements on authority in the Church are still largely dominated by this principle. True consultation at all levels is enjoined, but since the rank and file's recommendations are held to be merely consultative and not deliberative, the ordinary member is still deprived of responsibility. Policies and directives are generally formulated and executed at top level without consultation with, or participation by, the bulk of the community.

Again, it is characteristic of communities run on maternalistic lines that all the chief offices are kept in the hands of the superior and her deputy who grow into the habit of thinking that no one else can be trusted with the responsibility for any department, nor is anyone else held to be competent to carry out any task other than as a tool to relieve the superior of the mechanical drudgery. The result is that superiors are over-burdened, while the rest become less and less able to carry responsibility from sheer lack of training and practice. Capabilities are gifts of God; if they are not used they turn to frustration, boredom and resentment.

The monastic pattern of authority has been and still is based on the feudal system, while the rest of mankind has advanced, in varying degrees, towards the principles of democracy. Religious men and women wish to – indeed must – come freely, bringing the gift of their reasonable service. A feudal levy is not a gift.

The excuses given for persisting in the feudal form of government are: (a) that superiors must be sacrificed by being saddled with the whole burden or responsibility, in order that all the rest may vacate in peace to attend to uninterrupted contemplation. Apart from the impossibility of uninterrupted contemplation in this life, not even that boon is to be preferred to the attainment of full stature as a human person: it is, after all, the human person who contemplates, and grace builds on nature. (b) That all, bar again the poor superior, be insured the good of obedience. This is a crime against the individuals condemned to bear the burden of office for the greater part of their lives; even the best of them, sooner or later, end by being identified, and by identifying themselves, with the office. Worse still some communities, by special indult, evade the general canon law which limits the years of office to a maximum of six. The late Abbot Ford of Downside said 'There is a limit for all of us, sooner or later, to the work we can do, and it is well to recognize it in time; otherwise we often undo in the end what we spent our best years in constructing.' (*Life of Abbot Ford*, by Bruno Hicks, o.s.b., p.98).

Submission to an autocracy could be replaced by obedience to the community as a body, which would be a much sounder proposi-

tion, granted that the community's general way of life were given the seal of God's will through the approval of his representative, the Church. The Second Vatican Council has recalled us in no uncertain terms to the reality of the authority vested in the People of God as making up the Church.

The prior or prioress (not Father Prior nor Mother Prioress) would be, as the name indicates, simply the first among many brethren, the leader and the spokesman for the time being. In order to ensure that the office is a service, and not an assumption of personal power, it is suggested that the individual elected should hold office for a maximum of three years and be ineligible for at least the same period following – perhaps better still, for six years, which would prevent the same two people doing box-and-cox endlessly.

The objections that such a rapid turn-over would make all constructive policies impossible, and, also, take no account of the dearth of individuals gifted with the qualities for leadership, would have been met by the initial proviso that the government of the house be placed on the shoulders of *all* the members by a true sharing of responsibility. Such a living community would be a rich soil for producing strong, mature personalities. How otherwise fulfil Our Lord's command: 'You are all brethren; and call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father who is in heaven. Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ' (Matt. 23, 8–10)? It is sufficient that they are gathered together in the name and service of Christ to be sure of his presence as he promised.

6. *The lack of direct intercommunication.* It is not merely a question of the extent of the rule of silence; even when it permits speech, it severely restricts its use and its subject by the circumstances of time and place. Community recreation is superficially social: conversation is expected to be light, trivial and, if possible, amusing in a somewhat juvenile way. Women who have entered enclosure in their teens or early twenties and, since then, kept no contact with the events in the world, nor with the advances of knowledge in any field, who have read no literature outside the narrow scope of a pious convent library, and who know nothing of the growing points of men's minds as revealed in the arts of the day, particularly of drama, have literally nothing vital to talk about. Conversation is reduced to a desultory chatter about the weather, the animals, the garden, the visitors as glimpsed, and – plain gossip.

There is no provision for more personal exchanges, discussions or consultations other than with the superior. Straightforward communication, if any, takes place vertically, seldom horizontally. In the case of conflict between individuals, any attempt to meet and seek a rational solution by an honest exchange of feelings, motives, aims, so that at least each side knows both sides of the matter – the only solid basis for a reconciliation of opposites – is arbitrarily blocked. Under these conditions, is it any wonder that distrust and

suspicion, feeding on rumour and guesswork, should grow and fester to sometimes formidable proportions. James Hillman, speaking to the Guild of Pastoral Psychology, December 1964, on the 'subject of 'Betrayal' said, 'Conditions are transformed within the same sort of close personal situation in which they occurred.'

The common subject of communication in a religious community would normally be the general and particular ends of their institute. Chapter meetings should be occasions on which it conducts its business of self-government, discusses and decides on policy and all that concerns the community as a whole or as individuals, allocating by common consent the tasks and responsibilities of each member. Those who are difficult in these matters would then learn by experience the problems of their allocation.

In place of the traditional monastic Chapter of Faults which, by reason of its formality, artificiality and lack of two-way communication, has become totally alien to the present-day mind, it is suggested that regular sessions be held to examine group dynamics, a form of group therapy which works as a very efficient corporate examination of conscience on actual human relations within the community and with others; it is akin to what, in France, is called 'Révision de vie'. Within the one hour or so of session, communication between members is completely free and open, but it is not permissible to discuss outside the closed circle of these meetings anything said or done within it. Years of experience in group therapy has already shown how it improves human relations and forges bonds of mutual tolerance, respect and trust – qualities which, to the uninitiated, are the reverse of what is feared from such a free-for-all. It is the tonic effect of truth, truth sought sincerely at whatever cost. The barriers against free communication set up under the old monastic persuasion which claims that what is out of sight or hearing is, therefore, out of mind and even non-existent, can no longer deceive us. Provision for this greater psychological awareness will have to be made, and made soon.

7. *Meaningless forms of prayer and devotional practices.* Fashions change in these matters as drastically, if not as frequently, as in 'haute couture'. Most of them have been started one, two or three hundred years ago, prescribed under the impulse of a particular superior's particular devotion. Probably she grew out of it herself; certainly her successors do. On this the rare negative is needed as a measure of protection against the tendency to accumulate insupportable burdens of fossilised devotions: namely, that nothing be added by rule or custom to the universal essentials of the Church's liturgy, the Mass, the sacraments and the cycle of the Divine Office. From the liturgy, intelligently and faithfully performed, there will grow an abundant harvest of private prayer about which there should be no legislation as to time, place or form, other than to preserve the opportunity for such prayer.

8. *Obsolete practices of asceticism.* That there must be asceticism is certain. Christ said 'If any man will come after me, let him deny himself daily and follow me'. Yet some of the methods traditionally handed down have little or no meaning for us today. 'It is no secret that there is a great deal of sickness, mental and therefore physical, among religious at the present time . . . it is above all, because of the tension created by the increasing gap between the pretensions of the institutions and the real source and occasions of personal asceticism, and growth in faith and maturity'. (Fergus Kerr, O.P. 'Theology in a Godforsaken epoch', *New Blackfriars*, Sept. 1965).

The whole of religion is comprised in the love of God and neighbour. Love is at once the most personal act and that in which the individual denies himself most completely, for he makes his own the will of another acknowledged as other. Mutual love and service, carried out consistently and perseveringly, can cut to the bone, as St. Therese, in the tenth chapter of her Autobiography, shows uncompromisingly.

There would then seem to be no need – in fact, strong arguments against – the artificial crosses of contrived penitential practices, such as taking the discipline, abject speeches and performances, which may have had their use in more primitive times, but which are now felt to be childish and psychologically unhealthy. Particularly with regard to the discipline, understandable embarrassment and secrecy about such a repulsive practice has prevented its removal from constitutions long after common knowledge of physiology and psychology has condemned it. Religious will, of course, in the pursuit of their ideals, want to be reticent, but they should not need to be secretive. Their ways should be lived openly in the clear light of day for all to see and be glad thereat.

9. *A failure to appreciate the Christian and social duty to work for one's living.* The virtue and the vow of poverty do not mean destitution; neither do they mean living at other people's expense. Foundations by devout and wealthy patrons, revenues from landed properties and dowries, have each had their day and become obsolete. Modern industrialisation and mass production have created entirely new conditions and provide religious communities, especially enclosed communities, with problems which will act as goads to reform by the sheer pressure of practical necessity. There are difficult decisions to take in order to preserve on one hand the seclusion, regularity and silence which shape the life of specialists in prayer, with, on the other hand, the requirements of up-to-date technology, market standards and relations with suppliers and customers.

Because the majority of men religious take on the priesthood also, their work has been almost exclusively intellectual, while women have been largely occupied with manual and domestic work. Ideally both sexes should habitually see to their own basic human needs, and be capable of cooking a meal, doing their share of housework

and washing out their own 'smalls'. But the work involved in keeping ourselves in a civilised state of existence should be streamlined to a minimum by every available modern means so as to free us for the apostolic work entrusted to the community, whether this be an active service in the world or the silent, hidden sacrifice of contemplative prayer. There is no virtue in more than a modicum of manual labour, sufficient to give necessary physical exercise to the whole body, and to keep a healthy mental balance. Automation is desirable wherever possible so as to free the growing number of individuals who are educated to accomplish more complex and intellectually demanding tasks. The study of scripture, of the history of God's dealings with his people, of liturgy and of the art of prayer are primary duties and necessities of every contemplative religious. But study is impossible for the student who is drugged with exhaustion from long hours of heavy physical labour. The traditional emphasis on manual labour as conducive to contemplative prayer does not suit the modern mind which needs to know much more before the will can be freely exercised.

Finally, the over-all problem concerning the changes required in monasticism is, of course, whether these changes are to evolve slowly from within existing structures, or whether a much speedier, more radical reformation is the only solution. The need is urgent: the evolution of the human race is gathering momentum; more changes have taken place in the last five years than in the previous fifty. If monasticism does not meet the challenge quickly, it will be left behind – and perhaps that is the end of the road. Teilhard de Chardin, in his *Milieu Divin* says, 'When that (the sanctification of human endeavour) comes to pass, there will be little to separate life in the cloister from the life of the world' (p. 40). 'Amen. Come Lord Jesus'.