CALLED TO BE TRANSFORMED INTO THE IMAGE OF CHRIST (2Cor. 3:18)

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REFLECTIONS ON MONASTIC FORMATION

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Note: Here is the text of an article I published in 1995 in the ***A.I.M. Monastic Bulletin*** (n° 59) on the theme of monastic formation. It is a short summary of a course I give at the Collegio Sant'Anselmo in Rome every other year on the same topic. The article was written in French, and the English translation published in the ***A.I.M. Monastic Bulletin*** betrayed the original in many places. Here is a revised translation which is at least closer to the original.

I. Image of God

We are created in the image and likeness of God, but, wounded by sin, we need this image to be restored within us. This is the ultimate goal of the Christian life and so also of the monastic life.

The Son of God, who was *in forma Dei*, was not afraid to renounce his privileged status; he humbled himself (Ph.2:6-7), making himself one of us, like us in everything except sin (Heb.4:15). He consented to lose his *forma*, his beauty. He was disfigured to the point of being no longer recognizable (Is.53:2). He tasted death. But the Father raised him from the dead, seated him at his right hand, and made him *Kyrios* (Ph.2:9). In this way we have been shown the way of return to the Image. Having been deformed by sin, we must reform ourselves so as to be gradually transformed into the image of the risen Christ.

This final transformation, through a long process of reformation, or conversion, is the object of monastic formation. This formation must be understood in the first place not in the sense of an activity exercised by a human formator on another person, but in the sense of a gradual and constant transformation, never fully realized, of a person who using the means offered by monastic *conversatio*, allows the Holy

Spirit to restore within him the disfigured image and the lost resemblance.

The theme of the Image of God is central in the spirituality of primitive monasticism. This doctrine, which comes from Genesis 1:26, is very dear to all the Fathers of the Church who have dedicated themselves to searching into the mystery of salvation. Each of them has dealt with it in a different way, with the freedom that is found among poets and mystics, and so this doctrine has become very complex and has been presented with many varied shades of meaning. It can be summed up as follows: Man has been created in the image (*imago*) and likeness (*similitudo*) of God. As a privileged creature, he is called to share the divine life. These provisions have been reversed by sin, but man retains the ability to turn towards God (*capacitas Dei*). Through the grace of the Redemption and in imitation of Jesus Christ, man is capable of participating in the divine life. If his predisposition towards God (*imago*) develops and manifests itself in a sustained life of virtue, he moves towards resemblance (*similitudo*) and finds his fulfilment in becoming the image of God.

When we speak of monastic formation, we usually mean initial formation. However this can only be considered as an element or stage in the total process of transformation which we have just described. The goal of monastic formation, in all its stages, is nothing less than the restoration of the image of God in the monk. It is a progressive transformation which embraces the whole of life. To bring about this journey of transformation, man has a model, a prototype: the Word, who is the perfect Image of the Father, and whom St Bernard called the *sacramentum salutis.*

None of the Fathers of monasticism have in fact written about "formation" - at least in the sense in which we understand the word today. Nevertheless we see from their writings that they understood clearly that their role, whether as abbots or spiritual fathers, was to bring Christ to birth in their disciples. They knew that to bring this task to fulfilment they should lead their monks to the imitation of Christ. It is indeed through this imitation of Christ that the monk gradually makes more active in his life this resemblance which he received at the moment of his creation, and that the image of God within him is restored.

The idea that one can form someone to the monastic life, as one trains a doctor or a professor, comes from an altogether modern conception. This approach was absolutely foreign to the Fathers of monasticism. For them, monastic life was not a reality in which one could form anyone, but on the contrary it was a means, or rather a comprehensive range of means, by which one allowed oneself to be formed. It is in

living the monastic life that one becomes more and more a monk and gradually allows oneself to be transformed into the image of Christ.

II. In the cenobitic context

When the anchorites of the first centuries went to the desert, they sought to put themselves under the direction of a spiritual father who had already had experience of the desert and who demonstrated the influence of the Spirit in his person, one who had become *pneumatophoros*. This charismatic spiritual father of the desert passed on his own experience to his disciples in the manner of a guru. The relationship of father to son or master to disciple was usually provisionary, coming to an end when the disciple had achieved sufficient spiritual maturity to continue on his way by himself in solitude.

The charism of the fathers of cenobitism, of a Pachomius or a Basil for instance, was to work out a stable form of community life, a *politeia*, according to an established rule through which spiritual experience would in future be passed on. We find here an authentic *monastic culture* expressing a collective identity which enables all those who participate in it to achieve their own personal identity.

Culture must be understood here as a coherent complex of spiritual teaching, ascetic traditions, customs, observance, administrative organization etc., which express a spiritual experience, keep it alive and pass it on. A culture implies the cohesion and consistency of all the elements of life. Such a culture is always, and par excellence, the fruit of the experience of a collectivity. An individual does not invent his culture. The role of the saints, mystics and geniuses, as of poets, artists or theologians, is to give expression to the experience which has been handed down and kept it alive through and in their culture.

In the cenobitic milieu it is essentially in and through the form of the community life itself that monastic experience is handed down and that the *formation* of the monk comes about, from his entrance into the monastery until he passes over to the other shore. St Benedict is found within this great cenobitic tradition and it is here that the monks of the Benedictine tradition must look for the basic principles of monastic formation and not in a spirituality with an eremitical orientation.

When Benedict, in the first chapter of his Rule, describes the different categories of monks, he defines the strong race of cenobites as being those who live a) in community, b) under a rule, and c) under an abbot. We have here the three pillars of cenobitism and the order

in which Benedict gives them is of the greatest importance. History teaches us that each time the balance between these three elements is broken, a period of decadence ensues.

Community, rule, abbot. These are the three essential elements of Benedictine *conversatio* and so it is in living by them at each stage of his monastic existence, that the monk gradually becomes a true monk, and that his formation – or transformation – takes place in the sense mentioned above.

1) The community

In the great Benedictine and Cistercian tradition, a person's vocation is not a call to live the monastic life in general or even the vocation to a particular congregation. It is the call to a concrete community of brothers which constitutes an ecclesial cell. It is here that, after an adequate probation, he promises his stability; and it is with these brothers, unless obedience gives him another mission, that he will experience the mystery of salvation in the Church to the end of his days.

The modality in which each concrete community lives out this communion, this *koinonia*, has a very profound influence on the human and spiritual development of the monk throughout his existence. Besides all the "means of formation" which it offers to its members, the community as such has role of the utmost importance in formation.

A community can properly fulfil this role only on the condition that it has developed a solid local monastic culture. Such a monastic culture implies a clear common vision of monastic life and a spiritual orientation which conditions, which "informs" (in the Aristotelian sense) all the elements of daily life: the manner of prayer, of work, of making community decisions, of receiving guests, etc.

If such a common vision, such a culture, exists, the role of "formators" (abbot, father master, professors) will consist essentially in helping the monks, above all the newcomers, to participate in it and to allow themselves to be formed by it, and to make it their own in a responsible and creative way. If it does not exist all the "techniques" of formation that may be used (courses, meetings, counseling etc.) will in general have very little result.

The monastic community is not simply a place where we practice personal asceticism. It is a place where we seek the will of God together. Benedict wanted all the brethren to be called together whenever something important had to be discussed: *convocet abbas omnem congregationem* (RB 3:1), *omnes ad consilium vocari* (RB 3:3). This is

not a simple exercise of majority power, or of democracy before its time. It means that all should come together to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to each person for the good of all. Even if the abbot has the final responsibility to make a decision, the conventual chapter is the occasion for each person to exercise an act of community co-responsibility and thus to grow in the understanding of his own responsibility.

A healthy community is also a place of emotional and affective growth. Personal relationships which are able to develop at the heart of community life are both a school enabling a deep relationship with God and a sacramental expression of that relationship. Because the Christian community embodies a new way of looking at human relationships, these are seen and lived as a sacramental expression of the mystery of the Church. We are dealing with something much more profound than a vague community feeling. Yet care must be taken not to fall into the trap of an extremely tight unanimity, which ends by depriving individuals of their personal identity.

Fraternal life enables one to know oneself in the encounters of daily life and discover one's need for conversion. We soon recognize ourselves as a community of sinners who have all been forgiven. It also gives the possibility of being transformed through the practice of fraternal charity.

A healthy community life is the place where we can learn to read and interpret reality not only in ourselves but also round about us, and to penetrate to its center. An authentic contemplative life does not consist in withdrawing from reality to live in an artificial or purely spiritual world. It consists in withdrawing to the center, to the heart of all reality. A healthy community life helps us to evaluate with serenity the varied information that we receive, the different events through which we live. It helps us to go beyond our subjective projections and our conscious or unconscious desires.

Inflexibility of positions and in personal analyzes of reality constitutes in many cases an obstacle which hinders human and spiritual growth. A monk who continues to grow normally in the common life must be a person who is always capable of adapting himself, of modifying his opinions and attitudes. He knows how to cope with the inevitable conflicts inherent in human existence and how to live with the peace of the heart the tensions inherent in all common life. A healthy community life enables him gradually to acquire an attitude of understanding, compassion and sympathy towards everyone. A monk who transforms himself into a heresy hunter is somewhat abnormal.

In community, the monk learns to unify his life. In the world, a

person can easily live in a series of parallel lives. There is for example the business man, the profession- al or the politician who keeps a complete separation between his professional life and his family life or between his professional life and his religious practice. For the monk, this should be impossible. A monk can indeed have responsibilities in his community and even outside the monastery; but all his activities form part of his monastic life, he does them as a monk. Otherwise the central element of a monk's being would be lacking, that is, simplicity, which consists in having one single goal, one single preoccupation in life.

2) The Rule

Christ became obedient, with an obedience through which his will was totally identified with that of the Father. It is by the same path of obedience, in imitation of Christ, that the monk will allow the Spirit gradually to restore the image of God within him. What is meant here is of course obedience to the divine will; but this obedience is incarnated in every action of daily life.

The Gospel is the source of innumerable "forms of life". It has given birth to numerous ways of following Christ. The founders of coenobitism have received the charism of an existential interpretation of the Gospel. When this charism has been lived in a consistent way within a group, it was translated into a rule. When one enters a cenobitic community one thus becomes part of a tradition, of a living interpretation of the Gospel. One freely chooses this "way" from many possible ways. For Benedict it is so important that this choice be made freely and clearly that he has the Rule read three times in its entirety to the candidate during the year which precedes his commitment in the community. It is in fact this Rule which, if it is lived honestly and authentically, will form and transform the monk.

The common life and the Rule which gives it structure are the means for attaining love of God in the love of the brethren, preferring the good of the community to one's own will; the divine will as expressed in the Rule and put into practice in concrete situations by the superior to one's own good. In the same way, mutual obedience, of which Benedict speaks, is lived as a service and thus as an exercise of union of wills which leads to purity of heart and the vision of God.

The Rule, for the contemporary monk, is not only the text of St Benedict, but also the Constitutions proper to the monastic Congregation to which he belongs and the written or oral regulations of his local community. All this "legislation" is not a simple "law": it is the objective expression of the proper identity of a community

or a group of communities. As one acquires a particular cultural identity in allowing oneself to be formed by one's culture or in integrating oneself into another culture, so it is in allowing oneself gradually to be formed by a monastic culture, integrating oneself into a community, and so assuming the particular vision of that

community, that one develops a personal monastic identity. The sign of a true vocation is the capacity of a candidate to assume in this way the collective identity of his community while becoming more and more himself.

3) The Abbot

In the Benedictine tradition the abbot, who represents Christ in his community, is its spiritual father, master and healer. His role is obviously very different from that of the superiors of religious communities with more recent traditions. If it is fitting that he should be a brother among brothers, he must nevertheless not forget that he has been called to be a father - not because the others must be like children or adolescents before him, but because he has the responsibility to bring Christ to birth in them.

As a father, the abbot must, for his part, show his monks the gentleness and goodness of Christ, seeking to be loved rather than feared, adapting himself to the character of each and encouraging the brothers to run joyfully and with ready hearts along the way in which they have been called by God. The monk on the other hand, should know how to keep throughout his life an adult filial relationship towards his abbot, whatever their respective ages. If a monk, after profession, only sees in his abbot someone whom he must obey in really important matters, it is probable that he is no longer growing as a monk (even if he has great human aptitude and uses them for the good of the Church and the community).

It is not uncommon, in our day, that a novice seeks to recreate in the monastery the family he has left behind or which, in many cases, he never had, tending to identify the father figure with authority and the mother figure with the community. Such an attitude hinders true growth, for it consists in simply reproducing the family model.

If the relation between the monk and the abbot is not lived in an adult and open manner, it will bring about a passive attitude of insecurity and fear. Monastic life implies a separation from family bonds. Ties of a similar nature must not be recreated in the monastic setting. A community must be a place for persons with a strong desire to walk together towards eternal life, not a protective maternal womb. Society today does not, unfortunately, prepare us for this healthy

relationship with authority and the law. Either all authority is denied, with a serious lack of any kind of respect, or else security is looked for in a strong authority which decides upon every matter.

As the master in the school of Christ, the abbot is the guardian of the fidelity of the disciples to the monastic tradition. In order that the rule and the tradition do not become a dead letter, he must interpret them continually, in a dynamic way. He nourishes his monks by word and example. He gives them the bread of the Word of God, interpreted for the community at each new moment of its evolution.

As healer, he must care for their wounds and heal the brothers injured by sin. He must also

be a father to whom one can go in moments of personal crisis.

The abbot is the father, the master and the healer of all the members of his community. Even if there is a master of novices and a master of the young professed, the abbot cannot renounce his role of father to them. In modern active communities, where there is one novitiate for a province or even for the whole congregation, the novice has no other immediate superior than his father master; he will be assigned to a house of the congregation after his profession. In Benedictine life, where one does not enter a congregation but a particular monastery, the abbot is the father of everyone, including the novices. He cannot renounce his responsibilities even if he delegates a good many of them to the father master.

Thus it is essential that a common vision exists between the father master and the abbot. If the father master tries to form a new community different from the rest of the community or with a monastic orientation other than that of the abbot, his efforts are doomed to almost certain failure. The abbot has the ultimate responsibility for the formation of the novices as for all the other members of his community. The father master, his delegate, simply has the duty of accompanying the novices more closely on their monastic journey, and handing on to them the necessary teaching at the beginning of their monastic life.

The maturity of a monk (novice or professed) depends to a great extent on his ability to establish a healthy relationship with the community, the rule and the abbot.

III. The principal elements of monastic asceticism

Among the many elements which constitute monastic *conversatio* lived in community, under a rule and an abbot, there are three to which St

Benedict attaches particular importance and which have special formative value: the *Opus Dei*, *lectio divina*, and work. But still more fundamental is the place of the Cross in the life of the monk.

1) To learn the Cross

The monk enters the monastery to follow Christ, and to return by the way of obedience to the Father from whom he has wandered through disobedience (Prol. RB). Yet it is through suffering that the Son of God learnt obedience (Heb. 5:8). There is no other way for the Christian who wishes to follow Christ; and moreover Christ is quite explicit in the Gospels concerning the demands of such a sequela. "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him renounce himself, take up his cross and follow me".

It is here that we find the primary attitude that must be found in one who comes to the monastery. Is the candidate ready to accept the Cross? Then, during the first years of monastic life, he must be guided and helped to accept this difficult path. Benedict wants us to warn the newcomer very clearly, right from the beginning, of the hard and difficult things by which we go to God (RB.58:8).

It sometimes happens that our communities have the sad experience of seeing a monk, who seemed excellent, leave soon after his solemn profession. In nearly every case, what is lacking is this formation in the Cross. The monk was happy in monastic life so long as he found agreeable surroundings where he could flourish, where his talents were appreciated, where he developed his abilities etc. But as soon as a serious trial came, as soon as he met the cross, everything collapsed.

This must be related to the theme of inculturation. True inculturation does not consist in integrating all the attitudes belonging to a culture into Christianity or into monastic life; it consists in christianizing each culture. The mystery of the saving cross belongs to Christianity; it challenges every culture. We must learn and re-learn this each day.

Without accepting the Cross, none of the elements of monastic asceticism make any sense. But if the monk accepts it joyfully, it will form him throughout his life.

2) The Opus Dei

Monastic prayer strictly speaking is continual prayer. It is prepared by reading, study and meditation on the Word of God; in community it is expressed in the Opus Dei and it opens out into a mindfulness of God's presence as sustained as one is able. The Opus Dei, as well as

being a community expression of prayer is also a school of prayer. There the monk learns continually, throughout his life, to praise God, to weep for his sins, to intercede before God for himself and for all humanity, to contemplate all the aspects of the mystery of salvation.

The Opus Dei cannot be understood however outside the sacramental world in its entirety wherein the monk is conformed to the image of Christ in the Eucharistic celebration, healed of his wounds in the sacrament of reconciliation, strengthened to fulfill his responsibilities by various blessings, and finally prepared to pass in a positive manner through the crises of life and above all the last passage by the sacrament of the sick.

3) Lectio (and studies)

It is interesting to note that in the primitive Christian literature, at least until the time of St Benedict, the expression "lectio divina" always meant Holy Scripture itself and not a human activity undertaken with Scripture as its object. If one wants to translate this expression, it should be taken as "divine lesson" and not "divine reading". Holy Scripture not only teaches the monk but transforms him in his daily contact with it. His whole life must be rooted in this lectio divina, this "divine lesson", which he reads, examines, studies, interprets and meditates upon ceaselessly, without making any watertight separation between these different activities. If the monk lets himself be gradually permeated by Scripture, it will form him, gradually making him a true contemplative; that is to say, not necessarily someone who has what are called "mystical" experiences, but a person who sees God in everything and looks upon everything in the light of God.

One must know how to extricate oneself from contemporary theories which make "lectio divina" a special kind of "reading" and thus transform it into one observance among others, even though it is thought to be the most important. If one makes lectio divina a special activity which must be carried out at a specific time in the day and during a set period, it becomes no more than an observance which by that very fact loses the gratuitousness which characterizes it. One also risks emptying the rest of the day and one's other activities of the dimension of loving attention to God if one tries to concentrate on this special observance.

The monk must learn, from the beginning of his monastic life, to listen as closely as he can to God. He must let himself be penetrated, challenged, transformed by the word of God which comes to him as he slowly reads and savors Scripture, through his scientific study of it, through his reading or study of the Fathers, through his work and his

encounters with the brethren. If the monk develops this attitude, too marked a distinction between lectio divina and study of Scripture and the Fathers or any other reading will seem artificial. Such a distinction can even be harmful, if it leads to a diminution of studies.

Study has its place in the life of a monk. For a monk to live his monastic life well, he needs to learn many things. As Scripture is the basic Rule of monastic life, as has been said, and the principal source of the liturgy, the monk must receive a proper initiation into the Bible from the beginning of his monastic life. He must be formed to read Scripture in a contemplative manner, but he must also get to know the principal Sacred Books, the different levels of interpretation etc. He must be introduced to the monastic tradition, its history and spirituality. He must have a good formation in Christian doctrine and be introduced to the Fathers. This formation is necessary for everyone, although it may have many different forms. In some monasteries where there is a group of novices who all have a good basic education, this formation can be given through a cycle of well organized courses. In other cases the tutorial system will be judged preferable. Some people will profit from a scientific approach whereas others will find a more simple approach easier. Not everyone has the same needs or the same intellectual capacities. However one must know how to discern the motivation of candidates who, quite often these days, want a very simple life, "without studies". The thirst for "apparitions" and extraordinary happenings, which one finds in certain communities, often comes from an insufficient knowledge of the essential Christian message.

A community must know how to set up a programme of studies which is part of its general program of formation. Part of this program is undertaken in the novitiate and monasticate. The rest is studied throughout one's life.

A certain anti-intellectualism, which can be found in more than one monastery today, is perhaps partly a reaction, because many "formators" have a tendency to make all monastic formation consist in a series of courses. For several decades now, in the monastic Orders, the Fathers of monasticism have been much studied. We teach them to our novices and young professed. I am not sure that the results have always been what we hoped for. Why is this? Perhaps because we give the young monks too much of this literature before they have acquired a monastic identity which will enable them to assimilate it at a personal level and allow themselves to be formed by it rather than studying it.

The ideal father master would be a man who, having perfectly

assimilated the monastic tradition himself, could then faithfully pass on its content without ever having to quote one of the fathers of monasticism. Let us take an example. The Fathers of Cîteaux in the 12th century who knew the Greek and Latin Fathers well, and were formed by them, never seem to have "taught" them. One can even say that they never taught Scripture, even though they knew it by heart, quoted it constantly, and sometimes used the literary artifice of commenting on a Book of Scripture as a way of passing on their spiritual teaching. They handed on their lived experience. The Fathers, like Scripture, truly reveal their secret if they are read within the context of a monastic culture which incarnates the same values. So, once more, we see the importance of developing a monastic culture which embodies all the elements of the life. And one of these elements is work.

4) Work

For St Benedict, work is an essential element of monastic life. "They are truly monks if they live by the labor of their hands" (RB.48:8). Work, whether it be manual, intellectual or in some cases pastoral, is the context in which the creative capacity or the ability to collaborate with others and with God becomes evident. A monk must learn to work seriously in the service of the community, or, in the name of the community, in the service of the Church and society.

Work does not fill this role of forming a person if it is amateurish in character or if it becomes, as can easily happen, an occasion for seeking power and the expression of self will.

In a monastic community work has such an impact on the general atmosphere of the community and affects the equilibrium to such an extent that the abbot cannot leave it to the cellarer to organize the material life of the community by himself. It is his responsibility to see that the work is organized in such a way that it contributes to the monastic growth of the monks, be they young or old.

IV. The stages of formation

Even though formation is a process which lasts throughout one's life, as we have insisted in the preceding pages, this process still has very diverse stages, each with its challenges, its graces and its problems. In this short article we cannot analyze each of them in detail, but we would like at least to enumerate them and mention some of the more significant aspects. There are the initial stages, when the postulant and novice is in great need of direction and help, or when the young professed has much to learn. There is a central period of life during which one grows by means of the responsibilities taken

up in the community. There are also crises in each period, and, finally, the last crisis of old age and death. But in the very first place stands the period of discernment of vocation before entry into the community.

1) The period of discernment

We do not enter a monastery to try out the life, to see if it pleases us or if we are capable of responding to its demands. We enter to live the monastic life. Based on century-old experience, ecclesiastical legislation has of course introduced several successive periods in monastic commitment before a definitive commitment is undertaken. Nevertheless if the candidate only comes to "see" and not with a firm decision to give himself completely to monastic life from the beginning, he has little chance of remaining.

This is why discernment before entry is so immensely important. To accept candidates without this discernment is no service to them, to the Church or to the community. A serious discernment is, on the contrary, a service to the Church.

When someone presents himself to the monastery, we must first find out the reasons for his coming. As in many cases the candidates are not entirely conscious of their true motives, we must often help them to discern their motives for a fairly long time. It is not uncommon that someone comes with a sort of "generic" vocation to the religious life or even to the Christian life. Or perhaps he has had a sudden conversion and wants to give himself completely to God; or he has received an intense grace of prayer and wants to consecrate himself to a life of prayer; or sometimes a priest or active religious heavily engaged in a ministry which leaves little free time longs for contemplative prayer. In all these cases we must help them to discern if God is really calling them to monastic life or if he is not rather calling them to deepen the Christian values of which they feel such a great need in the situation in which they find themselves.

Another aspect of discernment consists in seeing if the candidate possesses the necessary ability to stay the course on which he proposes to set out: sufficient physical and psychic health, a disciplined life or at least the capacity for it, constancy, etc. Those who have been wounded by life in a particular way: unhappy childhood, premature and negative sexual experience, marriage failure, etc., need special attention. If they have not already developed a positive attitude to these trials, true discernment will consist in helping them to heal their wounds sufficiently before their entrance into the monastery. Though the monastic community can legitimately be considered as a therapeutic community in the sense that we are all

wounded by life, if only by our own sins, and that the community is a normal situation for human growth, psychological as well as spiritual; sufficient balance and health are needed to be able to take full advantage of it. Someone whose wounds need the help of a professional psychologist should receive this therapy before entering the novitiate. Such therapy requires all the psychic energy of a person, as does the formation of the noviciate. The two things can hardly be undertaken at the same time.

A sound community with a long monastic tradition can more easily receive candidates whose monastic vocation is still in doubt. The final discernment can readily be made through living the life. But this is not possible in a recent and small community. In this case the identity of the community is not sufficiently soundly established so that a candidate can quickly discover, on confronting himself to it, if he is in the right place or not; and, on the other hand, the presence of one or more candidates without a true monastic vocation will force the father master to give precious time with them to problems which have nothing to do with monastic life; and the real vocations will be neglected.

Among the false motives which may draw one to the monastery, there is first the search for material security. After all, one is at least pretty sure of three meals a day and a roof over one's head as well as necessary medical services in case of sickness in a monastery. This motive will probably not often pay a large part in countries in the first and second world, but will continue to operate in the Young Churches. It is likewise with the search for social advancement.

In a time of great insecurity, at all levels, like the present, it is not uncommon for someone to come to the monastery seeking psychological and spiritual security. There is nothing wrong in this, if it is not the principal motivation. Above all, we should quickly help the young people to find their security in a confident relationship with God and not in the artificial support of rigid structures and out-of-date observances. We should not transform our monasteries into camps of cultural refugees.

A large part of so-called "spiritual" literature makes an unfortunate confusion between "leaving the world" in the Johannine sense, and turning one' back on today's culture. If someone comes to the monastery because he finds the world is sick and evil and he wants to leave it to find his salvation in the cloister, it would be better to send him back to the world and help him to love this sick world, as God loved it. He should only then fly to the desert, as did the Fathers of the Desert, not in fear of the struggle but precisely to struggle against the forces of evil which are at work not only in the

world in general but also and above all in his own heart.

Some people come to the monastery after having had the experience of a particular kind - charismatic or other - of Christian community with a particular spirituality and a very strong sense of brotherhood. In principle this can be an excellent preparation for community life; but it sometimes happens that this creates problems, if "community life" is identified with this particular form. These people then find that there is no "community life" in the community which they have entered, because they do not find the same intensity of collective togetherness that they knew previously. There is an intensity of fraternal relationship which can be experienced in weekend meetings but which one cannot sustain all the time without getting indigestion.

The same principle can be applied to various forms of prayer which some may have experienced before their entry into the monastery. There is sometimes the danger of identifying "prayer" with one or other of these forms. A sign of a vocation will be the ability to take up a typically monastic style of prayer: that is to say the Opus Dei on one hand and personal prayer nourished by lectio divina on the other.

2) The postulancy

Even if this not explicitly envisaged by Canon Law (canon 5972, though, speaks of adequate preparation before entry into the noviciate), most communities have a postulancy, the length of which can vary considerably according to custom.

It is unfortunate, however, that this postulancy is often used to teach the elements of Christian doctrine (which should have been taught before entry) or to begin the teaching of the novitiate. This takes away from the postulancy its own proper character as an important moment of transition.

Entrance into the monastery is in fact an important moment in the life of a person. It marks a transition from one style of life to another. This transition begins by a physical and affective separation from the activities and personal relationships on which the personal identity of the candidate had to a great extent been built until this moment. If he has had the grace of a happy family life and many friends, this separation is even more deeply felt.

Because he has left one form of life without being fully integrated into another, it is normal that the postulant experiences a sense of alienation, that is of not belonging, and feels a deep emptiness and sometimes a sort of frustration. It is a time of death and resurrection in which he is confronted with the significance of all

his previous experiences, of all through which he has become the person he is now, of all those whom he has left and whom he continues to love (family, friends etc.).

The father master must be aware of all that the postulants are experiencing at this time. But it would be a grave error to deprive them of the time of "mourning". To go through this mourning properly and conscientiously is of the utmost importance for the rest of monastic life. It would be a grave error to fill up these first days – and even the whole postulancy – with numerous activities, meetings, conferences to "occupy" the postulants. It would be to deprive them of the possibility of conscientiously making this passage through the desert.

The postulancy then should not be a time when one gives course and conferences, except those strictly necessary to integrate them into the daily life of the community. It is a time for gradually accustoming them to live the monastic life. The postulancy should be a discovery of the new "situation" in which he now lives, of the community, the Rule and the abbot.

3) The noviciate and the monasticate

Although discernment of vocation goes on during the noviciate, this is not in the first place a time of discernment, since one accepts into the noviciate those in whom one believes to have already discerned a monastic vocation. It is a time of growth and maturing, under the direction of a master: growth in the knowledge and acceptance of oneself, growth in community relationships, growth above all in personal relationship with God.

To bring this about one should help the novice to deepen his life of prayer, and to nourish himself on the Word of God. He is gradually put in touch with the great monastic tradition and with the teaching of the great spiritual masters to help him define his own spiritual identity.

The monasticate, often seen solely as a time of study, because this necessarily takes a major place, is in the first place the time when the young monk roots himself in his community by beginning to exercise some responsibility, and when he prepares himself for definitive commitment.

We will not delay over these two important periods of initial formation, the noviciate and the monasticate, as they are the object of many specialized studies.

4) Crises

At the beginning of monastic life the novice usually has a sense of personal well-being. It is not unusual to hear someone say during his noviciate that he has never felt so good in all his life. But it also happens that, even during the noviciate, or some years later, suffering stemming from the awareness of personal problems one thought resolved long ago now appears with a new intensity. If, during these first years, one is constantly immersed in studies or other pleasant activities, this "crisis" can occur much later. It can happen shortly after solemn profession or, in the case of priest monks, a little while after ordination.

These personal problems are varied. It may be that sexuality is insufficiently integrated or is disoriented. It may be due to psychological wounds coming from the context of an alcoholic family. It may be due to a difficult temperament or unforeseen and sharp changes of mood, etc. The silence and solitude of the monastic desert, the lack of human support, and the great difficulty of keeping up a mask indefinitely in community life, enable these problems to come to light.

Obviously, we are not dealing here with problems that are proper to monastic life. In the world they will probably become evident one at a time and will perhaps be solved by a successful career, psychological help, or the therapy of a good marriage. In the monastery, it is not unusual for them to become evident all together. This is the moment to see whether the house is built upon rock or on sand (Mt. 7:25).

If the common life favours the eruption of such a crisis, a healthy community context also offers the means whereby it can be experienced positively, with the grace of God, the discernment of the spiritual father and the support of the brethren. Every passage to a new stage of growth implies a sort of positive disintegration of the personality which must then be rebuilt on a new basis. Many states which are today considered to be nervous depression (and treated as such) are probably this sort of crisis; called "dark nights" in the language of the mystics, they offer the chance of a qualitative leap in human and spiritual growth. This is the most essential element of ongoing formation, while the latter is often identified with periodical "recyclages"..

Finally, a monastic community must be particularly attentive in helping each of its members to pass serenely through the last great crisis, which no one can avoid, and which puts the seal of the Spirit on his configuration to Christ.

Conclusion

According to the Rule of St Benedict, the newcomer to the monastery is formed by living the life of the community. This is why he is confided to a mature monk, full of discernment and zeal for souls, whose role is essentially to discover whether he is diligent in the elements of monastic life which before all others must form him: the prayer of the community, obedience and humiliations.

This is the way of formation which monastic life offers us to attain that liberty of heart which enables us to run with hearts enlarged in the ardor of charity on the way of the divine commandments and to attain, with the grace of God, a complete transformation in the image of Christ on the day of Meeting.

Rome, October 4, 1995.