

Affective Maturity in the Consecrated Life¹

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Introduction

When God loves, and precisely because he loves, he calls. The vocation is an expression of love. It is uniquely motivated by the loving will of God and tells of such love. It speaks of the most profound identity of God and, at the same time, the intimate nature of the vocation itself, its origin and its destiny.

A vocation, understood in this way, is the inevitable consequence of the nature God, and of the God who loves. He who cannot but call, because love by its nature communicates itself, to be shared and offered to others. The vocation, all vocations, are precisely that: the call to participate in the love of God, in the eternal celebration of the Holy Trinity, of the Father who loves the Son in the Holy Spirit, in an uninterrupted interchange that seeks to grow outside of the uninterrupted Trinitarian dance.

The result is a unique vocation, the vocation of love, to open oneself to be loved and to love, to announce love and to translate it, as if falling into love, in its gestures of openness, forgiveness, gratitude, gratuity, benevolence, service, self-sacrifice, passion, peace, solidarity, and martyrdom.

Whatever the specific individual vocation be, or whatever path we are called to take, the final destiny of its existence does not change: love, love received and love given. Putting all of what one has received as gift of life (that is, from God) in service of love: mind and heart, external and internal senses, sensitivity and intelligence, body and soul, sexuality and resources and projects, options and renouncements, etc.

As such, the celibate/virgin and the married, both, are called to reach the same objective although through very different paths. And the same objective of maturity is love, the free gift of one's self, the

¹ This text fundamentally summarizes the first part of my book *When the flesh is weak. Vocational discernment in face of immaturity and pathology of sexual-affective development*, Milan 2005, pp. 3-25.

capacity to witness to love as the only reason to exist, as obedience to that norm that the Creator himself has put in our human nature, mysterious fingerprint evident of our likeness with God: He who is Love.

I believe that there is a lot of wisdom in the popular refrain which says, "One cannot consecrate well, if one could not marry well, and one cannot marry well, if one could not consecrate well."

Thus it is important to discern attentively, during the time of initial formation, the level of consistency and the affective freedom of the call to the presbyterate or the consecrated life by the one who permits the call to captivate him/her as the excellent sign of love that gives love. At the same time, within this attention, it becomes indispensable to identify immediately possible signs of immaturity and any possible pathologies in the affective-sexual development. This occurs within the normative framework that identifies the criteria of growth in the area of affective maturation in general, but also in the specific areas that the roads to priesthood and religious life require.

This is done not because or with the purpose of selectivity only (so as to guarantee non-existent superiority of the species), but because of the demands of truth and charity toward the person directly interested with his/her need to be helped to know him/herself even in the less-than-positive aspects, so as to make a well-thought-out choice, as well as for those who, in the future, will, in some way, have contact with his/her ministerial action and with that love, which all living beings need, of which he/she is the sign.

In the reflection that I now share, I offer some elements to support this discernment. I do so proposing some concrete criteria to verify the authenticity of the evolving path to mature affectivity for those in initial, as well as ongoing, formation.

We are emerging from a very difficult time, a period of darkness, on the worldwide level, in what is referred to as the witness of priestly and religious celibacy. We all know that, in many of the cases that have caused scandal, the defect has been, precisely, in the initial discernment, when the problem was not even identified and, for this reason, it was not possible to keep under control or possibly even "cure it" in the later stages of formation.

To recognize the truth of the situation, which is presented as a call, is not only important and decisive for admission to the educative process, but it is also indispensable to offer, as soon as possible, help to the person: help him/her to understand him/herself; help identify possible therapeutic means or instruments (not necessarily in the clinical sense); help with a personal presence to confront real problems of the individual so as to be able to overcome them, keep

them under control and become more independent; and, finally, help offer criteria to make a good, well-thought-out decision, in time not suspected or adapted for discernment (not on the eve of the diaconate or the perpetual profession, or even the eve of the priesthood). When this type of help is offered to the person *from the beginning* of the educative-formative journey, it is a truly helpful service for one who seeks to identify the proper path of life and it is truly formative, regardless whether the person is or is not admitted to the institute. When this service is not offered or when it is not offered carefully, then ambiguity replaces help and makes discernment over time more difficult and problematic.

In summary, it is not only necessary to propose criteria as punctual elements, before which is placed the dry alternative at the time of entrance (to receive or to reject), but as formative itineraries, along which extend both formation and discernment.

1. Scope and criteria of discernment

Above all, it is important to correctly define the scope and the criteria of investigation, that is, the specific and true object, and the necessary criteria of reference to conduct the investigation. To do so makes it concretely possible to confront the person at his/her level of maturity. In other words, it is necessary to define the material and formal object of vocational discernment in relationship to the scope of affective-sexual maturity.

1.1. Material Object

The material object is the affective-sexual area and the extensive problematic field related to normal problems of development and, on a more serious level, any specific pathologies.

The material object is also the area encountered *at the center of our intra-psychic geography*² and through it, functions frequently as a resonance box for problems that arise in other places, which is to say, more *symptom* than syndrome, but always as a *part* in reference to a whole. In some cases, this area hides itself “chastely” behind other problems or, more simply put, behind fear, shame, or a false preconception of the person. This makes for a much greater scope of the investigation and the material object of discernment. Certainly a general awareness of the behavior is not sufficient, nor is the

² Even an ecclesial document like *Pastores Dabo Vobis* calls to mind: “Affective maturity presupposes an awareness that love has a central role in human life” (44).

adoption of a purely negative criteria (“given that he does not exhibit a certain type of behavior, there is no problem”; “he can get by, he is serene”), nor the interpretation of silence in this area as a sign of maturity.

The title of our reflection, in fact, invites us to direct our attention to those instances called “difficult cases,” those that present immaturity or even pathologies in the affective-sexual area; those, more exactly, whose vocational discernment is made complex because of specific problems that contaminate, more or less significantly, the very vocational option and the possibility of living an authentic consecration to God in religious life or in the priesthood. To delineate more precisely, these difficult cases require a definition of the *ideal* candidate (the ideal priest-religious as conceived by the Church) and the *nature* of the sexual-affectivity.

In other words, it is advisable to respect the habitual law of integration between the architectural and the hermeneutical perspective and, in the final analysis, between the theological component and the psychological component of the choice that the subject is going to make. This clarification is precisely that which will permit us to understand the formal object of vocational discernment in the area of sexual affectivity.

1.2. Formal Object

The criterion for discernment of a call to the ministerial priesthood or to the consecrated life is, by its nature, compound and complex. It does not consist in a list of requirements, even being correctly defined (on the theological or psychological level), that has to be verified in a cold and impersonal manner, perhaps utilizing technical instruments as if to try to verify up close the coincidence or non-coincidence with a certain robotic portrayal (identikit) of a priest, a brother, or a sister; verification that does not allow flexibility or exceptions. On the contrary, this type of discernment is a gesture that is profoundly human, helping a person to know him/herself better, which demands a profound knowledge of the individual on the part of the one who offers this help, demands a great sense of the mystery of the human person and notable knowledge of the two elements that enter constitutively in this theme, the spiritual and psychological, as we have discussed and we will now make more explicit at length.

1.2.1. Spiritual-Normative Elements

First, we will attempt to refer to the norms that the Church sets out for admission to orders and religious consecration. Referring to the most recent ecclesial documents,³ we will synthesize them precisely in terms around these two points. A candidate can be admitted to orders and vows if he, in addition to all the other required qualities of the Church,⁴ has acquired (or demonstrated the ability to acquire) in his psycho-sexual development:

1. a solid sexual identity, in accord with his own appropriate sex, that permits him to relate with otherness in the diversity (sexual and not only sexual) of a complementary and fruitful manner. A correct sexual identity normally supposes a sense of self of the “I” strong and positive, that frees the person from diverse conditions in his relation with the same and the other sex (fears, rejections, affective dependencies, with or without erotic connotations, etc.);⁵
2. the possibility and the capacity to fully live celibately the “nuptial meaning” of the human body, “thanks to which a person gives oneself to another and takes the other to oneself”⁶ in *disinterested* service of the spiritual good of all

³ In particular, CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, *Potissimum Institutioni, Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes*, Rome, 1990, 39-40; JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Rome, 1992, 44; CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *The Preparation of Educators in Seminaries. Directive*, Rome, 1994, 33-35; JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, Rome, 1996, 65-71; POVE, *Nuove vocazioni per una nova Europa (New vocations for a new Europe)*, Rome, 1997, 37b; CEI (Italian Episcopal Conference, Episcopal Commission for the Clergy), *Linee comuni per la vita dei nostri seminari (Common lines for the life of our seminaries)*, Nota, Rome, 1999, 9-22; CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in view of their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders*, Rome, 2005.

⁴ Cf., Canon 1029 (“After all circumstances have been taken into account in the prudent judgment of the proper bishop or the competent major superior, only those should be promoted to orders who have an integral faith, are motivated by a right intention, possess the required knowledge, and enjoy a good reputation, good morals, and proven virtues, and other physical and psychological qualities which are appropriate to the order to be received”).

⁵ Cf., *Potissimum institutioni*, 39; *Nuove vocazioni per una nuova Europa*, 37b.

⁶ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 44; cf., also, on the subject of the “weddedness” of the human being, JOHN PAUL II, *Verginità o celibato “per il regno dei cieli” (Virginity or celibacy “for the reign of God”)*, 5th cycle of catechesis at the general audiences, Rome, 1982.

- the faithful, without preference or exclusion, with freedom of interaction with the other different from oneself;
3. "a strong, lively and personal love for *Jesus Christ*... which overflows into a dedication to everyone,"⁷ within a mature life of faith;
 4. a sufficient and progressive *freedom and affective maturity*, which converts him into a relational man, capable of true pastoral paternity, and makes him conform to the emotions of Son, Servant and Lamb,⁸ Shepherd and Spouse,⁹ free as he who loves intensely, and is loved properly and purely, never tied as such to anyone, capable of offering religious attention toward the other and of intimate understanding of his/her problems in a lucid perception of his/her true good, rich in human warmth and capable of educating in others an affectivity offered equally devotedly;¹⁰
 5. *the moral certainty of the power to live celibacy and priestly chastity*, confronting with determination and prudence the difficulty of *renouncing* the exercise of an instinct profoundly rooted in every man and woman, without resorting to defensive or selective relational styles in dealing with one or the other sex.¹¹

These criteria indicate the itineraries that constitute the arrival point of priestly and religious formation under the aspect of sexual-affective maturity. But in a certain way, they also indicate the reference point or the general background of *initial* discernment, of *first* admission, and, by contraposition, the cases of those not suitable for admission because the objective is not prudently within their reach.

1.2.2. Hermeneutical-Psychological Elements

The hermeneutical elements, as the very word indicates, are those that allow us to specify better the ideal proposed by the ecclesial norm, and, as such, also permit us to clarify the components of this ideal or the human conditions that make possible the achievement of this norm. In this sense, psychology can help us a lot in the area of hermeneutical science, which by definition makes it

⁷ Cf., *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 44.

⁸ Cf., *Vita Consecrata*, 65-69.

⁹ Canon 1029.

¹⁰ *The Preparation of Educators in Seminaries*, 35.

¹¹ Cf., *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 44.

possible to explain the intimate, inner, psychic mechanism of man as a sexual being and called to love even in the case that he chooses virginity, or capable of leading us at least to the threshold of the mystery of sexuality, of love, and of virginity for the kingdom, and to make us understand how it “functions” or how all should function.

It is important, as such, to remember that there exists an *ordo* (= a rule) relative to these three realities (sexuality, love, virginity) and it is psychology, or a certain psychology in dialogue with the spiritual perspective, and even before that with philosophical-theological reflection, that can help us to understand a certain intrinsic structure of the reality of sexuality, of love and of the very virginal option in that it is structurally connected to the other two realities.

2. Rule and Grammar of Life

Such a *rule*, ultimately, refers to that “grammar” written by the Creator in the heart of the creature and that is fundamental to right living and right judging, as Benedict XVI recently wrote.¹²

If such a *rule*, or intrinsic structure, exists, then everything is converted by man in interest rather than in duty, to obey such an order or to give precedence to the objectivity of the norm over one’s subjectivity. In any case, it is only the notion of the *rule* that can make us understand the idea of disorder. In relation to our reflection, it will be sufficient to note quickly the three indications in outline form.¹³

2.1. Ordo sexualitatis

Sexuality has its one internal code, a species of DNA that reveals its nature and its functions. According to psychological analysis designed for this type of investigation, sexuality is:

¹² Cf., BENEDICT XVI, *The Human Person, the Heart of Peace*, Message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1 January 2007: Thus is the text of paragraph 3: “The transcendent ‘grammar,’ that is to say the body of rules for individual action and the reciprocal relationships of persons in accordance with justice and solidarity, is inscribed on human consciences, in which the wise plan of God is reflected. As I recently had occasion to reaffirm: ‘We believe that at the beginning of everything is the Eternal Word, Reason and not Unreason’ [*Homily* at Islinger Feld, Regensburg, 12 September 2006]. Peace is thus also a task demanding of everyone a personal response consistent with God’s plan. The criterion inspiring this response can only be *respect for the ‘grammar’ written on human hearts by the divine Creator.*”

¹³ I treated this subject at length in my *Verginità e celibato oggi. Per una sessualità pasquale (Virginity and Celibacy Today. For a Paschal Sexuality)*, Bologna, 2006.

1. *dynamism*, it is not only datum of a biological or psychological act that imposes itself or imposes necessarily a certain exercise of the genital instinct, but it is also and above all a *becoming*, or rather educable reality that immediately calls up the freedom and responsibility of man, that must be integrated in the whole or put into action.
2. but is itself a *composite* reality, fruit of divers components or “acts” of:
 - *genitality*: of organs predisposed to a relationship and of a fertile, fruitful relationship that already evidences the receptive capacity and offering of the human being, in addition to the unitive-relational one;
 - *bodyness*: all of the body is sexual in all of its components and is gifted with a precise genus identity (masculine or feminine); such belonging is the base of attraction of the sex to the other and also the capacity of relationship with the diverse-other;
 - *affectivity*: sexuality acquires true human quality only if it is oriented, elevated and integrated by love; it grows and becomes only in freedom to accept love and to give of oneself;
 - *spirituality*: sexuality is also spirit, spirit as a synthesis of extremes and capacity of interpretation of those components to understand them in a mysterious truth, the truth of human life which is made evident in life and written in the body.¹⁴ The sexualized body, in that it is “witness to love as a fundamental gift”;¹⁵
 - reveals *man*, his coming *from another* and his going toward *the Other*, his radically dialogical nucleus;

¹⁴ Such distinction of 4 components of sexuality is taken up again in substance in 4 structural levels that the geneticist A. Serra recognizes in the human subject: the *biological* level (as a structure already given, different from subject to subject and that is carried out gradually), the *psychological* level (that immense world of sensations, perceptions, images, memories, etc., which structures itself in a highly flexible way, continuously molded and shaped, and nevertheless strictly characteristic of the individual), the *mental* level (as the universe of intuitions, ideas, thoughts, etc., which enriches itself without stop through observation and reflection), and the *spiritual* level (with the function of bearing structure, that gives a sense to all the rest and puts into relationship and ties the person with the Transcendent). Cf., A. SERRA, “Sessualità: scienza, sapienza, società (Sexuality: Science, Wisdom, Society),” in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 3687 (2004), 221-222.

¹⁵ JOHN PAUL II, General Audience 9 January 1980, in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II (Teachings of John Paul II)*, III-I, 1980, p. 90, n. 4.

- helps to comprehend *the meaning of life*, gift received that tends, by its nature, to become a good that is given;
 - “contributes to revealing *God and his creative love*”¹⁶ who loved man so as to make him capable of a love which gives life, which makes him in the likeness of God himself.
3. the *mysterious* nature of sexuality then appears evident, not only in that which escapes any banal or superficial reading of it, but in the most profound sense of the idea of mystery, a point of encounter or place of composition and integration of apparently contradictory extremes, in the interior and exterior of the individual.
 4. sexuality, in fact, as has been said, is *memory* written even in the human body, of its coming from the other (*ab alio*) and together *energy* that opens towards the other (*ad alium*), so it is at the same time need (deficit) and potential (resource), well received and well given, divine invention and reality most human, autonomy and belonging, eros and agape, self-transcendence and falling in love, spontaneous exuberance and law that is rooted in one’s being, gratitude and gratuity, paschal lightning¹⁷ and human instinct, etc.: sexuality makes it possible to integrate these tensions without excluding any of the two poles; precisely because of this it is rich in energy.
 5. sexuality is that place, in particular, that typifies the genus of belonging, place where the identity encounters a concrete point of reference (until it is biologically founded) and in that otherness which reaches its most evident point. The difference between the sexes shows the radical diversity. It is the symbol of excellence of human differences, is almost the school to learn to respect and value the you, each you, in your diversity, uniqueness, and beauty, going beyond all temptation to homonogize the other and only establish relationships with one the same as you. Sexual identity is the fruit of this *relational complementarity*, and is much more firm and sure when it is more unconditionally open towards the other different from self.
 6. then, when the identity puts itself in dialogue with the otherness, the interpersonal relationship becomes fertile

¹⁶ CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Educational Guidance in Human Love. Outlines for sex education*, Rome 1983, 23.

¹⁷ Cf., CENCINI, *Verginità*, 54-56.

and of a fruitfulness in various directions: on the level of the I and the you, of the we and the other: especially because it affirms and strengthens ever more the very sense of one's identity and of the other's, then later because the relational dimension of the human being grows in such a way as constitutive of man, and finally, because the relationship thus lived does not close itself on the two, but regularly opens itself in favor of a third, such as children in a marriage, or the good of others, of many others, to whom one is more tempted not to feel him/herself particularly pleasant and is, on the contrary, reached by a love that welcomes. At this point, sexuality has reached its natural object and perhaps its most qualified: *total fruitfulness*.

7. once and for all, then, to have a solid sexual identity means:
 - to integrate the four *components* and the diverse *poles* of sexuality, around that fundamental truth written in the same sexuality: human life is good received that tends, by its nature, to become a good given,
 - to leave oneself and be capable of *relationship* with the other different from self, with the diversity as such,
 - and of *fruitful* relationship on three levels: the I and the you, the we, and the other.

2.2. Ordo amoris

Saint Augustine was the first to speak of an *ordo amoris*, of an internal structure or of an objective order to which love "obeys" or should obey.

1. Such a *rule* reaffirms the ascendant structure of the being (and of the good) with which every being is kind in relation with the fullness and quality of the being possessed. For this reason, for example, a rock is less kind than an animal that, as such, is less kind than a human being, where as at the top of the scale is God, the Being most kind and desirable, the only and true desire of the human heart, although at times one is unconscious of it.
2. This ascendant structure of being not only indicates, in a progressive line, the material object of human love, but rather it says and reveals the possibilities and capacities of human nature to be able to experience love, that which is divine, that is not limited to simple benevolence, but that arrives at the point of making the creature *capable of*

loving in the way of the Creator. This is the central and culminating point of the *ordo amoris*.

3. In this sense the *ordinata dilectio*, *ordered* for this divine potential present in every human heart, imprints a rule on reality, an inventive and disciplined rule, that comes precisely from the certainty of God's love ("poured out into our hearts") and which consists fundamentally in loving with the heart of God: in a selfless way, freely given, accepting the other unconditionally and touching the radical positiveness of the I so as to want the good, learning to receive and not only to give, to do things for love and to observe the rule not by obligation but freely, to love God with one's whole heart so as to love with the heart of God all of creation.
4. However, at the same time, the *ordinata dilectio* always is being attacked by its contrary, by the *dis-ordine*, by *chaos* or by ingenious pretension that the heart follows spontaneously a certain rule in loving and letting oneself be loved. The affectivity is an area that manifests a certain existential restlessness, a deep down ambivalence, a contrary attraction or a certain *cupidity* that is converted apparently in movement towards the other, loved or "used" preferably to cover the very need to feel loved. As such, a certain *cleansing and discipline* of the heart and of the emotions are indispensable.
5. The arrival point on this path of purification and growth is *affective freedom*. This comes from *two certitudes*: having been loved, always and forever, and capable of loving forever. This allows a person to surrender him/herself totally to the other and accept the other unconditionally (= *falling in love*); and in virtue of such a concentration of love which permits a person to express the maximum amount of his/her own affective capacity, loving *much* and loving *many*, especially the person who is most tempted to feel unlovable.¹⁸

2.3. Ordo virginitatis

Here the analysis becomes much more interdisciplinary and explicitly more open to the spiritual; like a road that, while we can use some of the preceding road markers, opens to a unprecedented journey.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 167-178.

1. Virginity is the *particular and mysterious actualization* of the *ordo amoris* or of the ascending structure of being, where God is the vertex of the loving tension of humanity, because it indicates the possibility that God becomes, in some way, the “*exclusive*” object of human love, a love that does not exclude other loves, but on the contrary, excites the affective capacity of the virgin.
2. For the kingdom, the virgin chooses *to love God with all* of his/her heart, mind, and strength or with all his/her being (= above all other loves, including the natural and desirable love of a woman/man, to the point of renouncing him/herself) so as *to love* all creatures *with the heart of God* (= loving all intensely without being tied to anyone or excluding anyone).
3. In the measure that God is the “exclusive” object of love, the divine love becomes even more the *loving way* of the virgin (love makes the beloved in its image, or the material object is transformed into the formal object).
4. The virginal option can never be privatized or interpreted as the striving for one’s own personal perfection: rather it is fundamentally a *proclamation of the truth of the human heart* created by God, and, as such, oriented toward God or “called” to encounter only in God the complete fulfillment, no matter what might be his/her state of life.¹⁹
5. The *ordo virginitatis* becomes fundamentally a way to express the loving way of God, and thus, the centrality of God in human love. It is the style:
 - of the one who *never puts him/herself in the center* of the relationship, because the center belongs to God;
 - of the one who “*lightly touches*” the other so as *not to invade him/her*, because the body is neither the place, nor the motive of personal encounter in the life of the celibate;
 - of the one who knows to *intelligently renounce the exercise of genital physicality* in order to seek and find with creativity the thousands of other expressions of true love;
 - of the one who *says no to the face of the most beautiful and attractive* to love the one humanly unattractive (as

¹⁹ On this interpretation of virginity as a universal vocation, see A. CENCINI, *Un Dio da amare. La vocazione per tutti alla verginità (A God to Love. The Vocation to Virginity for All)*, Milan, 2002.

the leper for Francis or the dying embraced by Mother Teresa), and the one who feels unlovable.²⁰

Obviously this rule or discipline can not be marginated and is to be respected in its deepest implications and in the specific consequences of the different vocational states. Always we will be able to speak in general of immaturity and pathology when the person does not seem capable of expressing and realizing in his/her life a level of maturity in his/her sexual affectivity and virginity (in the case of having received the gift and chosen it as his/her life's vocation) in line with these indications.

(THOMAS J. STEHLIK, C.M., translator)

²⁰ On the relational style of the virgin, see A. CENCINI, *I sentimenti del figlio. Il cammino formativo nella vita consacrata (The Sentiments of the Son. The Formative Journey in the Consecrated Life)*, Bologna, 2001, pp. 207-211; and *Verginità, op. cit.*, 183-193.