

Option for the Whole Life

by José Rodríguez Carballo, O.F.M.

Minister General O.F.M.

Presentation

The number of male and female religious is decreasing and aging. The prognostics do not seem better in the near future. Rather, one may expect the number of consecrated people to continue decreasing and their age to continue becoming higher.

This double tendency is caused not only by the small number of young people that opt for religious or consecrated life, but also by those who leave during initial or “guided” formation and during the first years of ongoing or “autonomous” formation, which follows solemn profession or priestly ordination. That which today afflicts many institutes is not so much a crisis of vocations but a crisis of the vocation. It is not so much a problem of “entries,” but rather a problem of perseverance.

Whether we like it or not, reality shows that solemn profession or priestly ordination is no longer seen, by many persons, as an option for the whole life, as a definitive and irrevocable option, or at least, in many cases, it is not seen as such.

What is happening? Why do many religious leave some time — in some cases only a few months — after having pronounced solemn vows or after having received priestly ordination? Is there any sense in continuing to speak about an irrevocable option, about an option for the whole life?

To answer this question or other similar questions, I think it is necessary to start with drawing a profile of our young religious, within the context of our society today and, more concretely, within the framework of the world of the youth. I will try to indicate the principal tasks, which present themselves in vocational pastoral work and in initial formation.

1. A Few Characteristics of Our Time

The first characteristic which comes to the foreground is that we find ourselves in **a world in transformation**. It is a matter of a historical transformation, which brings with itself the passage from modernity to post-modernity or to a late modernity. We live at a

moment that is characterised by unthought-of cultural changes, of speed in social and radical cultural processes. New cultures and subcultures, new symbols, new lifestyles and new values follow each other with a dizzy velocity. The “certainties” and interpretative global schemes, which characterised the Modern Era, have gone toward complexity, toward plurality, which characterises the Post-Modern Era or the Age of Late Modernity.

This results in much disorientation, uncertainties, insecurities, and all that together leads toward a strong disillusion before all existential demands which are considered useless.

Our time is also a time of commerce. Everything is measured and has its value of utility and of what it will render, even persons. These, in terms of commerce, are worth as much as they produce and they are a value to me in as far as they are useful to me.

We also live at a time which we can define as a time of “zapping,” which brings with it an attitude of not accepting long-term tasks, of passing from one experience to another, without deepening any of them.

In such a world, in which everything has been made easy, there is no place for sacrifice, nor for renouncing, nor for similar values. This results in a superficial mentality and a skin-deep sensibility, which search for immediate satisfaction and avoid all that demands constancy, abnegation and patience.

Finally it is worth the trouble to indicate that the world in which we happen to live is dominated by neo-individualism and a “culture of subjectivism” which leads to a **lack of profound communication**.

2. Our Young People

It is very difficult to present a complete profile of the young people of today. I am convinced that young people do not exist, **although the young person** does; that “youth” is not an anthropological constant, but depends on society and, definitely, on each young person in particular. It is exactly because of that that it is necessary to begin with the affirmation that **the world of the young is very plural**.

This juvenile world is in particular conditioned by:

- the “culture of subjectivism,”
- the “culture of part-time,”
- the “culture of scepticism,”
- the “culture of temporality.”

In direct relation with the last constant, it is worth indicating another constant and that is the distanced implication of our young

people with regard to the problems, which they say occupy them, and to the causes which they say they defend. There seems to be **“a hiatus, a lack, between final values and instrumental values.”** In many of our young people there is a great lack of values such as effort, self-responsibility, commitment, etc. The **“light culture”** seems to dominate. **Another characteristic** of the world of today’s young, which is sufficiently generalised, is the fact that for many of the young the concept of limit does not exist. The only limit which they accept is that imposed by how much their own body can bear (tolerance, solidity, resistance, strength).

Other constants which influence and condition, more or less, the world of the young are:

- The family, from which they come, is characterised, in many cases, by: the defence of a kind of **axiological neutrality**, according to which each must choose that which seems to be better, and by the **lack of a prolonged communication** with a certain deepness and serenity. This can explain, at least partly, so many attitudes of our young people.
- Another constant of our young people is the fact that **they live happily vested in everyday life**. Many are those who confess that they are happy with what they do.

Besides these young people, we must indicate also many others who are characterised by a great capacity for generous and altruistic commitment and by a great capacity for enthusiasm and fidelity. They are young people with a strong desire of “leading an in-depth life,” dedicating themselves **“full-time”** to God and others. They are young people involved in the struggle for justice and solidarity with the poor, and very alert to “provocations,” which come from the poor and marginated.

3. Our Young Religious

Our young religious form a part, in the fullest sense, of the world of their contemporaries, of that generation, which is called “Generation X,” which many define as a fragmented generation, secularised, unstable, not very motivated and without a solid religious formation.

The majority of our young religious do not come from exclusively or preferably “protected” environments. In the enormous majority they have the characteristic traits of contemporaneous youth, particularly: the desire for self-realisation, the value of “authenticity” (to be oneself), the exigency of controlling and reversing their own decisions, a certain uncertainty with regard to the options to make, a great emotional fragility, difficulty at the

moment of considering certain fundamental demands from the point of an existential view, fear to commit themselves definitively, a good dose of individualism, a considerable lack regarding communication and coherence, regarding sacrifice and taking responsibility. Besides these, as is logical, there is no lack of young people who come to religious life, originating from environments, which we can consider as “protected,” who have almost no relations with “secularised” cultures.

With regard to the motivations which have brought them to embrace the religious or consecrated life, we cannot discard the fact that there are those who opt to enter religious life and who even arrive at solemn profession or priestly ordination, seeking a refuge or security, or also to “taste” and experiment one more sensation.

It remains clear that once they have tested it and experienced the first sensation, if it was not as satisfying as they had hoped, they will turn back. At this point, however, I believe that it is a matter of justice, once again, to observe that the great majority of our young people arrive well motivated at religious or consecrated life.

Usually our young religious are altruistic and generous persons, occupied with a true dedication in apostolic work. They are young people with a great sensibility for prayer and a great desire for radicalism and authenticity; young people who have received a correct formation in the theology of consecrated life, at least at the conceptual level; who have had experiences of all kinds; who, at least apparently, know well the difficulties of the religious life (since nothing is hidden from them) and who say that they have overcome many crises (crisis of self-image, crisis of realism, affective crises), and from whom we may expect much.

However, we see that, after some time, not a few of them become “victims of a process of secularisation” and “professionalism,” which manifests itself in individualism, in a certain air of independence and even in an apparent spiritual colourlessness, which, in many cases, translates itself into the abandon of the vocation.

We know that this period represents “a phase which is critical in itself.” We know also that until 40 years of age the person is in a phase of expansion, of progressive construction of his personality. We know all that, but does all that explain the leaving of so many young people during the first years of their insertion into apostolic activity?

I do not believe it is right to throw all the blame on those who, sooner or later, decide to leave. In many cases they are to blame, but we cannot exempt ourselves from the part that concerns us. For that reason it is necessary that we ask ourselves seriously: What are the challenges for the pastoral care of vocations, for initial formation, for ongoing formation and for religious life itself in such a situation?

4. Challenges in the Initial and Ongoing Process

If some time after the profession of “definitive” vows many of our young people decide to leave, it is clear that this places in serious dispute the formative process followed both in the years of initial formation as in the first years of ongoing formation.

4.1. *Challenges for the Pastoral Care of Vocations or Vocational Promotion*

The acknowledgement of the vocation, the offer and the discernment must be very honest and demanding. We can neither let ourselves be guided by numbers — in many cases this transforms itself into fear because of the lack of vocations, nor by haste — which in many other cases leads to shortening the steps. It is not the numbers that will save or make religious life meaningful in the future. In religious or consecrated life we can never talk about epochs propitious for reduction, neither with regard to the quality, nor with regard to the time. Religious or consecrated life is so closely united to evangelical radicalism that this cannot be changed (to obtain virtue).

On the other hand, attaching oneself to the call, assimilating progressively the sentiments of Christ towards his Father and assuming the spirituality of the Institute, needs time and demands a slow process. I am convinced that, as the announcement of the vocation must be explicit and the offer valid, serious and demanding, the process of discernment too cannot be done by reducing the steps.

To all that has been said, we must add and stress that all steps of the process, to which we are bound, require an adequate witness from all of us who have already embraced the religious or consecrated life. Authenticity of life and a joyful witnessing is asked of all of us in relation to our vocational option, in such a way that we too may say: “Come and see” (John 1:39).

4.2. *Challenges for Initial Formation*

The first and fundamental challenge, in my point of view, is that of **formation for what is essential**. This includes:

- Formation for making decisions, in a world of undecided persons;
- Formation for assuming a passionate responsibility, in a society where everybody talks about rights and privileges, and only a few are willing to take up the corresponding responsibilities and obligations;

- Formation for taking risks, in a time when people want to assure everything; formation for fraternity and for communion, in a world of solitary people;
- Formation for living with what is sufficient in these days, when some people lack what is necessary and others do not know what to do with their surplus;
- Formation to austerity, in a society of opulence;
- Formation for a constant search for God as the only absolute reason to embrace religious life at a time when the question of what we are and what we do torments our hearts and dries our souls, and when the greater part of our efforts are focused on and used to seek solutions for conserving or developing, but not necessarily recreating, our “**diakonia**”;
- Formation to solitude, in a world of lonely people full of fear and to which we are called to give witness of true communion with all through the vow of chastity.

With regard to **methodology**, considering the plurality of the world of youth in general and of those who opt for religious or consecrated life, it seems evident that initial formation must be personalised. This demands, among many other things, the following:

- **Attention to the person** of each individual and **respect for each one’s rhythm of growth**. We have passed from a fundamentally collective awareness, submerged in that of the group, to an awareness in which the individual identity clearly emerges, with the corresponding becoming aware of the person in relation to the group. Keeping in mind this passage, we have already been speaking for some time about the necessity of passing from a passive faith towards a personalised Christianity.

In this same context, we must firmly and decisively stress that the formative process has to be a personalised process. A formative process which is based on and tends toward equal recognition of all is a depersonalised process and, for that reason, is set to produce disasters. A formative process, which really wants to be such, must pay special attention to the uniqueness of each person.

If, in other epochs, we were “**molluscs**” today we must be “**vertebrae**,” which means that today there is not as much support as there was in other times. Today we live **at the mercy of the elements**. Formation cannot be considered as such, if it does not prepare each person to confront this situation.

This attention to the person and the process of growth/formation of each person will require differentiated formative processes:

- Personalized **accompaniment**. Attention to the person demands also a personalised accompaniment and a preferential dedication, even exclusive, on the part of the formators to their priority ministry as vocational and spiritual companions.

Among the demands of accompaniment, it is worth highlighting two. In the first place, accompaniment requires presence, nearness, etc. Accompaniment demands time to listen and share. In the second place, accompaniment and formation must embrace the whole person, but, in my opinion, they must give particular attention to the way of personalisation of faith and to the affective-sexual sphere.

- **Provocative-interpretative methodology**, by means of which the person is not left to himself/herself (subjective pedagogy), nor is simply placed before the norms to which he/she must adapt himself/herself (objective pedagogy), but rather that which helps him/her to discover the presence of God in his/her own way and to respond generously to the provocations coming from the Lord. From his/her own autonomy-authenticity the person tries a way which leads to fullness.

4.3. Challenges for Ongoing Formation During the First Years After Solemn Profession or Priestly Ordination

It is necessary, in the first place, to give our young religious an atmosphere in which they are able to communicate their sentiments.

It is also necessary not to overwork young people. Moved by their vitality and because of the lack of “manpower” they are often given too much work and too great a responsibility. This leads them to fall into intense “**activism**” to the detriment of personal and community life. In such a situation they easily get tired and exhausted. Consequently, it is necessary to confide to them responsibilities adequate to their strengths and possibilities.

Our young people are fragile. They need to be accompanied personally. This accompaniment must be carried out both by the Community and by a specific companion. The community accompanies if it is truly formative; that is, if it is a community in which the members feel themselves to be in ongoing formation and constant discernment; if it is close to the young person; if the “**doing**” of its members does not overshadow their “**being**”; if its members bring the ideal nearer to their daily life, avoiding apathy, becoming bourgeois, etc. But the accompaniment of the community is not sufficient, it is necessary that a **member** feels himself/herself directly responsible for the accompaniment of these young members, helping them “to live fully the love and enthusiasm of their youth for

Christ.” The ideal would be that he/she be the superior of the community where these young members are, but if he/she is not prepared for this, the Provincial Superior must provide another member to assume this responsibility. It is the responsibility of the **companion** to:

- maintain a periodical dialogue with the member or members during these first years of discernment in pastoral activity;
- help the young members in integrating the essential values of the charism, without falling into pure and simple adaptation;
- be on the alert that they continue to develop the personal life project;
- pay attention that the work they do does not destroy the spirit of prayer and devotion, nor “separate” itself from community life, creating in them individualism, disorientation and dryness;
- assure a healthy balance between availability and personal desires;
- help them to develop projects of ongoing formation and to follow closely their putting this into practice;
- assure that the members of this age group come together periodically for formation or fraternal sharing.

Only with these premises can the young religious continue the progressive discovery of the contents of the religious identity and can a growth in his/her institutional and charismatic integration be guaranteed.

5. Conclusion

At the end of this reflection the fundamental question arises, a question which has guided us from the beginning: In a society like ours, is it possible to make an option for life that is really absolute and irrevocable?

My answer is clearly affirmative, on condition that the following be observed:

- that religious or consecrated life places the centre of its renewal in a renewed experience of God, Three in One, and considers this experience as its fundamental structure. The central nucleus in religious life is to live in God. The future of religious life, therefore, depends on its option for the living God (cf. John 20:17); its erosion on adaptation to post-modernity.

- that the option for the living God, far from closing oneself in a mysticism separated from everything and everybody, leads religious men and women toward a sharing in the Trinitarian dynamism “ad intra” and “ad extra.” The participation in this dynamism “ad intra” supposes relations of communion with one another and demands free dedication of oneself, accepting differences, communication without reserve, maternal tenderness, filial docility. On the other hand participating in the Trinitarian dynamism “ad extra” supposes living critically and prophetically in this “information society,” placing the human person above the Sabbath (in the first place) and personal dialogue above anonymity and diverse forms of solitude.
- that there is a clear decision to prefer the quality of life of the community to the number of its members and its activities.
- that in the pastoral care of vocations or vocational promotion, religious life will be presented in all its evangelical radicalism and that a discernment is made in consonance with these demands.
- that during initial formation a personalised accompaniment will be assured and that the level of the demands will not be lowered in all that is considered essential in religious life.
- that there be continuity and coherence among vocational promotion, initial formation and ongoing formation.
- that during the first years after solemn profession personalised accompaniment continue.

Certainly, even by assuring all this, abandonment of the religious life will continue, but I think that these will diminish in relation to those which occur today or, at least, there will be less responsibility on our part.

A lovely oriental proverb says: “The eye sees only sand, but the enlightened heart can perceive the end of the desert and fertile land.” Let us look with our heart. Perhaps we will be able to see what others do not see and help others to see that which otherwise they might never succeed in seeing.

(VICTOR BIELER, C.M., translator)