

The Phenomenon of Departure from the Congregation from a Psychological Point of View: Intrapsychic Dynamics

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Introduction

Vocation to the religious life is in itself a mystery of participation in the mission of Christ. Precisely because it is a mystery, sometimes it is difficult, in a specific individual case, to understand exactly how it begins and where it must terminate. But like every other mystery, we can understand something about it.

In recent years, many congregations, as well as ours, have witnessed a good number of premature departures for various motives and reasons. The effect sometimes can be contagious in the community and injurious or liberating to the individual persons. Thus this phenomenon continuously opens new questions for investigation towards a broader understanding of the possible causes.

In a religious vocation there are two persons involved in the fulfillment of one mission: God and Man. The individual religious is, therefore, invited to be engaged wholly with the divine gift of internal grace which, building on his nature and internal disposition, helps him to be effective in the mission. The central idea that emerges from this consideration is the fact that there is, on the one hand, the grace of God to live the invitation and, on the other hand, a personal disposition through free response.

However, this has a big implication for living the actual vocational experience. For instance, the freedom to live the Vincentian vocation will require a personal and conscious commitment to an understood value. In other words, effectively living it will imply a sufficient understanding of the Christian values as presented by the Congregation of the Mission, a conscious and personal commitment to these values and an understanding of the dynamics that might weaken or destroy the commitment.

So this article will seek to offer, first of all, a brief review of the Vincentian vocation as a religious vocation and the value it presents. Secondly, it will look at the motivational predisposition for entrance into the vocation, and some intrapsychic factors that could affect effectiveness and perseverance.

The Call to Be a Vincentian

Every Vincentian priest or brother has a personal story on how and where he first got the call or the motivation to dedicate himself to the service of the poor. Though varied, the unifying factor about these stories and experiences is that they are not automatic but begin gradually. Events and further experiences continue to inspire and nurture it until eventually a decision is made. Even such a decision is open to further challenges by later experiences.

Just like every other religious vocation, the call to be a Vincentian can be understood as a call to the adventure of faith expressed in the service of the poor in the spirit of St. Vincent. This vocation, therefore, is not an achievement of a status but an insertion into the mystery of service, which is not a final point, but a departure for the actual experience of the vocation.

Looking back at the history of the Congregation of the Mission one of the most painful moments that St. Vincent had to contend with was the gradual departure of so many good men who had started living the experience of serving the poor but could no longer persevere. St. Vincent once said, "I have seen a member of the company, one of the very best among us who is about to leave, without giving me any particular reason."¹ His intention was not, it would seem, to manipulate perseverance and neither did he presume that everyone who was once inclined to the Congregation was always so motivated and had finally found his vocation. In fact, St. Vincent acknowledged that there could be wrong or inconsistent motivations. His reaction to the departure of some members like Chrétien Daisne and Brother Doutrelet² was a good example of his assumption of the possible weak and unrealistic motivation of some members.

But, from the depth of his experience, Vincent would warn that the symptoms before departure included failure to rise early, lack of prayer, and the neglect of the practice of poverty.³ To this end, it is evident that St. Vincent was challenging inconsistent lifestyle here; that is, where one's attitude does not sufficiently sustain the value professed, but gratifies the internal needs of the individual.

¹ SV III, 379.

² SV VII, 354, 379.

³ SV XI, 223.

As we stated earlier everyone has his vocational story, his vocational motivation and his personal ideal in living the call to the religious life and more so the call to be a Vincentian. But the realization of this story or motivation is often mediated by the Church or the Congregation, such that the call to be a Vincentian, which began as a private experience, becomes a call to living the charism that is the identity of the Congregation of the Mission. The five Vincentian virtues — simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification and zeal for souls, which make up Vincentian spirituality — are presented as instrumental values which facilitate theocentric self-transcendence and vocational effectiveness.

So apart from the self ideal, which may form the base for a vocational motivation, the institutional ideals/values, like the five virtues, are all the more important for the realization of the end of religious life (union with God). But one wonders: what could make someone be motivated by the Vincentian vocation, but at the same time incapable of living the values associated with being a Vincentian? This question calls us to examine the structural and content dynamics of the human person as important factors to living the vocational life.

The Human Personality: Structure and Content

The human person is one of God's most complex creatures. His complexity renders a single directional view, a reductionist anthropology. But an authentic Christian understanding, which we want to adopt, holds that though human beings are created in the image of God, with the capacity to know and love their creator,⁴ they experience disunity within themselves⁵ as a result of the dynamic interaction between the actual self, ideal self, needs, attitudes and values. That is the basic dialectic of the human person.

We consider the structure of the human person as two ends of one pole. The actual self and the ideal self. The ideal self, because it is the idea the person has of himself and the type of person he wants to be, is prevalently conscious and sometimes illusive. The actual self, which is the actual and everyday life the person is living, is both conscious and unconscious. How many times are we surprised that we did things that we never knew we could do or never were conscious that we did? This seems to be our unconscious or latent self at work. Common feedback in the community tries to make this unconscious, actual self conscious to the person.

⁴ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, 12 (henceforth cited as GS).

⁵ GS 10.

Now within this structure are present the active content which puts the life of the individual person in a dynamic process. This content includes values, attitudes and needs.

Values constitute what one holds as important and wants to attain. They may be religious, political or economic. Whatever they are, what is important is that the values of the person tend to influence the actual self in a very definitive way. Such influence could be self-gratification, in which case it is centered on the person's well being and personal comfort, or it could be self-liberation, which is centered on freeing the person for something outside of himself, for example, living the Vincentian vocation as a gift of oneself or basically to provide a job or means of survival for oneself.

Attitudes are the specific dispositional ways one tends to express what he values or what he needs. Attitude is like an indication of one's conscious or unconscious need or value. The classical definition of attitude holds that "*an attitude is a relatively enduring organization of beliefs concerning an object or situation, which predisposes one to respond in a certain preferential way.*"⁶ Thus attitude would tend to precede behavior or action. Hidden behind every attitude is the need of the individual person. Thus *needs* are innate tendencies to action which derive from a privation in the organism or from the natural potentialities inherent in it, which he tries to actualize.⁷ So all three constitute the internal movement of the individual personality, such that every motivation or decision tends to be remotely conditioned by the antecedent dictates of values, needs and attitudes interacting in the person.

Given this background then, it becomes necessary to understand the phenomenon of painful departures from the Congregation from the psychosocial dynamics perspective. We must understand "*how*" and "*what kind of*" needs, values and attitudes preceded the choice of entrance and sustained or weakened the actual living out of the Vincentian vocation. Therefore two questions emerge as regards the choice and the living of the Vincentian vocation: 1) What structure is the individual using when he is making the choice? What motivates him? 2) How is he motivated; that is, what is preoccupying him and how is the motivation being sustained?

These two questions will form the pivot of our discussion and give a direction toward formulating hypothesis on understanding the phenomenon of departure from our perspective.

⁶ M. ROKEACH, *Belief, Attitude and Values. A theory of Organization and Change*, p. 112.

⁷ L.M. RULLA, *Depth Psychology and Vocation*, Rome, 2003, p. 31.

The Choice to Enter and Be Received into the Company

Every choice is at the cost of a renunciation. The choice to enter the Congregation of the Mission is a renunciation to being a diocesan priest or brother. But choice in itself is based on a value appraised as good-for-me or good-in-itself. A value appraised as good-in-itself leads to self-transcendence because it is objective, whereas a value appraised as good-for-me guarantees gratification as far as it is good for me. When conditions change and that value does no longer gratify or satisfy my need, it ceases to be a value.

Therefore the decision to enter the Vincentian vocation is assumed to begin with the appraisal of the Vincentian values, in addition to general Christian values, as good-for-me or good-in-themselves. Thus, if it is based on the values as good-in-themselves, the choice to enter the Company becomes the choice to commit oneself to the values presented by the institution and to integrate these ideals as Christian values into one's actual life in the following of Christ.⁸ This in turn will promote vocational effectiveness and perseverance. But if the values are appraised as good-for-me, they maintain their force as long as conditions are favorable to the person.

In this regard, vocational choice requires personal responsibility, which is centered on the individual self-ideal and the institutional vocational-ideal. But to aim at eliminating a conflicting lifestyle, as a Vincentian, the values the person seeks and lives must be considerably in agreement or consistent with the objective value of Christian vocation and the characteristic value of the Vincentian virtues. It is the disparity between these values and personal values that could trigger a vocational crisis in the early or later stages after entrance.

Vocational Crises in the Congregation

A vocational crisis can be experienced at any stage after entrance into the vocational life. Some experience it early, others later. Some people survive the crisis, while others feel destroyed by it. Crisis can be described as a state of conflict, internal or external, which provokes the feeling of meaninglessness and powerlessness. It is the state when personal defenses seem to have broken down and the person becomes somehow disorganized, whether in his relationship with himself, people or his work.

⁸ L.M. RULLA, *Anthropology of Christian Vocation*, Volume 1, Rome, 1986, p. 339 (henceforth cited as ACV).

Vocational crisis, then, is the experience of conflict in the vocational life after entrance. Such conflict can be internal or external. It is internal when it involves the intrapsychic dynamics of the person; that is, the interaction among needs, attitudes and values. It is external when it is provoked by external factors, for example, the community or family system or some social factor or pressure. Most often it is crisis that leads to departure from the Congregation.

Inconsistency

Internal conflict originates from the dialectics of two incompatible internal reactions whose forces, from the functional point of view, are equal; that is, the incompatibility *between needs and values*. Intrapsychic conflict, as regards its effect on the individual person, can be experienced by the individual religious whose needs are in dissonance with vocational values. In this case, living religious life effectively becomes difficult since he will frequently seek to satisfy his needs in an environment that does not facilitate this satisfaction because of the orientation of the institutional values.

Among the many human needs, there are some which give rise to attitudes that might be described as vocationally dissonant; that is to say, they are in conflict with values which are fundamental in a religious vocation.⁹ These needs are aggression, affective dependence, sexual gratification, exhibition and abasement. The more these needs are nurtured, the more they pose a danger to living a religious vocation. So great inconsistency exists when one proclaims the religious value but feeds one or more of these needs by his attitude.

For instance, an individual may proclaim love for the poor as a value or as a motivation for the Vincentian vocation, while actually he desires prestige and self-fulfillment in his everyday, actual life. When this happens the individual resorts to a defensive attitude either by compliance or identification¹⁰ with the religious group, just to keep using the group for his needs. The tragedy occurs when this conflict is unconscious, so that the individual religious does not

⁹ L.M. RULLA - F. IMODA - J. RIDICK, *Psychological Structure and Vocation*, p. 7 (henceforth cited as PSV).

¹⁰ This was discussed by Kelman in connection with attitude change. He defined compliance as the attitude of accepting influence from another person or from a group because he hopes to achieve a favorable reaction from the other. This is done regardless of what his private beliefs may be. Identification is when an individual adopts behavior derived from another person or group because this behavior is associated with a satisfying self-defining relationship to this person or group. Cf. H.C. KELMAN, "Process of Opinion Change," in *Public Opinion Quarterly* (1961) Vol. XXV, pp. 62-65.

understand what is going on, even as he suffers and no longer finds meaning in his vocational life.

Sometimes some young men and women may be attracted to religious life in some of our provinces because of the rate of poverty and unemployment. This is not an invalid motivation in the first instance, but these are likely to face internal conflict when they are not able to internalize the Vincentian values in the course of their formative experience. The effect is premature crises and eventual departure when they are confronted with the reality of living the Vincentian life and the vows. At times we observe the phenomenon that some young confreres from developing countries, when given the opportunity to study in the developed — or what sociological literature calls first-world — countries, enter into crises and do not want to return home again. This may be because they have found what they actually sought, in which case there will arise the question of initial mixed motivation, or they become confused by the values that the developed world is presenting to them. Here there is a question of affective immaturity.

When this inconsistency exists, the individual person, instead of finding fulfillment in religious life, constantly experiences conflict and dissatisfaction about almost everything. He expresses his dissatisfaction by seeing that the community is bad and nothing is working, the apostolate is not satisfying, the superior is not caring enough. The litany may be longer and it will be turned against the entire community and everybody else who does not see things as he does. In such situations, he simply awaits an opportunity for departure.

Psychological and Social Inconsistency

Inconsistency could be understood from two perspectives: social and psychological. A *psychological inconsistency* exists when an *unconscious* need is incompatible with proclaimed values and attitudes; for instance, if someone, who has a strong, subconscious need for power and prestige embraces the vow of poverty and the five Vincentian virtues. He is likely to suffer some psychological conflict because of the evident inconsistency between his needs and his values and attitudes.

Social inconsistency exists when a subconscious need is incompatible with vocational values and the attitude obeys the needs more than the values.¹¹ Here we can think of the situation where a confrere has a strong subconscious need for sexual gratification, which is expressed in a consonant attitude of entering into intimate

¹¹ PSV, pp. 11-12, 35.

friendship with a particular girl, forgetting the value and the vow of celibacy and chastity.

The resultant effect of these two kinds of inconsistency is evidently conflict and dissatisfaction. In fact, these contradictions can limit the judgment processes and decision-making of the person, and even hurt his interpersonal relationships and, indirectly, his progress in the spiritual life.¹² These can result in social or missionary blunders and eventual departure.

We have widespread instances in vocational life when people faced psychological and social vocational inconsistency, which resulted in the decision to quit the vocation. Unfortunately, in the vocational life, people can underestimate the obstructive influence of the unconscious. This seems to have a long history in the Church, because the theory of unconscious influence was seen as the politics of modern psychology — whose father, Sigmund Freud, was a celebrated atheist — and was incompatible with Christian belief. This position was evident in the Church's view of man as either almost free and always responsible for his action, such that every action was indexed as sin or virtue; or not free and almost totally driven by unconscious forces in the sense of pathology.

But Vatican II broadened this view and accepted the possible influence of the unconscious in living the vocational life. Thus it declared that, pastorally, sufficient use should be made not only of theological principles, but also of the findings of the secular sciences, especially psychology and sociology. In this way, the faithful will be brought to purer and more mature ways of living the faith.¹³

There is every indication that the council teaching on the use of human sciences to foster maturity in the Christian vocation considers the Christian response as a total self-giving. From this background, there has been extensive emphasis in post-conciliar documents on integral formation,¹⁴ which pays special attention to consistent vocational integration and to various aspects of development. The aim is to foster personal freedom in response to the Christian vocation. It was this background that provoked research on the

¹² F. MAEURES, "Un Progetto Interdisciplinare di Antropologia Cristiana," extract from *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 1987, p. 236.

¹³ GS, 62.

¹⁴ JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortations, *Vita Consecrata*, 65 and *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 2, 3, 4; Cf. also, Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to Institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate (31 May 1983), 45; *L'Osservatore Romano* (English edition) 18 July 1983, p. 7; National Conference of United States Catholic Bishops, *The Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests*, 24-26.

possible influence of the unconscious on freedom in vocational life.¹⁵ Practical results from this research have indicated that vocational crises and eventual departure do have roots not only in the weakness associated with sin, but may be even more related to an entrenched weakness due to the presence of unconscious inconsistencies as regards apparent good and real good; that is, what is good-for-me and serves my need and what is good-in-itself and serves a universal purpose.

The very presence of these deep-rooted, unconscious inconsistencies tends, with time, to assume an imperial take over and undermine the virtuous practices of the individual¹⁶ — like personal prayer, Eucharist, spiritual reading — that have value for the kingdom and instrumental values — like the vows and the five Vincentian virtues — that are basic to vocation. When these are broken down the person begins to see meaninglessness in the vocation. The worst case is when virtues were not strongly formed in the early years. The unexpected crises thus weaken apostolic effectiveness and the perseverance of the individual. The result will be departure or managing to stay, which is known as *nesting*.

False Expectations

Inconsistency in some way is related to false expectations. People normally attach personal meaning to values, people, institutions and things. The meaning they attach to these things becomes their expectations. There are a lot of expectations people can have about vocational life; for instance, the expectation that it is a perfect community or it is a paid job or a power-class. Unrealistic expectation does not allow for self-transcendence. But expectations based on the self-transcendence option of the *gift of self in the service of the mission* tend to be real and the vocational meaning will revolve around how much of oneself is given instead of how much of one's need is gratified. Sometimes, through realistic expectation, community life can foster growth in theocentric self-transcendent

¹⁵ In his research, Rulla talks about the three dimensions. In the first dimension one is considered as completely free in the sense of effective freedom. He is prevalently conscious and morally responsible for actions at this dimension. Actions therefore tend to sin or virtue. The second dimension mediates between the first and third dimensions. It is the dimension of consciously and unconsciously motivated actions. There is a degree of effective freedom here and there is also limitation. Actions at this dimension tend to real good or apparent good. This is the dimension of the non-culpable error. The third dimension is the dimension that entails opposite poles of normality or pathological illness. Here one is almost without freedom and tends to be driven by unconscious forces (ACV, Vol. 1, p. 193).

¹⁶ ACV, 357.

love based on internalization of the objective values of the Christian vocation and the Congregation.

But unrealistic expectations will seek gratification of personal needs through community life, in which case repeated satisfaction of needs becomes a hindrance instead of a help to vocational life.¹⁷ The frustration of these needs will then result in infantile choices.

In fact, the frustration begins with the *expectations* that people have before and at entrance to the vocational life. People can be so rigid in their expectations, evaluate vocation in a one-directional way and live with too much initial hope, that later there is no hope because of what has happened in community or in their experience.

Affective Immaturity

Affective development involves growing in relation to what one values and holds as important. Affective maturity is a process of self-awareness in relation to an important other. The other could be a value, a person or a promise. Affective maturity is about being in touch with the self and knowing one's inner desires, emotions, impulses, and reactions.

In this regard, the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, first of all, presents affective maturity as the result of an education in true and responsible love; secondly, as the capacity to enter into a good and affective *relationship with others*, worthy of esteem and respect such as would be reflected in the relationship between man and woman; and thirdly, as *true friendship* and deep brotherliness which flow from and into a lively and personal love of Jesus Christ.¹⁸

This requires a clear and strong training in freedom, which expresses itself in a convinced and heartfelt obedience to the "truth" of one's own being and to the "meaning" of one's own existence; that is, to the "sincere gift of self" as the way and the fundamental content of an authentic realization of self.¹⁹

Affective immaturity, therefore, is the inability to relate effectively with others outside oneself and inattentiveness to what is happening within oneself. Thus the affectively immature religious runs the risk of living the experience of unending bitterness, discontent and loneliness when struck with some crisis, which could lead to eventual abandonment of the vocation.

¹⁷ ACV, 402.

¹⁸ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis, On the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day*, 44.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

Social Pressure

Social pressure is another factor that can weaken values. In contemporary society, commitment to higher values seems to be discouraged by the social concept of emancipation. Everything is interpreted within the narrow confines of the self and what gratifies it. People tend to seek pleasure and search for the cash or pleasure-value thing or event.

Therefore, it is not worth dedicating oneself to anything without cash or pleasure-value. This contemporary social concept seems to influence living the vocational life as a gift of oneself. Today the definitions of poverty, obedience and chastity seek adaptation to social demands and contemporary understanding. But social demands tend to deny the possibility of a permanent commitment. Consequently, these new waves assume the form of emotional politics in search of adherents. Unfortunately, religious, who are already weak in the practice of virtue, become vulnerable to the social campaign and gradually lose their balance in the vocational life. Sometimes this campaign presents unrealistic pledges. The first target of this campaign is to weaken the self-transcendent value and direct attention to the pleasure of the natural value. Then it will reach out to the attitude until gradually the individual sinks into confusion. The confusion it provokes is that of thinking that outside the confinement of religious life there is freedom, more happiness and unlimited chances for self-fulfillment. How true this is, is a matter of experience.

Non-Cohesiveness

Cohesiveness is the degree to which members are motivated to remain in the group. It is the attractiveness of a group for its members. It is the condition of members who feel warmth and comfort in the group, feel they belong, value the group and feel that they are valued in turn and unconditionally accepted and supported by the entire group.²⁰

Among other things, the significant emphasis on this definition is the emotional satisfaction of the members of the group, given the nature of the group as a psychological environment. The members of a cohesive group, therefore, tend to behave with the confidence of real belongingness. They consider the task of the group as their task and they value the group. A religious community is like a group and perseverance would be occasioned by the degree of cohesion. When

²⁰ IRVIN D. YALOM, *The Theory and Practice of Group Therapy*, 4th ed., New York, 1995, p. 48.

the community is non-cohesive in terms of making community plans and building a community structure that involve its members, there is a likelihood that perseverance will not be encouraged and a decision to depart would be easy in face of the slightest difficulty. Confreres in crisis often lack the emotional support of the community and so feel lonely and hence become victims of aggression turned against the self.

Conclusion

We have noted, among many things, that religious vocation is first of all a call from God. But because it is directed to man in real life, there are many psychological variables that come to play in effectively living and persevering in it. As we have pointed out, such variables, when not properly integrated, can result in departure. In fact, living and persevering in the religious life seem to be about living the conflict of these variables in relationship to the vocational instrumental values (poverty, chastity, obedience) and the terminal value (union with God). These variables include consistency, realistic expectation, cohesion, affective maturity and personal conviction about the gift of self for service.