

Change of Perspective in the Consideration of the Topic

Initial Thoughts of a Canonist and Formator

by Michael P. Joyce, C.M.

As I begin this presentation, I apologize to the translators for the times when I will wander from this text and from my text next week. Since my abilities in foreign languages are quite limited, I admire your work and am dependent upon it.

When I was the Judicial Vicar of Cardinal Rigali in the Archdiocese of Saint Louis, we had a conversation about my work as a Vincentian. Cardinal Rigali is a close friend of our Community and received his initial formation from us, including from our former Superior General, Father James Richardson. Cardinal Rigali asked me how I saw my work as his judicial vicar as part of the Vincentian ministry. Since one of my duties was assisting diocesan priests in seeking dispensations from their obligations arising from ordination, I answered that part of my work was the continuing formation of priests who decided to leave active ordained ministry. I do not know if my response was sufficient for Cardinal Rigali but I do know that I see my work with the Midwest and Southern Provinces of the United States and with several dioceses in the United States in normalizing the status of priests who have left the active ordained ministry as formation work.

Allow me to explain the extreme statement I have just made. Father Bellemakers admirably explained the negative opinion that many in the Catholic Church used to hold toward priests who had left the active ministry. (It is even difficult to find non-judgmental language about these brothers.) The various canonical institutes that we will examine during this workshop to normalize their situations can be viewed simply as ways to release them from our Congregation. However, these men, whether they are our confreres or brothers in the fraternity of the ordained priesthood, are members of the Christian faithful and fellow human beings who have a personal relationship with our God. For them, the process of moving from membership in the Congregation of the Mission and participation in the ordained priesthood of Jesus Christ is much

more than a canonical procedure. It is also a process in their human formation that is at the basis of all other kinds of formation.

In various parts of the world today, people do not necessarily regard priests who find that they must depart from the exercise of the ordained, for whatever reason, with the same kind of negative views as in the past. This change of opinion, I believe, has come from experience. Many of these men may have been ineffective in their pastoral ministry and after they have returned to the lay state are now quite effective and much more satisfied with their lives. We, as people of faith, hope, and love, must ask how this dichotomy is possible. Did not God call them? Did they not respond? Was grace not effective in their process of discernment? I have no definitive answers to these questions.

When I began my studies in law for consecrated life and societies of apostolic life, we studied the canonical procedures for dismissal and laicization. My professor, Father Kevin Seasoltz, OSB, commented during his lecture that he believed that God might call someone to consecrated life and later call that person to another lifestyle. As a recently vowed Vincentian and newly ordained priest, I found that comment rather puzzling. I now believe that Father Seasoltz' observation is quite plausible. As God has informed us, his ways are not our ways. I take this opportunity to make a sales pitch and mention a work that you might find very helpful. It is entitled *Procedural Handbook for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life*.¹ This work explains how to go through a variety of procedures that leadership needs to use including excommunication, dismissal, and laicization. This book is available at Pauline Media, close to the Vatican.

Another possibility is that our formation programs are not perfect, nor will they ever be, because they are subject to human limitations. On this point, I recommend to you a series of presentations made to the superiors general entitled, *Promoting Perseverance in the Consecrated Life: Anthropological Challenges to Formation*.² You can find this book at the Ancora bookstore on Via della Conciliazione. Our formation programs are characterized by mutuality. The mutuality is between those in formation, the formators, and provincial leadership. There are several instances in which I, as a formator, recommended to provincial leadership that a

¹ MICHAEL P. JOYCE, CM - CATHERINE DARCY, RSM - ROBERT KASLYN, SJ - MARGARET SULLIVAN, CSJ (editors), *Procedural Handbook for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life*, Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 2001.

² UNION OF SUPERIORS GENERAL, *Promoting Perseverance in the Consecrated Life: Anthropological Challenges to Formation*, Rome: Litos, undated.

confrere not be admitted to incorporated membership or ordination. I only made such a recommendation after speaking with the confrere in initial formation. Many times, provincial leadership did not accept my recommendation. There are several instances in which the leadership was correct and these members are now doing outstanding ministry. However, there are other instances in which the confreres have continued to present problems. In some of these instances, I have had to make a recommendation to the Holy See that these confreres be dispensed from their obligations and dismissed from the clerical state and the Congregation. I do not need to go into detail about the variety of situations that were present; you know them from your own experience as formators. A work that I found helpful in synthesizing the various factors that cause someone to depart from the community and the priesthood is: *Fidelity and Abandonment in Today's Consecrated Life*.³ It is also published by the Union of Superiors General and available at Ancora.

I also will say a few words about an item in your folders titled "Synthesis of the Questionnaires." During the first meeting of the Commission for this workshop, we decided to ask Visitors, formators, and confreres who had left questions about their experiences. On behalf of the Commission, I thank all those who responded to our questions. Those experiences were very valuable as we met a second time to develop further this week in which we are meeting together. There is no one session of the workshop that directly responds to the reports that the Commission received. However, we used those responses to design the workshop. The experiences of those who responded include a wide spectrum. We suggest that you find some time early in the workshop to read the responses of our confreres and former confreres so that they may provide you with a rich background as you journey through the week of this workshop.

Finally I suggest that as we proceed during this workshop, we keep in mind that we are working with and for our confreres to provide ultimately, in a variety of ways, for their salvation, the supreme law of the Church.⁴

³ UNION OF SUPERIORS GENERAL, *Fidelity and Abandonment in Today's Consecrated Life*, Rome: Litos, undated.

⁴ Canon 1752: "... the salvation of souls, which in the Church must always be the supreme law."