

Psychological and Spiritual Accompaniment of Confreres in Difficulty

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Introduction

The theme we are treating is situated in a *delicate area* because of the problems entailed, because of the difficulty in helping people, because of its repercussions on the entire Congregation and beyond it. To face it requires an *holistic, integrated approach*, with an *interdisciplinary* vision, to the person and situation. Due to the brevity of the treatment, I will give only a few signs, limiting myself to the dimension of *psychological and spiritual accompaniment*.

Above all, it seems opportune to remind you how these two types of accompaniment are both important and, in a certain way, influence each other: to eliminate one for the sake of simplification could result in an inappropriate reductionism. Also, the two dimensions are not separated, but neither confused, with regard to the two distinct aspects of the person. For us as Christians the model which we can refer to after all is the person of *Jesus, Man-God*, in whom the human dimension and the divine-spiritual dimension are perfectly united, yet still distinct; neither confused, nor separated.¹ This is the *law of the incarnation!*

This model can help us understand another fundamental aspect of the topic, which, at times, can risk being put in parenthesis. We could, in fact, ask ourselves: “Is a confrere in difficulty only a *problem* or is he also a “*gift*”? Is he a *difficulty* and that is all or is he also a new *possibility*? In *light of the resurrection* we must affirm that the two dimensions of death and resurrection are both present: if a gift that God made to the Congregation of the Mission is to seek his face in the *poor*, where can he be found if not in these confreres who are, beyond a doubt, the *nearest* among the poor and who are sometimes among the *poorest*, at least in the moral or spiritual sense.

¹ Cf., Formulation of the Council of Chalcedon.

In this sense, we place ourselves, before all else, in *the view of "helping"* the person before that of *defending* him before the institution or others, etc. I am not suggesting here that we be imprudent, but rather, that the intention be to place at the center our interest for the confrere in difficulty, without neglecting others who are affected.

A word about prevention

It is said that "*an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.*" Perhaps nowhere is this so true as in this area. Unattended problems in the past, even small ones, can become a wellspring of serious trouble.

Therefore, it is very important to provide the *appropriate help*, whether it be personal or group support, at critical moments in religious life:

- *initial discernment*
- *initial formation*
- *ongoing formation.*

For example, frequently, the most serious difficulties could have been prevented by giving more attention to the process of initial discernment, whereby, with the help of trained professionals, potential problem areas can be detected. Here either formation offers the concrete possibility to deal with difficulties or it is not right or honest to receive the candidate into the religious community.

Preliminaries of accompaniment

A critical question for the process of accompaniment is the will of the person. *If the person with difficulty asks for help*, this simplifies things a lot: certainly the road will not be an easy one, but at least it can be traveled. *On the contrary, if help is not sought*, it will be necessary to assist the confrere to become aware of his need for help. Depending on the case, this will be done in a more or less energetic way, more welcoming and maternal — so to speak — or more decisive and paternal.

In fact, the *one who suffers* because of his situation usually wants to change, for which there is greater possibility of progress. On the contrary, *the one who does not suffer*, is often content as he is: according to him, it is others who must change! It is common to resort to pure lies to deny the problem to the bitter end, especially in certain areas (alcohol abuse, pedophilia, etc.). Particularly in these last instances the pedagogical and/or juridical usefulness of possible

“sanctions” could arise, once the real existence of the difficulty has been demonstrated.

In every case, the superiors responsible must be certain that they:

- do not shut their eyes in the face of concrete problems, nor try to cover them up under a pious veil (or an impious one): in this way the problem grows ever sharper and at times becomes almost irresolvable;
- give the person hope: hope is based on the possibility of appropriate help and finds fertile ground, especially when the person is open to it — and often the person really *wants* to change.

Nevertheless, it continues to hold true that “*if someone does not want...*,” things are anything but easy!

Lines of spiritual accompaniment

Some might come up with the question: “*Why a spiritual accompaniment?* This person is no longer in initial formation! What is more, it is not right to meddle in the private life of the person.”

It would require more time to respond to these questions, about which much has been written. I will briefly mention a few thoughts.

Saint Basil the Great says that, in respect to the spiritual guide, a person should not “hide from him any secret movement of the soul, nor utter any uncontrolled word.”² This is a double principle that, even though it is anything but easy to carry out fully, is, of course, a powerful factor in both spiritual and human growth. In this sense, the spiritual accompaniment can be very helpful both in formation as in the process of recuperation.

In his classic work, *Spiritual Friendship*,³ Aelred of Rievaulx, writes that to the friend “you confide as to another self, you hide nothing from him and fear nothing from him.” Even if the terminology is a little different (guide - friend)⁴, the substance of the dialogue is very similar.

² Quoted in E. ANCILLI, “Direzione spirituale,” in *Dizionario degli Istituti de perfezione*, vol. III, Paoline, Rome, 1973, p. 533.

³ AELRED OF RIEVAULX, *L'amicizia spirituale*, Paoline, Milan 2004, p. 145.

⁴ I will not go into the distinction of the terms among “friend” and “father,” or “accompanier” and “guide” or “director,” etc. At the end of this presentation it is sufficient to highlight the importance of having at one’s side a person to whom one can say everything about oneself and who presents to us the truth as it is, without diluting it to make us happy.

It is also said that “a friend is someone to whom you can tell everything about yourself without fear or shame.... One who accepts you, but does not judge you.... One who calls forth the best from within you and is not scandalized by anything.... One who does not trick you and who knows how to call both good and evil by name....” To have at one’s side the spiritual help of such a person is obviously a great gift and an opportunity that should not be squandered.

In the itinerary of spiritual accompaniment, which is logically adapted to the individual person, some themes can be particularly helpful:

- for example, to recall faith in *the love of God*, who is the origin of both the baptismal and religious vocation;
- or carrying out with dedication *the will of God*, as a way of responding to his love and thanking him;
- *brotherly love*, as a concrete response to God’s design;
- and *mutual love*, which is the fulfillment of love;
- or, finally, the love of *Jesus crucified and risen*, “Way” for every journey in God and the concretization of all human love.

These are only a few of many possible themes that, it seems to me however, are fundamental, given their close relationship with some of the general dynamics for human growth.⁵ For example, faith in the love of God and in seeking his will — if lived well — can help the processes that lead to consolidating the identity and the authentic fulfillment of the person; while the dimension of love of others and reciprocal charity are important to stimulate getting out of one’s own immature narcissism; final, the paschal dynamic of “losing in order to find again” is at the heart of every spiritual development journey.

It is clear that, especially in difficult situations, the person is called to live these dimensions more as a goal towards which to tend with constancy, than as an attained objective. There are many styles and possible ways of spiritual accompaniment. But, especially in the case of confreres with difficulties, it is particularly important to make witness precede the “word”: above all, living personally that which one wishes to communicate to the other. Consequently, it is necessary, as far as possible, to establish with the other a relationship of profound empathy, made up especially of much listening and “few words.” Much more could be said, given that the literature on

⁵ Cf., C. LUBICH, “Lezione per la laurea Honoris Causa,” in “Lettere” (Psicologia), in *Nuova Umanità*, 122 (1999/2), 177-189 (particularly, 185-188).

spiritual accompaniment is very rich, but here it is impossible to go any further into this subject, even briefly.⁶

One could ask the question: “*Is spiritual accompaniment sufficient to help a confrere in difficulty?*” Experience tells us “No!”, especially in serious cases. Even *theoretical reflection* says no, based on the principle of the law of the incarnation: one cannot, with spirituality and prayer alone, normally cure difficulties whose roots are sunk in psychological problems. This then gives rise to the need for psychological help and, in particular, for a *psycho-spiritual integration*. At this point the question arises: to *what kind of psychology and/or psychotherapy* should one turn? *What professional is most suited* to treat difficult cases in consecrated life?

Without wishing to make the undeserved exclusions in the area, it seems to me important to remember that, among others, a fundamental characteristic is that the background of the professional — beyond the type of school or current psychology in which he was formed — must be compatible with a Christian anthropology, with the vision of humanity that Jesus Christ presents us. Two characteristics are essential:

- Openness to transcendence
- Awareness that there are “limits” to the person’s freedom.⁷

This is in conformity with the concept of *Christian personalism*, in that the person is the center of interest and, at the same time, has, as his or her priority, *reference to the God of Jesus Christ*. It is also important to consider the personal experience of the psychotherapist, especially in respect to the following dimensions:

- integration of his own value system,
- acceptance and respect of the Christian values of the person helped,
- human maturity,
- professional competency,
- respect for the person helped.

⁶ A good, clear and comprehensive synthesis in Italian is found in the text of M. COSTA, *Direzione spirituale e discernimento*, Edizioni ADP, Rome 1993.

⁷ Cf., *Guadium et Spes*, 10.

Lines of psychological accompaniment

Psychological accompaniment consists in personal psychotherapy and — eventually — group psychotherapy. This is the very field of the professional; as such, I will go into very few specifics here. There are many techniques and methods of therapy used in different times and life situations that various therapists use with diverse clients.

However, it seems to me, that among others, some fundamental dimensions may be mentioned here:

- The therapy should be *rather demanding*, with regard to the frequency, duration, and kinds of sessions employed: more intense, when the difficulty is more serious. Generally, a few sessions or a few months are not sufficient.
- It is important to distinguish between “*symptom*” and “*gravity*.” A striking symptom does not always indicate a grave situation. And vice versa, symptoms which are apparently light may come from a personality gravely immature.
- Consequently, it would be necessary to attempt, where possible, a profound personality *restructuring* and not be satisfied with settling for the “disappearance of a symptom”; this, in fact, does not exclude, and even often is a prelude to the successive appearance of other types of symptoms.
- In addition the possibility of *interacting with other helping agencies* would be important (see below).

In relation to the therapy in the strict sense, it is important to carefully evaluate some opportunities.

- Of first importance is to evaluate the opportunity of guaranteeing the person residential context. This can be useful for a variety of reasons: the need to leave, for the time being, the institutional environment or to distance oneself from the daily routine, or to avoid some of the occasional “triggers” that cause problems (alcohol, drugs, pedophilia, as well as others).
- The opportunity for the therapist to have a point of reference with superiors, those responsible for the institution, can also be decisive.
 - * or the *superior* himself
 - * or his *delegate* (who has his trust and that of the one immediately interested)

- In some cases, it is helpful to have the opportunity to establish a relationship among the therapist and other possible professionals, particularly:
 - * when there is a *professional responsible for the therapeutic process*, that is, a coordinator of the different types of assistance, who has contact with the person's superiors (at times it is the therapist himself)
 - * *the one in charge of the residence* (sometimes it is that same professional responsible for the therapeutic process)
 - * *the group therapist*
 - * *the spiritual companion*

It is important to clarify, in the "initial contract" with the interested person, that all communication with the therapist and the other professionals, always marked by a simple essentialness, is *preceded by his consent and should take place with respect to the various types of "secret" to which the different professionals are held* (confessional, professional, etc.). It is also important to try to come to consensus, as far as possible, with the confrere.

Observations about the residence

A variety of residential institutions exist to treat priests and religious in difficulties:

- Ranging from the very "*programmed*" models, where each hour of the day is structured with an activity (the prestigious *St. Luke Institute* in Maryland, USA), to the more "*freely*" structured (*Oasi Perfetta Letizia* in Cotignola, near Bologna, Italy).
- Ranging from the more "*closed*," where practically all of life is lived in the residence (the *Venturini Fathers* in Trent, Italy), to the more "*open*" (*Comunità Agape* in Rome, Italy), where space is also given for "*external activities*."
- Whenever possible, and based on the concrete circumstances of the situation, one seeks a type of residence in which the interested person has *the best opportunities to mature*: for this a prior "*diagnosis*" is needed with a successive "*plan of intervention*."
- Also of notable importance is the question of financial costs. For example, the services offered at *St. Luke Institute* are very expensive, whereas other communities base their fees, for the most part, on a voluntary qualification and may reduce their costs almost completely (e.g., in the *Comunità Agape*).

The role of superiors (or their delegates)

Another very important dimension of help is carried out by superiors directly and/or through other confreres, delegated by them. Their role is to take both an *active and discreet interest*.

Things that a superior (or delegate) should **not** do:

- consider the confrere to be a “*parcel post package*,” who is “dropped off” with the experts or at the recovery center, without showing any further interest in him.
- turn over, in a similar manner, the “*problem to be resolved*” by the experts.
- show, on the contrary, an inappropriate, over-involved interest in the confrere with excessive “*intrusion*” during the process of therapy.
- seek a “*quick fix*,” possibly in a short amount of time.

The person in difficulty needs, on the contrary, a *discreet reference*, who is *sincerely interested* in his situation, who is *available to dialogue* with him and, where possible and necessary, with the other “re-educating” agents:

- the professional responsible for the process,
- the person responsible at the residential institute,
- the individual and/or group therapist,
- the spiritual companion.

The relationship among the “agents”: the TEAM

This is an *especially delicate area*: with regard to *privacy*, to professional or sacramental secrecy, etc. From the beginning, there should be a clear distinction made regarding issues that are in the “internal” and “external” forum. Nevertheless, especially in the most serious cases, coordination among the various health professionals is necessary, so that they work together as a **team**. The modalities of therapy are diverse according to the kinds of rehabilitation centers.

Collaboration among the following persons is useful (it goes without saying that all these “formative figures” are not always present and/or necessary).

- *Professional responsible for the process – psychotherapist – reference person in the residential community*: working together to formulate a process to follow, varying for the individual cases.
- *Professional responsible for the process – reference person of the religious Institute* (superior or his delegate): the communication can concern the plan and the evaluation

of the rehab process; the necessary steps to take, the stages to follow, if it will be helpful to change the atmosphere, etc.

- Occasionally, *psychotherapist – reference person of the religious Institute*: can dialogue especially on “how to manage” the situation, even from the point of view of the responsibilities connected to religious obedience (a type of religious community may not be suited for a given person); or to complete the information that the interested person provides to the psychotherapist (often the person “filters” and refers to the professional only that which suits him and is more or less acceptable, as frequently happens in the cases of pedophilia, etc.).
- *Psychotherapist – spiritual companion*: it is helpful to have a dialogue so as not to “row the boat in opposite directions;” but to sustain one another in the respective journeys; in fact, some people with problems have an extraordinary ability to “put people at odds with each other,” so that, if one is not attentive, the opinions of the therapist and the spiritual companion (or other helping professionals) can diverge even to the point of opposing one another.
- *Professional responsible for the process – spiritual companion*: (see above) to agree on the necessary steps to recuperation.
- Eventually *spiritual companion – reference person of the religious Institute*: in general this is less necessary.

Even if it is not necessary to consult frequently among the different members of this team, *the plan* is agreed upon together: the *pivot* around which the other formative figures turn is normally the one responsible for the rehabilitation process. Times of common meetings are helpful, especially in *key moments*: for example, at the time of insertion into the residential community, or during particular “turning points” on the journey, or during reinsertion into activity or in the community of origin, etc.

An example: the “Agape” community

I would like now to present, in summary form, an example of a welcome center for priests and religious in difficulty, which functions here in Rome, and in which I have worked for a number of years. *The “Agape” community* aims, in addition to what was expressed previously, to build a *self-help* community among the people who are welcomed. Thus, the individuals are responsible to help each other and become a cooperator in the maturation process of the other.

In this way, the person is encouraged to *act as an adult*: even though he/she has difficulties to face — and certainly these are taken into account — each person is called to join forces in order to support the journey of the entire community.

Now I would like to propose *a few areas of attention regarding the residential community*, which are basically typical of all communities, but which become even more important in a self-help community. I will not treat every single aspect here — other meetings would be necessary — but present only a list of things to keep in mind:

- *The relationships within* the residential community:
 - * among equals, that is the guests in residence,
 - * with those responsible for the institution
- *Outside relationships* — through the apostolate or other — to manage the process of recuperation: here it is necessary to be careful about the temptation to avoid facing the true problems or even the “acting out,” that is, for example, relapses.
- *Spirituality and prayer life* — personal and community — continue to be an important dimension that the person is called to develop in conformity with personal growth.
- *Health in general*: to take care of the rhythms and hygiene of life, physical exercise, bodily health, etc.
- *Attention given to vital atmosphere*, which expresses itself:
 - * in the mutual welcoming among the persons,
 - * in concrete, even manual, work
- *Study*: dedication to study, especially in a few areas, can cooperate in the therapeutic work; paying attention, however, to some risks (see “outside relationships”).
- *Outside communication*, for example, with family members, friends and acquaintances are managed in a different way in each case. In any case, they are reduced, so as not to avoid the work on oneself. Whatever helps this work is good; the rest is postponed (like what is lived in contexts like the “novitiate,” or the so-called “rites of passage,” etc.).

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to say that what has been said is little and there is much more to be said. For example, we need to reflect about the enormous change in sensitivity in various parts of the world on the way of living with this problem. In particular, *attention* must be paid to *some extremes* due to the culture, for example:

- in some contexts, a person's problem is considered as a *strictly "private" fact*, in which one should not intervene too much; but in reality, at least the Congregation and also the Church must be involved;
- in other contexts, on the contrary, a "rough" intrusion is made in the life of the person, which does not respect his dignity, his difficulties, and his patterns of growth.

Or again, we know that in the *relationships with authority*, which have a large share in the management of the difficulties of the confreres, the *"father" figure* is very important. It would then be helpful to ask oneself:

- what model of "father" has the person had *in his own family*? Frequently the problems originate in the family, where relational models among the people are unclear: for example, either too rigid or excessively confused, or inexistent, etc.
- what model of "father" exists *in the religious family* or in its local communities? Does this perpetuate the difficulties of the person or help him to overcome them?
- what model and *conception exist of religious obedience*? Does it promote healthy energies in the person and help him to keep under control his immature tendencies? Or does it not help in this?

We return then to the question posed at the beginning: Is the confrere in difficulty *problem or provocation? Trouble or stimulus to change? Condemnation or grace?* Aside from metaphor: Is it possible that the difficulty of the confrere is, at least in part, *the symptom of a community difficulty*, which reveals, for example, an underlying *problem in the community structure*?

To deal with these questions in an adequate way it is now necessary to turn to a *systematic approach*, which not only concentrates on the individual persons and their problems, but also on the kinds of relationships that exist among the persons and in the community structure in general.

Then the difficulty of a member will be useful, because it will make emerge the *possibility of new questions for the structure*. Without this bringing about *undeserved guilt feelings*, it can nevertheless be a *positive stimulus for improving* the structure.

Along these lines, for example, the Magisterium has made repeated interventions about growth in a deeper and generous assimilation of a **"spirituality of communion"**⁸ at every level of the

⁸ Cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43-45.

ecclesial fabric: "To think of our brothers and sisters... as 'those who are a part of me.' This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship... to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God... to 'make room' for our brothers and sisters, bearing 'each other's burdens' and resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy."

Is not all this a journey on which our ecclesial institutions still have far to go? Can the difficulties of certain confreres not be seen as a demanding call toward the realization of such ideals? In many situations, if the needs of others had been addressed in a timely fashion, even as a usual way of acting on the journey of religious life, perhaps they would not have ended up experiencing some difficulties. Why, then, not take up decisively a new effort in this direction?

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