

CONSTITUTION 49: FORMATION OF NOVICES

1

The mistress of novices should lead newcomers to share in the life of the monastic family. She is to instruct them in monastic observances, especially the Work of God, lectio divina, prayer and manual work. During the novitiate they are not given offices or work that could impede their formation. All the sisters are to support the novices by prayer and example and encourage them to persevere.

ST 49.1.A

To facilitate the formation of the novices it is recommended that a special part of the monastery be assigned to them.

ST 49.1.B

Between the abbess and the mistress of novices there should exist a sincere and profound unity of spirit, heart and orientation. This is an indispensable condition for a genuine formation of the novices. The abbess and the mistress of novices together determine novitiate policy. This is explained to the community by the abbess in order to obtain its co-operation.

2

Even in the school of love obstacles to full affective maturity can occur. It is of great importance that the community provide for the sisters such help as they need to overcome these obstacles. The mistress of novices should constantly discern their characters and their progress and help them to grow in self-knowledge. Where appropriate, she should make use of professionals in this field. The formation of novices should be entrusted only to wise and suitable sisters.

The Transmission of the “*Conversatio*”

Our fundamental concern in the formation of the novices should be that of not diverting them from the basic experience of the monastic *conversatio* and, therefore, to give them the possibility of giving themselves fully to the experience of the *Opus Dei*, personal and liturgical prayer, lectio, manual work, and fraternal life.

The fundamental criterion of discernment is the person's progress and growth in self-knowledge verified on the test-bed fundamental for monks: obedience, humiliation, capacity for solitude and community relationships. If there is tangible growth, if the person evolves, matures, changes, then she may be admitted to temporary profession. If the person has no possibility of evolution (obstinacy, conviction of being made as such... immutable, therefore, lack of true vocation) it is opportune to advise her to leave the monastery. Spiritual understanding of one's own vocation is the key to the person's constant transformation toward a full adherence, identity and freedom.

This spiritual understanding of one's own vocation is, in my opinion, the weaker point in candidate who enter monasteries today. Actually it is the life of the Spirit in us, that is no longer clearly perceived, that is, the life of faith. Since everything is reduced to feelings and sensations, endurance in trials is often an obstacle to make a decision. Life is not in God's hands, but in our human capacity to control it. Without the awareness of the life of the Spirit in us perseverance, entrustment and commitment are very difficult.

I was very struck when I read this affirmation of Cardinal Sarah concerning the intention of Vatican II: “‘Contrary to what we may think, the greatest difficulty of men is not in believing what the Church teaches at the moral level; the most difficult think for the postmodern world is to believe in God and in his only Son. The absence of God in our lives is more and more tragic... The Council's intention was to give back to God all his

primacy. This is why the Council's Fathers wished for a deepening of the faith, which was losing its savor in the ever-changing society of the post-war era."

The crisis of faith is the crisis of all of us. "it is not possible to believe the Church unless we fix our hearts in God."

The levity by which nowadays young people put into question their vocations is typical of their lack of faith.

A lack of faith is a challenge for all of us to rethink the content of it in order to be able to transmit it.

Everything in the monastery is about faith and directed to bringing us into the journey of humility in order to experience union with Christ: the liturgical life, the observances, the community life.

How can this journey that attracted St. Bernard and his contemporaries so much that they flocked to the Cistercian monasteries, can this way of life be still attractive for young people nowadays? Is the path of conversion to the truth about oneself, others and God still an attractive "form", model for modern youth?

I would say it is still attractive through an encounter.

Only an encounter with an authentic experience can free the person from the grip of his individualistic and relativistic vision. Only a gratuitous event can change forever the person's life stirring the whole process of following, conversion, transformation and transfiguration.

Are our communities places of encounter, places of education, places of communion in which the "forma Christi" can still attract and transform; places where people can experience true human and Christian dignity?

Even though they present a very individualistic mentality, young people can be attracted by the beauty and truth of our way of life.

Pope Francis continues to say that we must go back to the essential and the essential for him is to be solidly focused on Jesus Christ.

A community focused on the essential, on Christ, on love, is a place of encounter and a place of education.

We want to educate to communion our novices, we can only do it by being a community of communion.

To be a community of communion means to share a lived vision of the Cistercian charism; a vision that cannot be taken for granted but has to be continually renewed with the dedication and contribution of everyone.

Now to explain why faith has to do with our “*conversatio*” and how this “*conversatio*” is a unity and is a pattern of our life in the Spirit is the task of the mistress. Yet it is also the vision of the community.

What is our vision here in Matutum?

We give precedence to the liturgical sacramental life, the structure of which is already an image of that which ultimately we will be one day in heaven, a priestly people. In this way, which is the plan of God for us, we re-discover our true dignity, namely, to exist for the “praise and glory” of the Father, and not for power, success, pleasure and appearance. Remaining at the heart of this fundamental vocation, we finally come to know who we are: children in the Son to the praise of the Father’s glory and with this dignity we live out all the gestures of the *conversatio monastica* orienting them to the glory of God.

This liturgical sacramental vision, that is, this clear orientation to Christ, thus becomes transparent in the way in which the community lives out the *conversatio monastica*. The way of the liturgy is also the way of the Word of God, of *lectio* ordered to the Mystery, of work to support ourselves and to be free from external conditionings, of the tradition, of love for the beauty of the place and of the service to the community. In this vision, everything, from the humblest to the greatest gesture of our life, is held together and acquires meaning. It is the way to unity. By this way all of us re-discover ourselves finally in the house of the Father, children, all prodigal, forgiven and invited to the celebration of mercy. This way which is offered by the tradition of the Church and by our Cistercian Fathers who made of it the center of their contemplative spirituality is the royal way that leads us to charity and to unity.

In spite of all the limitation that the community shows, the deficiencies and the inconsistencies, we sustain each other in being faithful to this vision and we want to transmit it.

We think that this communion among us is the only true challenge to the pagan-relativistic culture.”

We do not propose something new but just re-present the Cistercian spirituality and tradition as a response to the thirst of the young.

Concretely what does it mean for us to transmit and to live as community of communion?

It means first of all re-thinking the monastic values in their ecclesial dimension.

In “*Pedagogia Viva*” M. Cristiana gives the vow of *fidelity to the monastic life* as example.

If we want to give to the concept of fidelity an ecclesial dimension, we ought to go beyond the understanding of fidelity as perfect repetition of usages and observances and place ourselves, with responsible attention, in an attitude of listening to the magisterium of the Church, the Order and the community.

Fidelity to the monastic life, seen in this light, becomes, personal responsibility to conversion, desire to adhere in freedom, sacrifice personally and gratefully embraced.

Listening to the community means not only to internalize the teaching of the abbot and of the senior members, but also to be open to the intuitions of the younger members. It implies an attentive remembrance of the grace and the history of the house.

This internalization and remembrance implies a personal and communal responsibility.

A common vision is sustained by each one's fidelity to it and by a communal reflection in order to continually verify and renew it. This does save us from inconsistency and poverty. We will never be a perfect community. Yet it gives credibility to the proposal.

If the community faithfully lives according to this ecclesial vision then it is also possible to ask those living in the novitiate to engage in the long path of integration of the monastic values: profound knowledge and acceptance of oneself, the acceptance of others, openness to correction, the passion for conversion, fidelity to the authority, love for the house.

The journey continues in the *monasticate* which demands a greater effort in integration since the juniors are fully inserted in the adult community.

Since the internalization of the common vision requires the constant attention of the abbot, I would like to say something about his function as sacrament of communion before presenting some concrete ways of educating the novices and juniors to communion. What I say of the Abbot can also be applied to formators and their authority.

Discernment or "Consideratio"

To teach discernment has become more urgent because of the situation of confusion and emptiness that characterizes young people who come to the monastery. We know by experience that young people nowadays present a rather pagan mentality. This is true even of those who come from Christian families or define themselves as believers.

They learn that what counts in life is to succeed, to enjoy, to possess... They are "image" oriented and tend to be moralistic and perfectionistic. While they are often scandalized of the immoral behavior of others, they are permissive in many ways as regard to themselves; sexual disorder is often considered normal. In other words they have absorbed the relativistic moral views of our modern mentality and society. They do not have a clear concept of sin.

Their Christian and vocational identity is weak. A little difficulty can be an occasion to put their vocation into question. Vocation is not a gift from God but something that they can control, depending on their feelings and their reaction to circumstances. Often they have difficulty to commit.

They live in a virtual world that makes them perceive reality and the present as boring and unbearable. They need changes and new and instant solutions.

They are not used to reading and as a consequence they have difficulty in thinking. They do not know how to listen and prefer debate to dialogue. They have no clear points of reference. They have no models.

To perceive reality as a sign of something else is particularly difficult because their idea of life and of the relationships with others is distorted.

Authority is just someone who regulates the common order, who establishes the politically correct. Autonomy is the new name of freedom and it is the golden rule of life.

It is true that our way of life is intrinsically pedagogical and adherence to it changes the person, yet this change does not come about automatically and requires time.

Candidates must learn to reflect on their behavior and choices. The path of self-knowledge is often a painful one. In order to do this they have to learn how to question themselves and think according to a vision of faith.

Therefore it is important that superiors and formators show a lot of patience and understanding, and, on the other hand, consistency and firmness of discernment so that they can really be helped.

The first step is facing reality. We can teach only by starting from reality, from their difficulties and problems in facing the life and in relating with others. They have to face the truth. Concrete experience is confronted with the formators so that they can become aware of what they are really searching for and why they behave this way and make these choices.

The second step is facing the consequences of one's own choices and actions: how these affect others, their relationship with God and with themselves.

Thirdly they learn how to internalize their experiences: their mistakes, and their failure are no longer a source of shame and guilt but a step toward a greater freedom.

They eventually realize that it is the Lord that speaks through these particular situations and asks for change, for conversion.

They become ready to receive the truth from others.

Then they can accept that in order to become true and free they have to embrace sufferings and the cross, which will lead to love.

In other words, they become sons and daughters in Christ, able to receive life from others.

This discernment process helps to put Christ at the center in order to look at reality with eyes of faith; it helps to put everything at its real place: who is God, who is man, what is our real dignity, and where his freedom and truth lie?

To educate to love

Up till Vatican II the affective maturity of a person was measured on the capacity of controlling one's emotions and on the capacity of the reason to dominate feeling; everything that came from the corporal, emotional, passionate, tangible world was considered more or less sinful. It was inevitable: this educative model exploded.

Now we face moral void. Yet in spite of this moral drift many young still express a great need of meaning manifested by their search for belonging to some group and desire of entrustment.

Our task as educators consists essentially in re-awakening the intuition of true chastity, to re-educate the faculty of love. The vow of chastity has often been understood in a formal and negative way. Perhaps man has never so deviated from the truth about love as now. Yet, paradoxically, we have never been so close to the truth about love, after the "theology of the body" of Pope John Paul II re-founded anthropology. Actually I would prefer to call it "theology of communion" rather than theology of the body, but thus is how it is mostly known.

In his book *Love and Responsibility*, in the chapter on the true meaning of chastity, Saint John Paul II explains that it is impossible to understand the full meaning of chastity unless love is understood as authentic reciprocity between persons, *communio personarum*. He, then, strongly underscores that communion comes about through mutual service, a willed and constantly chosen solidarity.

Love is not a feeling; it is a choice. Therefore, its fullness lies in the moral sphere since love is a virtue and only if it is a virtue, that is to say, only if it has moral weight and value, can it mobilize the reason and the will and corresponds to the need of the person to love and to be loved.

Chastity is not repression and control of instinctive impulses. It, rather, allows the liberation of love and all man's affective capacity from barriers, from possessive egoisms, from sensuality and from sentimental subjectivisms.

Chastity shows the transparency of a person's interiority and the gratuity of his heart; it is love without calculations.

In the chapter on vocation, which he sees as man's capability of committing oneself for a precise finality, as an ideal that takes hold of the person, John Paul II connects it with love. Vocation, the response of man to the calling of God, always implies the gift of oneself because we are made for love.

All man's vocations are either love and, therefore, involve the wholeness of his affective energy, the full impetus of his self-giving, or there is no vocation, nor choice, but only of a sterile roving about within the closed world of one's instincts and impulses, forcing him to continual changes, to instability, to hold on to anything, without risking anything, without ever having found his identity.

The "theology of communion" of Vatican II underlined that human relationships be characterized by mutual understanding and respect, and be filled with a deliberate and generous reciprocity. The Synod on the Consecrated Life reiterated that there is no authentic religious life without authentic fraternal life.

Someone even called the religious life: “the sacrament of friendship”.