

# Accompaniment in Life Crisis



**Course for New Superiors  
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I have been asked to speak to you on the subject of accompanying people who are experiencing a life crisis, the type of crisis we have all experienced. As superiors in our communities we bear a special obligation to support our brothers/sisters during these difficult periods which no-one can avoid. **Crises have always existed** but, in our present time, what is really striking is the frequency with which they occur or, at least, their greater visibility. Minor conflicts can lead to drastic reactions (in a vocational sense) and at times we can find ourselves dealing with serious transgressions which are committed with extreme superficiality.

At the same time, **a crisis is viewed as something negative** which needs to be eliminated, while we forget that, in fact, it is an opportunity for growth. That is why it is so important for us to be formed and to provide formation on this topic, so as to be able to offer support. The writer Amedeo Cencini<sup>1</sup> has studied this subject in depth and I will be referring to him, while adding material from my own personal experience and other sources.

We need to admit that we feel uncomfortable when talking about crises, but that in itself will not make the problem go away. When a brother tells us he needs to talk to us because he is going through a crisis, our reaction is a mixture of discomfort and fear, rather like the way someone feels when their partner tells them “we need to talk”: they react with a feeling of intense anxiety. All of this springs from our deep-seated insecurity, because we would prefer to have everything under control. That is why we tend to regard a crisis as a sort of unpleasant accident which is better avoided.

There are those who view the vocational journey as though it were a straight line leading to a fixed destination, which means trying to be a good monk, with no doubts, weaknesses or faults. From this standpoint any sort of deviation from the beaten path could be regarded as the start of a crisis. But it is not enough simply to see things in terms of the final objective. We need, rather, to discover God’s presence within the vocational process itself, which is what gives it an intrinsic value. That is when everything can begin to make sense, including our crises,

At the same time we cannot believe that our vocational process is something exclusively spiritual. We are human beings and must not forget that we also have other needs, whether physical, intellectual, emotional, relational or sexual in nature, or perhaps related to our self-affirmation, the need to develop our personal or artistic qualities, etc. To ignore all this is to forget that monks and nuns are concrete human beings. If God became incarnate in our human nature, then we cannot pretend to be divine beings by ignoring our humanity. That automatically means that, as life goes by, different sorts of crises will come and go, all of which will need to be identified and put in their proper context if we wish to deal with them appropriately.

All this is more important than we might normally think because, since all these needs are an integral part of our being, any physical necessity can lead us to suffer problems with our relationships or at a psychological level, and which could perhaps be wrongly considered as a crisis of vocation. The same is also true of the paralysis sometimes caused by our need for self-assertiveness or affection which can also lead to

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<sup>1</sup> AMEDEO CENCINI, *L’ora de Dio. La crisi nella vita credente*, Bologna, 2010.

infantile or obsessive reactions. A difficulty or a bad patch should not necessarily be regarded as a real crisis, but rather simply as an opportunity for overcoming certain obstacles. We have to listen carefully to the brother in difficulty, so as to discern the origin of his crisis. Above all we must do everything we can to create a good fraternal atmosphere in the community to help all the members to develop their personal character and potential. This will help to avoid certain types of crisis which have nothing at all to do with their vocation as such. Our obligation is to help all the members of our communities to cultivate their proper gifts, despite the risk of causing jealousy or envy. By developing their potential we also help them to give a greater depth of meaning to the free dedication of themselves to the vocation they have received,

At the same time, we should never forget that we Superiors are not God, and we cannot be expected to solve each and every problem which may crop up. Each individual monk or nun bears the responsibility for his or her response. Our job is to offer all the available means so as to ensure the personal and spiritual development of each single member, and of the community as a whole.

## **WHAT A CRISIS IS**

A crisis means opportunity and decision when facing a change. Crisis **means** making a decision at a specific point in time: “I decide, distinguish, judge”. The dictionary defines a crisis as being a “profound change with important consequences, in the context of a process or situation, or in our perception of the same”. In the medical sense, it is the sudden change during the course of an illness which leads to an improvement or worsening in the patient’s situation. A crisis, therefore, is a situation which puts our freedom to deal with it to the test, with greater or lesser success, in other words, in terms of getting better worse.

A crisis **unsettles and torments us** when we become aware of the gap between what we are and what we should be, what we want to be and what we really are. When we realize our ideals are collapsing or under threat, we suffer. So long as we are unaware of this situation or do not feel affected by it, we cannot say we are going through a crisis. When our love and passion for our personal vocation begin to flag then we do not notice the crisis as such, we go on living as though we were blind to reality. On the other hand, when we live our lives from the perspective of love, we are more sensitive to critical moments, and the suffering caused by this awareness creates in us the desire to change things. It is not enough to admit that the problem exists, we also need a motivation to introduce a change, something which only love can give us, that very same love which caused our suffering will also encourage us to change.

**We cannot view a crisis simply as an isolated problem** we need to “solve”, but rather as a reality concerning the whole of our being (as people with a monastic vocation), and that is the focus we need to use as the starting point. That is why the theme of crisis must be dealt with in the context of formation, in the sense of learning how to face the challenge of our personal existence, and not just from the academic viewpoint by offering theories about crises.

A crisis may have an objective cause, but the way we perceive it subjectively is much more important because the mere facts in themselves are simply elements which can make us enter a crisis or not, as the case may be. One of the most frequent errors is to throw all the blame on the event which provoked the crisis. This leads us to avoid facing the situation as being an important moment in our life process and trying to solve the problem by simply ignoring the fact which provoked it.

Of course, **prudence** should make us avoid things or situations which could be harmful for us, but that is not enough, because we cannot live in a sort of cocoon to protect us from all possible dangers. That is why it is important for us to take advantage of these situations which contribute to a crisis in order to grow and strengthen ourselves.

**A crisis always points to something pre-existing**, some weakness which **causes it to happen**. Why do the same circumstances cause some people to go into a crisis and others not? That is why it is important for us to search within ourselves to find the origin of the crisis, above and beyond the concrete fact which may be the cause. We could mention here that we have all been influenced by **negative childhood experiences** or at other times in our youth, but that does not mean that we are automatically condemned to repeat them. On the contrary we can use them to understand ourselves better in the present, being aware that we are free to act even though these conditioning factors exist. In the same way, we are all influenced by the cultural context we live in, without that making it impossible for us to choose freely, even though of course it can condition the way we behave. Those who face a crisis basing themselves solely on their past experiences will live in a state of permanent frustration, whereas those who are able to learn from their past and to look towards the future will live a permanent learning process.

That said, it is not enough to discover the origin of the crisis, it is also necessary **to be aware of the seriousness of the situation** if we really want to face it. It would be much more dangerous than the crisis in itself, if we were to live in critical situations without even noticing any problem at all. When this happens on a grand scale in the monastic life, the result is alarming, and in such cases it would probably be better for those concerned to go into a real crisis.

A crisis is always an opportunity, it is **time for God** in our lives, when our freedom is put to the test, when we are given the opportunity to choose a greater love from the perspective of our faith, because we need to put ourselves at risk, without being able to control the process. A crisis is a time for testing the sincerity of our trust when we abandon ourselves to God, accepting his plans for our lives, and discovering his presence even in the most absurd situations (humanly speaking). We should also not forget that high aspirations always go hand in hand with serious crises and temptations.

## **ATTITUDES TO CRISIS**

Each person is different, which is why we find so many different ways for facing a crisis, depending on individual personalities.

### *Never in crisis*

This is the most numerous group in the context of the religious and monastic life. We are referring to people who seem to spend their lives happily doing what they have always done, without getting involved in problems or complicating their own lives. It is true that they have had their share of inevitable difficulties as regards community life, but it appears they have never truly been through a crisis because they have always been able to adapt themselves to their circumstances, in certain cases even maintaining scandalous situations in secret.

Many of those belonging to this group lead a mediocre life, with no enthusiasm for the religious life, without drawing attention to themselves or committing serious transgressions. They tend not to have serious vocational doubts, are generally somewhat strict, defend those in authority and consider themselves to be faithful. They may even be admired by other people.

Strangely enough, these people who have never had a crisis but who always feel they are in the right, regard themselves as being irreproachable, apparently are never wrong, nor are they haunted by guilty feelings, and they usually end up pushing another member of the community into a crisis, rather than having one themselves.

### *Always in crisis*

Apparently this is the opposite of the former group, though in fact extremely similar in nature. Those who are constantly in crisis in fact are never in the throes of real crisis, because by definition it should be limited in time, in the sense that it requires a response or that a decision be made in a certain direction. Someone who is permanently in crisis normally finds himself in that situation because there are things which bother him, and uses them as an excuse for him not to take decisions or to oblige other people to give him special treatment or even be afraid of him.

A possible reason for someone to be in a constant state of crisis could be due to having an attitude of paralyzing perfectionism. Being permanently concentrated on himself and terrified of making a mistake, he finds it impossible to act. His only way out of the situation is to forget his own importance and run the risk of getting on with life, trusting in the One who has called him. Perfectionism is not the same as holiness. Holiness is our poverty enveloped by God's love. Perfectionism, on the other hand, is an attempt to reach the heights of virtue through our own efforts. Anyone caught up in this type of crisis needs above all to battle against his own narcissism.

### *Crisis on "standby" status*

This type of non-crisis is for someone who wants to put it off for as long as possible, by denying its very existence or by running away from it. It is frequent in the emotional dimension, when we try face up to our affectivity and sexuality with the sole help of bottling things up and negation, in the belief that the vow of chastity presupposes the absence of any sort of attraction. It goes without saying that we have to give up the possibility of giving free rein to our basic instincts, but we cannot deny their existence or keep all emotions under lock and key. We should at least be able to look at them straight in the face, recognizing the existence of an affective dimension inside us and channel it

in harmony with our life as religious. It is one thing to have feelings and another to do what they want to make us do. Those who content themselves with ignoring their interior world live their monastic consecration in an insipid way, with relationships lacking personal implication, and excluding the heart.

At the same time, we cannot put things off indefinitely. Sooner or later the controls we use to keep crises under strict vigilance begin to weaken. The fears, prohibitions and rules begin to come to the surface in mid/life (around the age of forty for those who entered in their twenties,...) and we could also probably add a certain feeling of fatigue or disappointment. This is exactly the moment when, feeling as we do more fragile and doubtful, all those things we have repressed return with greater force, making it more difficult for us to deal with the situation. That is why we need to be prepared, to be familiar with the challenge, to perceive the crisis and try to channel it before it is too late, thanks to having received the necessary formation and support at the right time. I used to say to my novices that I would prefer them to go through every possible form of crisis during their novitiate, so as to be able to accompany them and prepare them for a future time when they might not have the possibility of counting on such close support. That is not to suggest, of course, that we should artificially provoke crises simply in order to practice how to deal with them.

The same applies to people who cannot accept failure, who are terrified of being rejected, who believe they are totally faithful to the Lord, etc. We need to be aware of what is happening to us and to learn to manage these “disasters” without being dramatic, because they reveal to us the intimate truth about ourselves.

### *More details about crises*

We must clearly **reject** the temptation which often appears when we go into crisis, namely that **we have made a mistake with our vocational choice**. If a celibate who entered the monastery when he was very young falls in love, he may well feel overcome by the experience of love, the love of his life, and believe that he was wrong when he made his initial choice, failing to realize that falling in love is completely normal, without that necessarily meaning that we are called to married life. Moreover, who can tell how many times a person is capable of falling in love during their lifetime, without automatically having to get married each time?

**Crises exist for us to learn from them and to help us to mature.** It is better for us to be prudent and not to provoke crises deliberately by avoiding the avoidable, but it is useless for us simply to keep the problem at bay in every case. If we do this, it is probable that the same process will repeat itself over and over again if we find ourselves in a similar situation. It is not sufficient simply to move the person in question to a different place, or to avoid certain dangers for him or entrust him with important or prestigious tasks. Crises exist for us to learn from them how to be stronger in future situations. If that were not the case, then the crisis would have been a waste of time. If a crisis does not stimulate us to change, then it will not have taught us anything.

**We can never deny or avoid a crisis**, we need to try **to extract something positive from it**. If we stop thinking of a crisis as being a threat, and begin to view it



rather as an opportunity or something new to be learnt on our life journey, then we will be able to face it more serenely and, probably, with greater success.

Nevertheless, **a crisis, just as experience in general, does not automatically teach** us anything, if we are not open to the possibility of learning and being taught something new. It is not the same thing to achieve the wisdom of old age as simply to accumulate years with the passing of time. If you leave a donkey in a library and bring it out a month later, it will be just as stupid as when it first went in, no matter how many interesting books it was in contact with. At times I think that the passing years have made me a little skeptical regarding the possibility for people to change. If we are not interested in truly knowing ourselves or in facing our crises, then there will be no change, even if a dead person were to come back to life (Cf. Lk. 16,31). All that remains is the hope that a ray of spiritual light will come to help us rediscover our way, since mere experience by itself does not teach us anything at all. Until this happens we have to support and help people just as they are, without losing hope, because we can always count on God's mercy.

One of the clearest signs of **interior stubbornness is when the person in crisis blames everything on someone or something else**, whether that be the life he has been forced to live, his community, climate change or God himself. When this happens we should remain calm, there is nothing we can do. The most we can hope for is to try pick up the pieces once the storm has passed.

Nor is it a good idea to encourage our brother's temptation by minimizing his responsibility. It is one thing to treat a brother in crisis affectionately, patiently listening to his complaints, and something totally different **to tell him he is right**, thus reinforcing his idea that it is his internal confusion is caused by other people's attitudes to him. It is not always easy for the superior, because it would far simpler to take his side to keep him happy, rather than to contradict him and watch him stomp away in anger.

Similarly, it may **not be a good idea to send a person in crisis to see a psychologist** as a first option, because we could be encouraging him to lose sight of the origins of his crisis, as if it depended on external factors or the inevitable consequence of his personal traumas. It is even not enough simply to ask God in our prayers to solve the problems which we ourselves should solve, without denying in any way that prayer is a necessity in our lives. A crisis in our development process is something we need to deal with at a personal level, with our decision to respond in harmony with our life options and our desire to follow Jesus. There may be cases where external therapeutic help is required, but that is definitely not always the case, considering the risk of creating false hopes in the brother concerned and a deceptive feeling of relief in the superior, who may believe he has been exonerated from offering the personal support he should be giving, and with great hopes that the therapist will send the brother back to him transformed and free of problems.

**All crises need time for us to overcome them**, because we need time to organize our hearts and minds in order to face the trials they are going through. We should be patient with ourselves, not expecting to introduce radical changes before we are ready to assume them. We need to identify what is happening to us, analyse the causes, pay attention to the struggle we feel within ourselves, the feelings which come to the surface

and express new facets of our intimate being, in order to decide the most appropriate way of reacting and choose the best means for doing so at our disposal. And, when it is all over, if we have not been able to solve everything, be able to accept the fact and live at peace with ourselves, bearing in mind that God gives us his strength in our weaknesses, without in any way coming to some sort of corrupt compromise with sin as a valid option.

**Crises do not normally happen all of a sudden**, they tend to have a lengthy gestation process. That is why we need to pay attention to the tell-tale signs we notice in our inner being so as to apply all the necessary cautious measures we feel to be appropriate.

Mid-life crises, which we generally refer to as the “**crises typical of people in their forties**” are, in fact, a sort of second calling, a moment when we have the opportunity to pronounce a new “yes” to our vocation, without counting on beginners’ enthusiasm, but rather from the perspective of the faith, with a greater awareness of what we are giving up and why we are giving it up. We value what we put to one side, and we freely confirm what we have opted for. In this sense, every crisis is a sort of second call from God, and for that same reason, an opportunity to reinforce our initial compromise and our personal identity. A crisis is an uncomfortable and critical companion in our life progress and serves to test our faith as we continue on our way.

### **THREE MAIN TYPES OF CRISIS**

There are many types of crisis, as many as there are people and situations, but we can identify three main areas where most of them occur in the context of the monastic life namely: identity, emotions, and vocation which, in turn, correspond to my need to know who I am, my need for affection, and my need to have a life project. Of these three types the emotional crisis is the one which tends to appear with greatest frequency. Other types of crisis caused by, for example, dissatisfaction, conflicts with authority or the magisterium of the church, psychological problems and so forth, are considerably less common.

#### ***Identity crisis***

Every human being feels the necessity to give a meaning to his life, and to himself as a person, which is why he seeks for the truth, starting with his own personal truth, that is, Who am I? To lose the meaning of our life, or to feel that we are insignificant leads us to an existential crisis. We need to give our lives a unified and coherent meaning to enable us to give significance to all the different stages of our existence, including any mistakes we may have made or incidents which seem to not to have any meaning at all.

When we enter into an identity crisis **we lose the positive meaning of our lives**, we lose our self-esteem, we become frustrated and attempt to find self-expression in a narcissistic way, we stop seeing our objective selves and try to fill this emptiness with other things which will never be able to satisfy us, such as success, the job we do, being popular, and so on.

One of the greatest difficulties in this context is **relativism**, because our identity can only truly exist on the basis of authentic truth. Our present cultural environment tends to make our feelings the priority, and that means reducing the truth to a relative concept, depending on how we perceive things or our state of mind – things which vary from person to person and according to the personal stage each individual finds himself at.

All of this can also happen in the monastic life. At the beginning everything appears to be cut and dried and we identify ourselves totally with the vocation we have chosen. Our initial formation teaches us what a monk has to be like and the monastic tradition presents us with virtuous models of what a good monk should be. But our modern culture places the emphasis more on the individual than on the collective dimension of our lives, stressing the present moment or our personal feelings rather than more stable and lasting truths. For this reason it comes as no surprise that, at times of crisis, people can begin to have doubts about their own identities. If lasting truths no longer exist, then my own identity will tend to change depending on the circumstances or my emotional state.

It is true that we are all engaged in the process of living and we are slowly being transformed but, if we lose our identity, this process can cause a lot of heart-searching.

### ***Emotional crisis***

Above and beyond anything else, **we are love**. That is how we define God, and we are made in his image. The greatest act of infidelity we can commit is our lack of love. When love is missing in our lives, or our love is very weak, we lose all sense of structure. This can also happen in the monastic life. Moreover, we express our love in a sexually defined way, as men and women, since sexuality is the energy through which we express our love and what makes it productive. For this reason, living our sexuality without love is simply a matter of genitality and taking possession of the other person. If love is at the very centre of our lives then sexuality will never be far away, even when we are speaking about the monastic life.

**Our sexuality is capable of expressing our interior world.** By expressing it genitally, it gives pleasure and activates our personal impulsive dimension, thus favouring our psycho-physical balance. Even though this is not enough to guarantee our maturity, it is clear that, in this field, the celibate person is at a disadvantage when compared to a married person, which could lead a celibate person to harbour the desire for compensatory gratifications in any field, not only the sexual one. We must not forget that, since each of us is a personal unity and love is the primary impulse, then certain crises could have an emotional-sexual basis, even though this may not be immediately obvious. In the same way, some crises which seem to be of an emotional-sexual nature may simply be the echo, in this field, of completely different basic problems.

As I have already said, sexuality is much more than its genital expression could lead us to think. Before all else, sexuality is the expression of love between sexuated people, love which is given and love which is received. It is the capacity for opening myself to another person who is “different” to me and being able receive in return. For this reason, the emotional crisis is a crisis of love, not of feelings. Our emotional need is

a need to find a centre of attraction, another person as a point of reference on whom to centre my own affections, my capacity to love and to feel that I am loved. What most unites two people is the knowledge that they are loved by the other person they love.

A monk or nun cannot give up the profound significance of his or her sexuality, even though they give up its genital expression. **Sexuality, intended as the capacity to relate with someone who is separate from us**, in a form of love which includes giving and receiving. This type of sexuality is deeply engraved at the bottom of our hearts, and is open to the other person in order to give new life. All this, as we well know, can only be channelled by us in the monastic life from the point of view of our sincere love for God and our neighbours. Anyone who lives in perfect continence yet with his or her heart closed to love for his brothers or sisters is not a virgin, but quite simply continent, and nothing more.

A love open to **fruitfulness**, to creating something new in all the brothers, something which is neither “mine” or “yours”, but rather “ours”, that is to say the “community’s”. Let those who are incapable of this take a closer look at the way they live their sexuality, because sexuality is a creative force which exists by definition to make fruitful, to bear fruit and to create new life. This is the energy produced by love which needs to be developed according to our specific life option.

In the consecrated life this need is satisfied when **the centre of attraction is the love of God** and, from that starting point all our other relationships take their orientation, and all the daily details of our lives find their true meaning. When this is missing the tendency arises to seek impulsive substitutes which only serve to increase our emotional inconsistency.

Given that **the emotional crisis is the most frequent one**, we should pay special attention to the early warning signs. One useful tool is to listen to our own body, the feelings it experiences, without being naïve as though we were free from all possible dangers and have no need to exercise a prudent form of self-control in our relationships with people of the opposite sex. In this field, one thing can lead to another at an impressively rapid rate. We need to consider whether the other person is, for example, becoming increasingly more important for us, if they are constantly in our thoughts or imagination, if we constantly want and try to see them more frequently, if our reciprocal gestures are increasingly more explicit, if we start to fall in love in our dreams, imagining the unlimited happiness we could obtain by giving everything else up so as to be able to go and live with this other person.

In general, this stage is preceded by a **certain type of interior struggle** during which we think that there is nothing wrong with this sort of falling in love, that God is love, that it is worse to face the negative relationships in community than my contacts with this person who motivates me and makes me feel happy, who helps me to improve my relationship with God and with other people etc.. And then, when we start to lose the battle, we actively start to justify ourselves for our behaviour. “Love is strong as death, jealousy relentless as Sheol . . . . Love no flood can quench, no torrents drown”. (Sg 8, 6-7), as the Song of Songs tells us. For all of these reasons we need to be careful about our emotional dimension, and not fall into desperation when things have gone too far.

We need to be prudent, but **without trying simply to escape from our feelings**. Our feelings are there, our job is to illuminate them with the help of our fundamental life option, in the knowledge that to feel does not necessarily mean to consent. We need to make a special effort in order to give real meaning to the image of virginal sexuality carefully avoiding every and anything which might inspire in us an even more grotesque vision of instinctive sexuality. Our senses feed our feelings at all levels of our being. For that reason it is important for us to **be in control of our senses** so as to reach personal maturity. This has nothing to do with denying our feelings or rejecting them as if they were bad: all they do is to reveal to us what is going on in our hearts. We need to channel them and develop those ones which help us to be more coherent in terms of our identity and calling. Evagrius Ponticus said: "Be like a porter at the entrance to your heart and let no thought pass without questioning it first. Before any other question, first ask yourself: "Is this a friend or an enemy".

It is a waste of time to discuss with someone in the throes of an emotional crisis who has fallen in love about whether it is legitimate or not for a professed monk to give free rein to his infatuation, because we already know the answer: "God is love", "there is nothing bad about being in love", "loving like this helps me to be able to love others". It is difficult to convince him that this is not the real problem because, of course, loving is a good thing, nobody can dispute that. It is much more a matter of feeling a call to a life of celibate love, to struggle or not to defend this grace which God has freely given to some people, as Jesus reminded us in the gospel: "It is not everyone who can accept what I have said, but only those to whom it is granted....there are eunuchs who have made themselves that way for the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can." (Mt 19, 11-12). It is when we forget this point that we start to look for justifications so we can have everything we want without having to give anything up.

Developing bonds of friendship between the members of our community can help all to live their sexuality satisfactorily. A non-exclusive friendship. Someone once said that we monks know how to love, but we find it very difficult to do it among ourselves. And, at times, it can happen the way T. Radcliffe described it: "We are so afraid of personal friendships (to protect our chastity) that we end up by creating personal enemies".

### ***Vocational crises***

It is precisely in the context of our vocation that we integrate our identity and our affections by embodying them in our life project. In our vocational experience we make use of our will to give shape to the ideas in our head and heart, to our identity and emotions by means of basic choice which channels our personal **dynamism**. That is, the vocational process involves effort and sacrifice if we are to remain faithful to our call. The lack of gratification in this basic choice can sometimes lead to a vocational crisis, which may in turn lead us to mediocrity by avoiding sacrifice and suffering or to an exaggerated activism which empties our personal witness of value and may even end up by tempting us to leave because we find no real value or purpose by staying in the monastery.

The early formation period helps to lay the foundations of our vocation, but life lasts a long time. We need **to be willing to learn constantly** from life itself in order to consolidate our vocational response. A vocation is not a package we receive at the beginning of our journey so we can carry it until we reach the destination without damaging it. A vocation is something which grows as part of our personal and community life. People in crisis often say: “this is not the community I entered at the start!” In fact, communities, just like each single member, evolve and mature, which does not necessarily any loss of authentic identity for either. Love goes much deeper than its initial stage. We must love other people and the community in and for themselves (“in sickness and in health”, “in youth and old age”). We cannot justify our personal crisis by blaming the way our community has evolved, as if we have not also accumulated grey hair and wrinkles with the passing of time!

A vocational crisis often appears because of human immaturity. That is why we should stress the need to form authentic human beings during their vocational process. In other words, people who are in touch with their interior reality, who serenely assume their past, who constantly strive to educate their senses, deal with their emotions and listen to their feelings, who live their sexuality by offering themselves and being open to others, who learn to create fraternal relationships without false dependences, free from competitive attitudes and not allowing themselves to be conditioned by complexes related to their past, etc. In short, no mature nun or monk can exist without being mature in human terms.

**Being a monk is not the same as playing the monk.** Any competent actor could play the monk if he is looking for a role to give him a feeling of security. On the other hand, being a monk is impossible without constant human and spiritual effort, creating a space where grace can flourish. Those who live pretending to be monks, no matter how edifying they may appear to be, may experience at an intimate level the internal division of those who have failed to integrate and unify the various essential elements of their existence. This schizophrenic attitude characterizes those who seem to be happy with what they are doing, but at the same time transmit a cold distance, making them incapable of creating relationships and empathizing with others.

It is also necessary to have a **vocational nucleus within ourselves, where we can integrate our personal being**, and around which everything we experience in our daily lives, good or bad, finds its relevance and meaning. If this “centre” does not exist, then eventual crises will inevitably find a hiding place somewhere among our unconnected experiences. If someone asks us about our monastic life experience, we will be able to remember many past episodes without being able to discern God’s formative interventions in our past, our personal evolution. We can notice this in the cases of people who have led lives full of sacrifice, but without being transformed by it: fragile vocations. If we have developed within us this integrated centre, however, we will be able to tell our story, while at the same time finding its deeper significance even in its most negative aspects. We will understand our vocational experience as being part of the history of salvation.

A vocational crisis in mid-life is rather like a **second call** which invites us to undertake a deep conversion process, as we have already said earlier. If our initial

vocation appeared as a feasible proposal, the second one implies that we recognize our inability, the experience of our lies and contradictions. We experience it as being something radically impossible for us.

## THE STRUGGLE AT TIMES OF CRISIS

**“Life is a struggle!”**, as one of the older members of my community frequently repeats. In the same way we can say that there is no crisis which does not involve struggle and effort because, when our spiritual fervour begins to flag, we fall into a sort of lethargy which prevents us from noticing the crisis itself.

**The word “struggle” implies that we are striving for an objective and come up against an obstacle** we need to overcome. It is our desire which motivates us to continue overcoming challenges, where we need to die to ourselves each time, so that new life can emerge. The child in us needs to die so that the young adult can emerge, the young adult must die to allow the adult to be born, and so on and so forth during the whole of our lives (Plutarch),

Nevertheless, some people are perfectly aware of their situation, but they allow themselves to fall into a sort of inertia, and **refuse to struggle**. These people do feel the crisis, but they choose not to face it, they avoid making the effort a struggle would imply, and accommodate themselves to the crisis without making any attempt to face up to it. They simply learn to live with it, and have no problems of conscience about the matter. Naturally, those who behave in this way end up by proving the old proverb to be right: “People who act differently from the way they think end up by thinking the way they act”. **The decision not to struggle is typical of people with mediocre objectives**, who make do with feeling comfortable all the time, and with no desire for conversion.

On the other hand, those who do face **the struggle end up by strengthening their ideals** and convictions. How can an ideal be authentic if we are not willing to struggle in order to achieve it, if it hasn't been put to the test? The most ambitious objectives normally entail serious temptations, as Ecclesiasticus reminds us: “My son, if you aspire to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for an ordeal” (Si 2,1). St Paul also warns us that it is a struggle where we will come up against our own fragility (thorn in the flesh) which is precisely where divine grace comes into play. (2Cor, 12, 9-10). It is a matter of accepting our weakness so that God can fill our emptiness with his power and mercy. An ideal can only become a motive force in our lives after passing through struggles.

This struggle at moments of crisis needs to be **open to the Transcendent**, otherwise we will remain locked up within ourselves. We will touch upon our envies, lack of self-esteem, the affective void we feel in the loneliness of our heart, and so forth, but what good reason would we have to face all of this? If we exclude the Transcendent, the most we could hope to achieve would be some sort of desire for perfection or else we will abandon our chosen way or we will tame our ideals, and make do with a conventional middle-class lifestyle. Without a spiritual perspective, without being in dialogue with the Transcendent, the consecrated monk will be unable to give an authentic meaning to the concept of struggle in moments of crisis.

**In this struggle we need the help of someone else** in order to escape from the vicious circle of our ghosts, thoughts and feelings. In order **to face the crisis correctly** it is vital for us to have a receptive attitude, which makes us ready to respond to the experience of the person who is accompanying us, and for the act of thanksgiving which then makes its presence felt. We are interrelated beings and it is only through relationships that we can find the light we need, because the other person acts as a mirror or contrast making it possible for us to glimpse our own back, all those things we cannot normally see.

**To live the monastic life without experiencing the struggle caused by a crisis** indicates that we have come to a standstill in our personal growth. Everything can seem peaceful because we have made a pact so as not to be disturbed, deciding to leave things as they are, and justifying it all on the pretext that we are “only human”, or because we have decided that we no longer wish to complicate things. There are times in our lives when we should go through a crisis, so that we can clearly see the critical situation we are stuck in.

## **OFFERING SUPPORT IN A CRISIS**

It is essential for us to be relaxed and to put our trust in the Lord. We superiors are responsible for **helping our brothers in crisis**, but **NOT for producing the solution**. That is impossible without the decision of the person concerned. All we can do is to accompany the brother and to offer him our presence and help. Sometimes it is also possible to offer external aid, but without falling into the temptation, which I have already mentioned, to send him straight away to an outside expert, in the hopes that the therapist will “remove” the crisis, thus avoiding us the nuisance of us having to help him ourselves. Each case is different and must therefore be treated in different ways. A lot will depend on the attitude of the brother and the capacity of the superior.

We cannot forget that **unless our heart is free**, we will not be very useful when it comes to accompanying people in crisis. The person whose heart is free suffers with the brother who is suffering, but his prime concern is not to calm him down and make everything go back to normal, which would naturally be reassuring, but rather to give him the support he needs so as to be able to take the most authentic decision possible. Even though it may be painful, we need to distance ourselves from an exaggerated concern not to “lose a vocation”, given the way numbers are these days in the Order. It is only human for us to worry about this problem, but we need to focus above all on the brother in the throes of his crisis.

My experience tells me that in the early phase of accompanying someone it can be very useful for the postulant to take a **personality test** (a few months after arriving). This will prove very helpful when we examine it in greater depth with him in the course of his process of getting to know himself better, and will also help in the task of trying to identify the root of his problems, whether present or future.

In the process of personal maturity we move from one stage to another. In the field of the development of sexual identity the order is usually from infantile auto-eroticism to adolescent homo-eroticism and finally to the stage of hetero-eroticism. If a step is



skipped, sometimes because of infantile abuse acting as a block, then fixations can be produced. In a similar way, in the vocational and spiritual process we need to move from one stage to the next without allowing ourselves to be blocked by certain fears.

There are **signs** which enable us to detect when someone is beginning to enter a crisis by withdrawing into themselves and avoiding other people, that is, when we suspect that the person involved is not living his sexuality-otherness but rather seeking refuge in compensatory habits:

- Eating disorders and alcohol abuse
- Accumulation of money and possessions
- Interest in pornography and other forms of paraphilia which lead to self-isolation
- Resorting to auto-eroticism or to virtual sexuality
- Public manifestations of superiority and self-sufficiency
- Protagonism and narcissistic search for self-promotion
- Subtle self-satisfaction when feeling “interesting” or polemical
- Offhand or offensive way of treating people
- Exasperated and exasperating rationalism
- General indifference to, or excessive importance of self-image
- Mediocrity as the rule of life
- Bad tempered and constantly on edge

## **1. The beginnings of crisis**

To be able to accompany someone who is going through a crisis the first essential point is for us to realize that he is in fact in a crisis. Here are certain criteria which will help us to do this, bearing in mind that it is also a good idea for the whole community to be involved, not just the superior, because we all join together to form one body, and the community itself should figure as a place for healing. If we act in this way, what might initially appear to be something negative can be transformed into a moment of grace for all those concerned. We must all feel responsible for our brothers. It is our love for them which will enable us to notice the signs that they are going through a bad patch and need help. We should never forget that prevention is the most important thing, which means not putting things off until the situation becomes serious, because experience teaches us that by that stage the monk in question will in all probability feel very disinclined to listen to them, not allowing anyone offer him help and inclined in general to leave the monastery. In such cases the most we can do is watch the inevitable happen with a great feeling of frustration.

### **a) *Identifying the signs of crisis when they appear***

- ❖ A state of personal frustration tends to mark the beginning of a crisis. That is why we need to pay attention to the way each person develops and how he faces situations in

a healthy way. Frustration is not caused only by the external situation we are facing, but rather and above all, by our capacity to face it. The external frustrations which life forces on us should not necessarily cause us special harm, but of course the frustrating experiences they cause can do so. That is why we must pay special attention to people's capacity when facing frustrations and the origins of their greater or lesser capacity to react. It is impossible to evaluate everybody using the same yardstick. What is more, we need to bear in mind that frustration diminishes our freedom.

- ❖ In the emotional-sexual field: to pay attention to the **first gratifications** which seek to establish contacts or relationships in order to compensate for our solitude or a perceived lack of esteem, thus creating a habit which gradually limits the brother's freedom and pushes him towards ambiguous forms of behaviour. This habitual search for gratification, which might start as a more or less daily contact by Internet, tends to become increasingly more repetitive, leading to a greater need for gratification and considering his acts with growing indulgence and self-justification until all this ends up by occupying the centre of his personality and conditioning everything else.

In these cases we see how an initially trivial problem (feeling of solitude or lack of esteem), together with a morally harmless attitude (frequent contacts by Internet) can degenerate and lead to dangerous consequences. It would be better to nip the problem in the bud, without simply limiting ourselves to moral considerations (whether what he is doing is good or bad, morally speaking) and to try to seek help in order to avoid negative consequences. The main problem is that the initial reaction tends to be evasive and to deny what is really happening, thus making it difficult for him to receive help. Some form of external help may be more useful, because it gives the brother greater freedom to express himself since, especially in cases like this, the tendency is to avoid talking to the superior altogether.

- ❖ **Making use of fraternal involvement** to help us with a crisis is very useful. We need to remember that we are responsible for our brothers, but we need to go even further, to the point of really "wanting" our brother to get better, to be truly happy. Living this fraternal dimension in community unites and protects us, allowing us to decide to act when we realize it is necessary. It is also essential to create in our communities a culture of mutual support as regards our personal vocation, a responsibility involving the whole community and which we must all fulfil reciprocally. This does not mean encouraging people to pry constantly into other peoples' lives, creating an atmosphere of curiosity and denunciation. What is needed is an authentic experience and praxis of a type of love which is concerned about the well-being of others. Unfortunately, it is more common to come up against constant complaints, the desire to be informed about the latest gossip so as to be the first to start spreading it around, than to find the sincere desire to help the brother in question. The community must take the decision to encourage the latter approach and eliminate the former. We must all realize that we have been entrusted with the health and well-being of our brothers.
- ❖ **Sometimes psychological disorders**, of a more or less serious nature, make their appearance and they can be detected in terms of a certain confusion of the mental

processes or the inability to control the emotions. Similarly, other signs can be: a certain instability depending on the concrete circumstances, a long term tendency towards incoherence, the absence of feelings of guilt or sin in objectively serious situations, aggressive, impulsive or obsessive behaviour virtually impossible to control, sudden mood changes, extreme inflexibility when defending one's own point of view, and so forth. These cases always require the help of an expert therapist.

**b) Concrete help at the beginning of a crisis**

- ❖ **Creating a culture where we allow ourselves to be formed by the brothers** in community and accepting their involvement in order to help us. Often, the help of a brother to help me realize what is going on is more effective than that of the superior, because it is more spontaneous and natural, without the connotations associated with authority.
- ❖ **On-going formation** is also very useful. We should take nothing for granted, but rather guarantee permanent formation, so as to be prepared for anything which might crop up later in our lives and to help us identify the problem and make the appropriate decisions. This can be achieved by organizing short courses, every year or every two years, **at the regional level**, for all those who have already made their solemn profession and finished their formal monastic studies. A course with lectures and dialogues, lasting three or four days, with an expert on the subject of human development: psychological, relational and spiritual aspects. We pay special attention to these points in the programme of the inter-novitiate in the Spanish Region.
- ❖ It would be interesting, **at the regional level**, to propose a **few people** who could offer their **assistance** as a complement to the formation programme or as a response to a concrete case of an incipient crisis. It is not absolutely necessary for these experts to be members of the Order. It is obvious that each monastery will already know of certain people, but it is good to share this information with other communities as a useful reference point for people in difficulty.
- ❖ **Frequent dialogues** between the superior and each monk or nun. Everything depends on the concrete situation. A young person needs to be listened to with greater frequency, and the same is true of someone who is going through a bad patch. Meetings of this type would ideally be organized every one or two months, without needing any serious reason or other justification than the desire to exchange ideas. These dialogues can be of great use at times of possible crisis, and they could even be increased to once a week. It is also possible to organize dialogues between two brothers who get on well together, or at least accept each other, for a more prolonged form of accompaniment, informing the superior about the project.
- ❖ **Possible topics to deal with in personal accompaniment:**
  - Knowing ourselves and identifying the root cause of specific problems.

- Possible consequences of the root problem which is causing the crisis with regard to:
    - Our own identity
    - Our relationship with God
    - Our relationship with other people
    - Our own vocation
  - Coming to terms with our personal past, considering life as a history of salvation.
  - Recovering a certain degree of moral sensitivity, feelings of filiation and beauty.
  - The decision to change, in order to respond to love by means of love.
  - The experience of our personal weakness in connection with the paschal mystery (strong = weak, to die in order to live).
  - How to increase our own freedom and self-control.
  - A positive vision of our personal crisis.
- ❖ **To share in groups** (the whole community or simply a part of it) experiences of crisis or weaknesses which could be of help to the brother in crisis. This type of group therapy is sometimes more effective with people we do not normally live with. The courses following the official monastic formation programme, mentioned earlier, could provide the opportunity. Another useful tool could be the *Experientia* course we are using in the Order, if we organize sessions for sharing in small groups.
- ❖ We need to choose the **place** for these activities with great care, depending on what we hope to achieve. For this type of group the place should be inviting and simple. The placing of the chairs and many other details can either favour or impede fluid communication.
- ❖ The fact that a whole community becomes aware of a brother's serious need, and accepts the fact with a view to helping him in any way possible, is of enormous help, and reflects a serious desire to follow the Gospel. We need to speak frankly with the brother about his dependency or weakness and show him affection and solidarity. Use all the means at our disposal to help him (e.g. one community decided to abstain from wine in order to help an alcoholic brother or, in another case, made every effort not to talk about certain matters out of respect for the brother, etc.). This type of attitude helps the whole community to improve its fraternal relationships. It is a sort of practical exercise in changing attitudes, which involves much more than simply not judging our brother or being merciful towards him. What it really means is to look for the best way to give him support and help him to free himself. This is not only a very positive thing for the brother in crisis, (who feels the tangible support of his brothers in his crisis), but the whole community also experiences a new type of mutual responsibility through having to face the weakness of one of its members, while at the same time enriching the quality of community life itself.

- ❖ **To celebrate the return** of the brother after his crisis. It is painful to note how sometimes people have to wear a negative label for the rest of their lives, that some brothers in community feel an eternal resentment towards him that, rather like the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son: they feel offended because of his return and they are scandalized that a party is celebrated on his behalf. All this is painful, but at the same time it is very real. It can also reveal to us the spiritual stature of those who feel offended, those who observe the law out of pure obligation, who cannot accept the fact that they receive the same payment as someone else who has worked far less than them, and without making all they sacrifices they have had to make. This is, sadly, is the typical figure of the good monk who is clearly unhappy, because everything he does is motivated by obligation rather than love.
- ❖ **Avoid being unoccupied.** Having nothing to do is a fertile seedbed for provoking crises and for making them worse by our idle thoughts, whereas having things to do helps us to overcome the situation more easily.

## 2. Experiencing the crisis

Not everyone who goes through university comes out with the same formation. In the same way, there are various ways of living a crisis. Depending on the degree of realism we use to face it, we will be able to grow to a greater or lesser degree. In order for our experience of crisis to be positive it is necessary to:

- ❖ Use **sincerity** to face the crisis. If we deceive ourselves then we are wasting our time. In order to be sincere, however, we need to be brave and not fall into the trap of thinking that what is happening to us means throwing all of our spiritual experience, our reputation or even our personal dignity overboard. As we strive for sincerity it is very useful to listen to our own body: the feelings and emotions we notice when we face the situation we are in, because our body, and our dreams, show much more freedom in the way they express themselves, before our minds start to censure them.

We also need to go further, by asking ourselves why we experience certain feelings, what they reveal about our spiritual progress and personal maturity, what we are looking for in all this, and so forth, trying to reach our most authentic truth. We find an example in Thomas Merton, when he recognizes in his diaries that the falling in love he experienced in his fifties went far beyond the love he felt for M. or mere impulsive gratification, because at rock bottom he was trying “to alleviate the pressure of the tremendous solitude of my heart”. In fact, such solitude does not exist, because we are all inhabited by the Trinity and that is something we can feel.

- ❖ Keeping our **moral sensitivity** alive will allow us to maintain a healthy feeling of guilt when we behave incoherently with respect to our life option. This will also help

because, if we lose this type of sensitivity, it will be impossible for us to be truly aware of the situation we are in.

- ❖ **A positive attitude.** Considering the crisis as an opportunity rather than a disaster is something which can help us to overcome it. A mature person is not someone who never has a crisis, but rather someone who experiences them and overcomes them. In effect, when our heart suffers, it is giving birth to what it has inside it. To recognize this fact helps us to keep a certain balance, because we take it into account and try to channel it. The same experience of falling in love, which can affect the whole of our being, is an opportunity for us to discover the capacity for love we bear within us and to decide the way we are going to orientate it.
  
- ❖ **Spiritual experience of the crisis.** A crisis is not just a feeling-related or psychological phenomenon which affects our spiritual life: it also presents its deeper meaning when we live it in the presence of God, with feelings of admiration and confusion at the way divine goodness acts in the human heart. What is God saying or asking of me by means of this trial? Where is he leading me? That is because the Creator has always gone looking for his creature – frequently by using tests – which revolutionize our way of thinking when faced with such infinite love.
  
- ❖ **The firm decision to change,** because there is not much point in knowing that we need to change unless we take the decision to do something about it, Without effort and sacrifice, without self-discipline and deliberately avoiding habits which will only increase my weaknesses, it is impossible to recover our freedom. Desiring it alone will not make it happen. Quite the opposite, he demons mentioned in the Gospel will always return with greater numbers when the house has been cleaned but our will to resist has disappeared. “Go, and do not sin again, in case something even worse happens to you” is what Jesus said to the paralyzed man he cured at the pool of Bethesda (Jn 5, 14). That is when the pain caused by renouncing something opens up for us the possibility of a different experience of God and a greater appreciation of our vocation.

When we try to live this situation in a non-authentic way, the crisis will go on indefinitely, eventually leading us to take drastic decisions either to abandon everything, or simply to accept the crisis as a chronic situation. That is when we recognize the crisis exists, but at a very superficial level, limited to the senses, minimizing the problem as such, and believing that we have everything under control, or perhaps even justifying it. Little by little this attitude makes our moral insensitivity grow. We are unable to see the crisis as a personal reality and we tend to blame everybody else, thus reducing our personal responsibility and remaining in crisis, distracted by thousands of different pretexts because we have lost our central focus. We lose our spiritual vision of the crisis completely, contenting ourselves with granting it a psychological or corporeal status, concentrating only on what we feel, thinking that we are right because we feel good about

it, without any transcendent perspective, and separating the life we are living from the life option we initially chose.

In the end every crisis leads to a final conclusion:

- Some people leave after a serious discernment when the crisis shows them the inconsistency of their initial vocational decision and they opt for another choice.
- Others stay, but they really should have left, though they do not do so for fear of admitting the truth to themselves, or because of the future uncertainty they could have to face away from the monastery. They prefer to continue with their life on hold, feeling protected inside the monastery and completely concentrated on themselves, seeking the basic gratifications they need without causing other people too many problems. There are even those who completely lose any sense of belonging, and do exactly what they want while merely paying lip-service to the rules.
- There are also those who decide to leave when, in fact, they should stay because their motivations are inadequate. Among this group are those who have lost their initial fervour, but who could have recovered it, or those who blindly insist on thinking that they are going to be happy somewhere else, or with another person and there is no argument to help convince them that they are wrong. There are others belonging to this group who decide to leave just because they feel offended or disappointed, or who have failed to reach a goal they had set themselves, or who have been persuaded by other people to leave, and so forth.

### 3. Certain types of healthy crisis during initial formation

- **Vocational**, because they are in the process of discernment. We need to make it clear that doubts or limitations in certain areas do not mean the same as not having a vocation. On the contrary, they may help people to assume one of the most basic qualities in the person who feels called: that is, to trust in God who is the one who calls us, without waiting until everything is crystal clear and under control before responding.
- **Personal immaturity**, because when we become aware of our imperfections, the idea that we are perfect or worthy of being called disappears and we open ourselves with humility to know ourselves better and deal with our internal inconsistencies to transform them as appropriate.
- **The feeling of our own powerlessness**. The monastic life is not for perfect people, but neither is it for superficial or lazy people. It is for the humble who know and recognize their powerlessness, allowing themselves to be touched by God's mercy, without that meaning they will be able to overcome completely all their imperfections. This is a healthy experience for those who feel the impetuosity of beginners (I remember a young aspirant who, during his trial month at the beginning, said to me

“Give me all the most difficult jobs to do, so that I can see if I can overcome them before I enter ....”. Later, as a postulant, he had a big surprise.

- **Solitude** is another point which makes us undergo a certain crisis, making us feel uneasy and bringing to the surface what is in the depths of our hearts. Even though our Order considers solitude as an important value, a burden which is easier to bear thanks to community life, anyone who wishes to consecrate his life to God will experience, with greater or lesser intensity, the solitude of his heart, solitude in love and solitude in a presence which at times seems to be very absent. It is an emptiness which we need to make, so that it can be filled: the desert where God will speak to us.
- **Identity crisis**, an identity which can easily feel threatened when we experience failure, incomprehension, illness...., and the person involved reacts in an exaggerated way to his malaise by seeking refuge anywhere but in his true centre. These moments of trial are very good for helping the monk in formation to realize that he is not so centred on the Lord as he thought he was.
- **Disappointment with the community** is also inevitable. At the beginning we have the idea of a perfect community, but very rapidly we begin to notice the failings of the other brothers and our fraternal relationships. This change, far from being a bad thing, except in extreme cases, can be of great help to beginners, obliging them to distinguish between love and what is simply a feeling of moral security and emotional well-being. We need to seek the source of love in the One who has called us, and we have to give our love without any conditions, loving with mercy, patience and without feeling in any way superior. (I remember what a simple-professed monk said to me just before his solemn profession: “I make my profession like someone who is marrying a woman in a wheelchair, but I love her and I am doing it for the One who calls me.
- **The image we have of God** at the beginning can also suffer a crisis. Everybody has their own image of God which often needs to be purified, because it is too laden down with cultural, family or personal conditioning. This crisis is also healthy and allows us to see the capacity we have for opening ourselves up to the spiritual life with humility. In the end, little by little, we need to forget the image or experience we may have of God to allow ourselves to be invaded by the experience God has of us. The experience of the mystics and of St Bernard: “to love myself in God”.

## CONCLUSION

The theme of crisis is so important, so close to us and so necessary for everyone that we should bear it in mind more often at various levels:

- In our initial formation programmes: by informing people and not avoiding crises for the beginners by over-protecting them, but rather accompanying them and preparing



them for the future. A “watered-down” initial formation is no great help for facing crises in the future. But an added problem is that many formators do everything they can to avoid their candidates from going into a crisis and make them always feel loved.

- Some people wonder whether an authentic formation exists to prepare us for facing life crises in our novitiates, juniorates and also later on. We usually offer intellectual formation, but no special formation in psychological or spiritual self-knowledge, or in personal maturity for that matter. Even more delicate, if someone has not received this formation, how is he going to give it someone who needs guidance later on? It should nevertheless be remembered that the monastic life in itself is formative, if we live it in its dimension of fraternal love and prayerful faith.
- On-going formation, with help from within the regions or from outside.
- Creating a form of community culture suitable for accepting and accompanying a brother in crisis.
- The superior needs to become aware of his role as sentinel and provider of support.
- To create a vision of the crisis as a spiritual experience of God’s passing close by, and from a Christocentric and Paschal perspective.

After all that has been said, we could perhaps feel a little overwhelmed and find ourselves wondering who among our formators is sufficiently well formed so as to be able to form vocations adequately at the beginning and accompany them during the whole of their lives. Which abbot or abbess has that sort of skill? En effect, everything can be condensed into the ten commandments. When I have to preside an abbatial election, after listening to the long list of the qualities St Benedict expects the superior to have, I usually sum it all up in three points, (no more no less): 1) He should be a person with common sense. 2) He should love his brothers deeply. 3) He should be a man of faith and prayer. If these three qualities are present, then that is enough for me. I would say something similar regarding how we need to face our task of accompanying our brothers in crisis.