

and deepens. We tend to measure everything by his standards and the more intimate we become with him the more humbled we are by his infinite perfections, the more overwhelmed by his love and majesty: and the more abashed by our own nothingness. For indeed we are less than beggars, clothed and nourished by his bounty. He called us into being, but for his ever-present conservation we would fall back into the nothingness from which we came; he has raised us up to be not only his adopted children but participators of the divine nature and, if this were not enough, he has assumed unto himself our human nature that being one with us he might know by experience what temptation and sorrow and shrinking yet absolute surrender to the Father's will can mean. Always for our consolation in our manifold trials and aridities and apparent failures we have that piteous and sublime figure in the garden: 'Father, if thou wilt remove this chalice from me: but yet not my will but thine be done'. And when we unite our reluctant, fearful fiats with his we know they are of infinite value to him. We know that he, indwelling our very souls, has made the surrender for us and yet accounts it wholly ours. It would be false humility to pretend otherwise and pride to ascribe the surrender to ourselves. We know these things but in some mysterious way God hides them from us so that we see only the reluctance, the lack of generosity that seem to spoil our gift. 'Without me', said our Lord, 'you can do nothing.' But with him we have done something, faulty and feeble as it may be we have done something, and may we not take courage from this reflection and remember that in spite of aridity and despondency and dissatisfaction nothing but sin can separate us from 'the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord'.



### VOCATIONS AND THEIR RECOGNITION: III

COLUMBA RYAN, O.P.

COMING to the second element of a religious and priestly vocation, we learn from the Roman Catechism that those who have a divine vocation who are called by the legitimate ministers of the Church. This in no way contradicts what we have

said about the divine call; rather it is very closely connected with it. For the divine calling of a man to the religious and priestly state destines him to a life in public of holiness and to the exercise of a hierarchic ministry, in the visible, hierarchic society of the Church; consequently such calling ought to have also the confirmation, admission and guidance of those hierarchic rulers to whose administration the Church has been committed by God.<sup>1</sup>

In these words the Holy Father makes it clear that there would be a kind of contradiction in a vocation to the religious life or priesthood that came simply from God and did not have besides the approval of the Church, that is, of responsible ecclesiastical superiors. It would be a contradiction because it would mean either that God was taking a matter that concerns the visible, hierarchic functions of the Church out of the hands into which he has chosen to commit those functions, or else that for all his omnipotence he cannot master those hands if he will; for one of these two situations must arise if the genuine voice of God should invite a man to a way of life within the visible body of the Church, but the divinely authorized voice of the Church effectively bars him from it.

We should never lose sight of the fact that a vocation to religious life even without the priesthood is not something that concerns simply the perfection of individuals. It concerns the whole Church as a visible, hierarchic society in so far as religious orders and congregations, ecclesiastically approved, form part of its public structure and organization. Individuals may force their way into these orders, as they may also force their way to priesthood, without a divine invitation. They may also be received and welcomed by ill-advised and imprudent ecclesiastical superiors, and have no divine call. But they cannot have a genuinely divine invitation to such life and fail to be received by superiors. If this could possibly happen, it would mean that God proposed but man disposed; it would mean that God no longer ruled his Church.

Of course, this does not mean that every first refusal of ecclesiastical superiors to receive a religious aspirant proves the absence of any true vocation from God. Sometimes superiors are dull instruments of God's will, only gradually fulfilling his purposes.

1 *A.A.S.*, May 31, 1956, page 357.

Sometimes, no doubt, God's purpose is to test and strengthen an aspirant's perseverance by the initial show of resistance. But what it does emphatically mean is that there can be no ultimate appeal to some subjectively experienced call of God as conclusive proof against the refusal of a superior; if superiors refuse an application to enter a novitiate or seminary, or turn away a candidate in the course of training, it is no use his adopting the attitude that they are effectively thwarting some true vocation from God to which his conscience bears him unchallengeable witness. The one thing that is certain in these situations is that, at least then and there, it is not God's will that the aspirant continue where he is; his vocation is not to be found there; if it were, God would make it possible for him to remain. That he does not, is clear sign that it is not his will.

After what we have seen, in the earlier articles, of the difficulty of recognizing with any certainty the presence of the grace of a divine calling, it must seem a happy thing that there should be this external and objective criterion of ecclesiastical acceptance by which to judge it. Of this at least there can be no doubt. If I am refused admittance to a religious Order, I can, for the moment at any rate, have no vocation there. Negatively, the criterion is complete. Positively, it is less complete, since acceptance by superiors is no guarantee that I shall persist, nor even that I must absolutely be right in going ahead here and now. But at least it is a strong pointer in that direction, and, in normal circumstances, a clear indication of God's will. In practice, the readiness or not to accept the decision of superiors in the matter of a vocation is often what shows most clearly whether the suggestion comes originally from God, or only from self-will. The victim of a self-appointed vocation cannot conceive that he must submit it to authority. The recipient of a true vocation from God finds it no more difficult to submit himself to the divine will manifested to him through superiors than in the first place to have submitted to the invitation from God directly. The one has the habit of submission, the other the habit of self-assertion.

We have however been considering only one aspect of the ecclesiastical vocation, its aspect from the point of view of the aspirant. It should also be considered from the point of view of the superiors who provide it. When an aspirant is turned down by superiors he may indeed be morally certain that he does right in

accepting that decision without further question. But the superiors have not the same easy assurance that in turning him down they must have been right. This ecclesiastical decision is a help in the recognition of a vocation to all except those who are required to make it. From them it requires the utmost exercise of prudence.

Partly the decision is a question of assessing whether a divine call is present. I have said enough of the lines such an enquiry must take in the two earlier articles. But partly the decision has to be formed on an estimate of whether there are in the aspirant such qualities as provide the necessary conditions for the grace of a vocation. To this matter we must now turn.

I have already commented, in the first article, that these qualities should not be confused with the vocation itself, whether on its divine or ecclesiastical side. They are rather the conditions necessary upon the part of the recipient of a vocation; without their presence it would be absurd to suppose that there could be a genuine vocation; but they may be present without there being a vocation. It would be absurd, for example, to suppose that God had given to a woman a genuine vocation to the priesthood, since it is one of the conditions to the receiving of Holy Orders that one be a male. But this does not mean that every man has a vocation to priesthood. Similarly, there are (less obvious) requirements upon the part of the recipients of this or that vocation which must be present if we are to say there is a genuine vocation, but may be present without the vocation. Here again therefore we have only a negative criterion of the presence of a vocation. It is however one of the most useful criteria, to be employed both by the superiors who have to decide for or against acceptance and by the aspirant in making up his mind whether to make the attempt or not.

What then are these qualities? It would be impossible to give a list, since what is at issue here is the whole balanced character of the aspirant. What he lacks in one direction may be compensated for in another; the whole complex of his personality is and must be peculiarly his own, not a bundle of common qualities shared in indifferently by this man and that. Then again the qualities required for one type of religious or priestly life are quite different from those required for another; for example, qualities of health and physical endurance may be required of the missionary that are not required of the parish priest, qualities of

intellectual formation required of a teacher that are not required of a lay brother.

There are, however, certain general qualities of character and make-up which, normally, must be found in every candidate for priesthood or religious life, and which form the basis for any further special requirements of special vocations. They are obvious enough, and yet not always in practice recognized, so that it may be useful to attempt an outline of them here.

Let us classify them roughly under three headings: first, qualities of health, physical and mental; secondly, general character and disposition; thirdly, talents appropriate to the special vocation undertaken.

There is a tendency in some quarters to suppose that whilst it is important that a candidate for religious life should have the necessary physical toughness to stand up to the daily routine of the life to be lived, it is less important to be exacting about nervous or mental instability. It is thought, for example, that the shelter and security of a convent or religious house will provide the solution to people of an emotionally immature type, or of slightly neurotic tendencies. This is almost the exact opposite to the truth. I should say that whereas quite large allowances may be made in regard to people physically handicapped, one can hardly be too stringent in requiring of all aspirants to religious life, no less than to priesthood, really well-balanced and emotionally mature personalities. I think it is St Teresa who says somewhere that she does not mind admitting to her convents people physically weak, but that with melancholics there is nothing she can do; and certainly her despair of dealing adequately with these, once admitted, is a subject to which she often returns: 'one person of this kind is sufficient to upset an entire convent'<sup>2</sup> if she should be given in to. For the truth is that the pressures brought to bear by a vocation upon anyone pursuing it will prove sooner or later too much for inadequately developed personalities; unless by some disaster such a personality should be permitted to turn the successive features of religious life into forms of escape. Thus, the pressure of living in community cheek by jowl, day in and day out, with the most variously assorted persons very soon imposes an insupportable burden upon socially ill-adapted types, unless they are allowed, by mistaken kindness, to live upon and

<sup>2</sup> *Foundations*, Chap. VII. Works Vol. III. Sheed & Ward, 1946. See the whole chapter.

at the expense of the community. The pressure of responsibly accepted obedience, which requires a person to do all kinds of things he would not spontaneously choose to do, or not choose to do at the particular moment indicated, will soon find out and break someone interiorly ill-disciplined, or someone unduly liable to anxieties and scruples, unless, again, they are permitted to make obedience an excuse for the abdication of their own responsibility. The pressure of the vow and condition of chastity will besides twist up anyone not well-balanced and properly mature in his approach to sex, unless again he is mistakenly allowed to use celibacy and purity as an escape from recognizing the claims of that part of his human nature which he may have spent years in barring from his view. And one could go on mentioning one pressure after another that religious or priestly life brings to bear; it is a most peculiar notion that ill-adjusted persons should be acceptable candidates. Of course, even if the pressures are successfully avoided in the years of training by the kind of escapes suggested, this is only to lay up disaster for the future. Sooner or later, the dread reality will catch up with the fugitive. And one may suppose that in that day the persons responsible for the disaster in the sight of God will be those who admitted such a character and allowed it its illusions in the first place.

As for physical health, it is evident that superiors should not admit to religious life or priesthood candidates physically unable to bear the ordinary duties of the life to be lived. It is not sufficient that they should be able to pray; they must be able to take their share of all the rest of the life in question, though it may be reasonable to make exceptions where the essential outline of religious life is not affected. Thus, for example, it might be reasonable to accept as a lay-brother someone who was blind, or had one arm missing, which would evidently preclude him from certain types of work normally undertaken by brothers, but would not necessarily debar him from the routine life of the house and some share of its work; it would be less reasonable to accept a consumptive unable to lead the regular life. Most religious institutes have their own particular requirements in these matters; and for priesthood there are, of course, certain canonical requirements of physical health.<sup>3</sup> The difference, how-

<sup>3</sup> Canon 984, 2<sup>o</sup> 3<sup>o</sup>.

ever, between physical and psychological difficulties cannot be too heavily stressed. Whereas a physical disability does little more than impede this or that activity within religious and priestly life, psychological disabilities, even of an apparently minor order, give a twist to the whole approach to such life. It might be said, with the force but all the disadvantages of a generalization, that there is room for a true vocation in the crippled body with a healthy soul, there is not in the healthy body with a crippled soul. I have laid some stress on this point since there is a tendency sometimes to extend a false kindness to 'misfits' (somehow religious life will 'put them right'), and yet to be too rigorous in exacting physical fitness. It is in principle the same mistake as is made by immigration officers selecting men on the basis of their being good healthy animals; a materialist error.

Turning next to general character and disposition, it is not possible to do more than draw out one or two salient points. Perhaps the first and over-all requirement should be what St Teresa often enough calls intelligence. Of the reception of novices she says: 'They must have good health, and be intelligent . . .',<sup>4</sup> and elsewhere: 'I do not see how a person lacking in intelligence can be of any use in community life, and she may do a great deal of harm.' 'In general, a person who has this fault always thinks she knows better than the wisest what is good for her; and I believe this evil is incurable, for it is rarely unaccompanied by malice.'<sup>5</sup> Intelligence in this sense is certainly not to be equated with some kind of intellectual *expertise*. The vocation to being a lay-brother or lay-sister requires this intelligence just as much as any other. For there is a type of obstinate stupidity to which it is opposed, a kind of imperviousness to learning from others (perhaps this is where the malice, of which St Teresa speaks, enters) that may be exercised at every level of human performance, whether intellectual or practical. And such stupidity is an absolute impediment to the living out of a vocation. In simple people it may take the form of a kind of dull stupidity (such types are sometimes recommended—how mistakenly!—as suitable lay-brothers. 'Fit for nothing else.' May God forgive us!); in more educated people it may take the form of pertinacious clinging to views, or personal ideals. All such people show little evidence of true vocation. It

<sup>4</sup> St Teresa, *Constitutions*. Works, Vol. III, page 224.

<sup>5</sup> St Teresa, *Way of Perfection*. Works, Vol II, page 57.

would be tragic if they were taken into communities by superiors who preferred to have subjects too stupid to question orders than intelligent enough to be occasionally challenging. For the intelligent person is one with a questing and open mind; and his openness has two results; he is open to the demands of obedience; but he is open also to new needs and new ideas, and though this is in no way incompatible with the submission required by obedience, it is incompatible with a kind of passive conventionalism that is sometimes mistaken for obedience.

This brings us to the next requirement of character, which I may call, perhaps, general strength of character. It is sometimes supposed that some characters may be too strong for religious life. I confess that I find this difficult to admit. I read with surprise the following remarks: 'There are people who are made for commanding and managing others: their personality is too pronounced for them to accept second place. They might be excellent at running Catholic Action or founding charitable organizations or secular institutes; they will never make religious with the duty of remaining for years on end within the framework of obedience and the necessity of being just like other people.'<sup>6</sup> I hesitate to disagree with the learned author of the article in which these words appear, and I may be taking them too little in their context. But I would suggest that either the people described are in fact quite unsuitable for the tasks they are said to excel in (being forceful, but without self-discipline)—this may be why so often there is a disagreeable flavour of ruthlessness and egoism about the works mentioned—or else that the description of these 'managing' types is unfortunate and that in fact they are people of strong initiative and firm purposiveness. In the first case I should agree that the persons described are equally unsuited to religious life and to the life of priesthood; but in the second, I should say that they are of all people those likely to make the best religious and priests. In this second case, their native strength of character, disciplined and canalized by religious training in obedience and self-control, can achieve its maximum attainment. It is an old saying that obedience is the best school for rulership. And what is true of such outstanding personalities, ought to be verified to some extent in every religious and priest; they must have a firmness of purpose and a power of initiative that will not

6 R.P. Reginald Omez, O.P. *Negative Criticism of Vocation*, in *Vocations*, page 98.



allow them to turn religious life into an escape from responsible human life.

At the same time, there is no doubt that besides these two qualities of intelligence and strength of character, one must look for a certain docility and affability. By the first of these qualities I mean that persons of over-critical tendency and such as are too ready to prefer their own judgment show little sign of having received a true vocation; they will never be pliable enough to be formed. But this verges upon that quality of intelligence already described.

By affability I mean the opposite of a cantankerous and individualistic disposition. Religious have to live in community, priests have to serve a larger community still, and if they are unable to be aware of other people they will never fulfil their vocation. Now, there do seem to be people so wrapt up in themselves and so little aware of others about them that nothing can be done to change them. It is this selfish pre-occupation with themselves and their own problems that I style individualism. I do not mean a disposition to be unconventional; individualistic people in this latter sense may make very good religious, because if there is one thing that may deaden religion it is the danger of routine and conformism. The best safeguard against this is a certain originality of disposition, an original cast of mind and character. It may make their training difficult, they may easily kick over the traces; but there is nothing fundamentally wrong with them, nothing unhealthy. Such indiscipline is merely the excess of something good and excellent, that can be used in the fulfilment of a divine vocation. But the morbid preoccupation with one's own problems to the exclusion of consideration for others is quite different; where that exists there is very little hope of establishing the community spirit which is necessary in every religious and every priest.

These qualities then appear to me, from both experience and reasoned consideration, to be those we should look for in the recipients of a vocation. No doubt many others could also be mentioned, though they would probably not be of such general applicability. It must not be forgotten however that here, as well as in the vocation itself, the principle holds good that a gradual development is to be expected. Intelligence, strength and stability of character, equableness in society are not to be demanded in

their full maturity from young aspirants. They are qualities that ought to be fostered and developed by the slow training of those who have vocations. What may be looked for in the first place is the beginnings of these qualities; we must be sure that there is nothing in the character directly opposed to them. But it is a mistake made by some directors of young vocations to demand a standard from them, before ever they are accepted, that is seldom to be found even in the most mature. There seems even to be a pessimistic anticipation that people can only be expected to deteriorate under the process of growing up. 'If they are as bad as this when they are young, what will they be like when their first fervour has worn off?' That, surely, is a condemnation not of those who are beginning, but of those who train them and set them an example!

But these, after all, are the qualities which will suit men and women for success in any kind of life; they cannot be taken as indicative of a vocation? One must agree that this comment is right. Only, it is not an objection. I find myself in agreement with the words of Fr A. Bonduelle: 'These short considerations of aptitude (for religious life) could be expressed in very few words: some people obviously have no aptitude for the religious life. But the aptitude in question here belongs to the same domain as human qualities in general, and the position seems one of ambivalence. Aptitude gives us nothing in the way of a positive criterion of vocation. If you have no aptitude, then obviously God is not calling you. But if you have an aptitude for the religious state you have one for all the other states as well, because to this aptitude corresponds possession of all the other human qualities which would make for success in any state of life; and no conclusion can be drawn from it. . . . Signs of absence of vocation, i.e. lack of aptitude are found principally among the weak and the abnormal. A normal person is essentially suited to the practice of poverty, chastity, obedience, and even life in common.'<sup>7</sup>

It remains to say something of the talents appropriate to the special vocation undertaken. These do also help in determining whether a person has a vocation or not. Obviously they cannot here be enumerated since they vary with every form of priestly and religious undertaking. It must be enough to say they provide

7 *The Recognition of Vocation*, in *Vocations*, pages 44-47.

the clearest indication not so much of a vocation as such, but of the particular form that vocation should take. In the gifts of birth, and the opportunities in life that every man has, is to be seen always the finger of Providence shaping the future. That a man should never have had the opportunity of learning the humanities is not, for example, an unfortunate chance that debars him undemocratically from priesthood; it is the design of God who may be preparing him for the positive vocation to sanctity of a lay-brother.

(Concluded)



## EXTRACTS

POVERTY is the groundwork of the Christian life. *La Vie Spirituelle* gives most of its February issue to the subject of the poor in spirit.

Poverty, writes the author of the first article, inaugurates Christ's message. It occupies a primordial place. Not that it is the essential; the essential is love: it is by love that we are to recognize his disciples. But even the pagan philosophers were aware that love is the daughter of poverty. That is why poverty comes first. It is the first step without which there is no second. God's very first intervention in history had in fact been a call to renunciation, to detachment: 'Leave your country, your family, your father's house' (Gen. 12, 1). This, the first word that Abraham heard, balances exactly the Beatitude which opens the new Alliance.

He goes on to show how progress in the spiritual life is a progress in poverty, a progress in being dispossessed.

FOR RELIGIOUS, Fr MacEntee in *Review for Religious* (January) applies the doctrine in a practical if rather banal manner. He considers 'the squirrel within us', and how a religious will often collect books (because they may not be in the library), clothes (because they may be necessary in an emergency of weather conditions). . . . The tendency of certain religious to collect oddments has often been noticed; but, as Fr MacEntee says, as