

Moments of crisis and maturation in consecrated life

The importance of psychospiritual development

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Fragility and crisis define our everyday lives. If lived well and properly accompanied, they can be transformed into steps towards greater psychological and spiritual maturity. Marco Vitale, a priest in the diocese of Rome, speaks about the calling – after twenty years working in parishes - to collaborate in ongoing clergy formation and work focused especially in psycho-spiritual integration and accompaniment of priests and religious.

The parish priest who falls in love, the nun constantly changing communities, a religious who complains about everyone and another who looks like a teenager, are not infrequent scenarios nor are they actually so different, despite outward appearances.

Consecrated life, like any other vocation, is a seeming medley of special notes called memories, thoughts, emotions, feelings, meetings, decisions, needs and values... The stage where the "orchestra" plays and the written symphony itself are everyday life. And life sometimes includes errors of execution that can be well represented by the typical crises. Nuns leave communities, couples divorce, people cannot keep a job, youth drop out of school, etc. Without being conscious of this, one might risk saying instead with banality that 'people are no longer as mature as they once were'.

Personal maturity

But what is meant by the maturity of a person, a believer, a consecrated person? There could be dozens of answers to this question, but the preferred one starts from Christian anthropology. What is most immediately observable in a person is, without doubt, his or her overall full maturity which is the final fruit of the coexistence between both one's psychological and spiritual maturity.

By psychological maturity we mean that which allows a person to let themselves be loved and to love (according to one's state of life), to fruitfully work or study, to be consistent in word and deed, to maintain strong, enduring interpersonal relationships and to have a stable temperament.

Spiritual maturity is the ability to recognize and welcome the gratuitous Love of God that impels us to live both a theocentric self-transcendence and a giving of one's life to God. It is a giving of one's life in a way that most authentically corresponds to "talents" received so that the seed that falls to the ground may bear even more fruit¹.

Starting from these descriptions, one can understand that between psychological and spiritual maturity is a dynamic reciprocity. Ordinarily in fact, it is extremely unlikely for there to exist a deep spiritual maturity without psychological maturity as well. Moreover, "the life of grace, by which one is regenerated through baptism, presupposes the life of rational nature, in which man is capable of receiving instruction"².

Spiritual and psychological crises

Crises, therefore, arise from tension and struggle within one's own personal dynamics. When an aspect concerns tension between me and God, a religious struggle may give rise to spiritual crises. Depending on the outcome, such a crisis may or may not become a source of growth and greater spiritual maturity. Instead, when a dynamic regards especially one's own needs and values, a psychological struggle may generate a psychological crisis which similarly - depending how the crisis is faced and eventually resolved - can be an opportunity for psychological growth or regression. Additionally, both spiritual and psychological dynamics have an impact, one on the other.

In my experience of accompaniment of psycho-spiritual integration, I believe I have never met a priest or consecrated person in crisis for whom the roots were originally in the spiritual dimension. Often, presenting difficulties concern chastity, obedience, poverty, prayer or community life and deceive us into thinking the crisis is spiritual. We could then be tempted to propose spiritual instruments as the solution, such as praying more, more frequent spiritual direction or partaking of the sacraments more frequently. Experience says that such a strategy is most typically of little benefit. It is necessary to accompany the person to know him or herself and their mode of functioning in the psychological dimension. Chastity, for example, is not only rooted in a vocation, but also in one's psychophysical development, possible affective dependencies, unconscious defense mechanisms, self-esteem and any traumatic experiences. Thus, we need to accept that when a spiritual crisis is felt, very often, there is a deep and perhaps unconscious psychological crisis underneath. A psychological crisis is not to be ignored or buried under dangerous spiritual feelings of guilt. Rather it must always be pigeonholed into the history of a person's psychospiritual development.

'Managing' crises and accompaniment

Perhaps Job's biblical experience can help us. He is a man loved by God and faithful to him! But when God allows the devil to "test" him, Job finds himself traumatized and outside his comfort zone. He enters into crisis in his spiritual life: "Cursed is the day I was born and the night I was conceived"³. We can say this behavior is completely normal. Yet this should not "please" us, but rather push us to ask ourselves deeper questions: What allowed Job to "hold up" to a certain point? What are the roots of resilience? What seemed excessive to my own emotional maturity? What psychological and spiritual resources can we count on to start again?

The story of Job, which we know well, speaks to us of an important path: Crisis management. The resolution of a crisis can have only two results: Orientation towards

greater maturity or towards regression. If a problem is ignored, it is nearly guaranteed that regression will follow. Instead by 'managing', I mean a plurality of integrated, helping relationships through spiritual accompaniment, psychotherapeutic accompaniment and accompaniment by psychospiritual integration.

Spiritual accompaniment is fundamental for every Christian and all the more so for priests and consecrated persons, because the "weight" of one's lived faith typically occupies a role of primary importance. Helping consecrated persons in difficulty through spiritual accompaniment means helping them understand the true image of God that they have internalized, to live the sense of sin rather than guilt and recognize their disordered affections. It also helps one in welcoming God's love, understanding stages of life in the Spirit, growing in the will to follow the Lord and in discernment, and arriving to know God to the point of having God's own sentiments⁴.

Psychotherapeutic accompaniment in crisis is of great help for growth in self-awareness. It is a matter of knowing how to give a name to one's emotions, level of self-esteem and personality traits. It serves in rereading one's personal, family, vocational and relational history and experiences with tools capable of also pacifying our wounds. In this way, our emotional energy can be oriented towards greater, truer freedom and away from defense mechanisms and trauma.

Finally, psycho-spiritual integration and accompaniment urges one to recognize that "the relationship with Jesus, and therefore the spiritual life, cannot be reduced to just psychological elements because there is an unsurpassable element of truth: The very person of Christ... [T]o be a good accompanier in the spiritual life, it is necessary to know the human person well, not in the general but in the concrete; this human person with his or her own ways of perceiving, of relating, in other words, with one's concrete history. It is not the relational dynamisms of the individual that speak of Christ's truth. Rather they condition the relationship with Christ's truth. This means that it is not up to psychology to speak the truth of Christ, but it can say much about a person's perceptual and relational distortions. One can understand where they come from (education, experiences, parental relationships of the past ...) and, where possible, help correct these distortions"⁵.

The roots of crises in the psycho-affective dimension

I hope to have highlighted the importance of personal accompaniment, particularly for consecrated persons in crisis. Every crisis has its roots – broadly speaking – in a person's psycho-affective dimension. It is precisely accompaniment that can sustain and transform an experience of crisis into a passage towards full maturity, both in the context of interpersonal relationships (including with God) and in one's own living environment (family, social, ecclesial, cultural).

¹ Cf. *Jn* 12:24-26.

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 71, a. 1, ad 1.

³ *Jb* 3, 3.

⁴ Cf. *Phil* 2:5.

⁵ C. Bresciani, *New trends in the accompaniment of the psycho-spiritual educator*, Tredimensioni 11 (2014), pgs. 256-257.