

# VOCATION AND MOTIVATION

## The Theories of Luigi Rulla

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THE LONG YEARS OF RESEARCH undertaken by Luigi Rulla (1922-2002) and his colleagues into the psychology of vocation culminated in two volumes, published in 1986 and 1989, entitled *Anthropology of the Christian Vocation*.<sup>1</sup> Rulla, who was both a Jesuit and a psychiatrist, began his research as early as the 1960s, with empirical studies on the psycho-social processes underlying decisions to embrace a priestly or religious vocation, to persevere in it, or to abandon it. He did empirical tests and conducted depth-psychological interviews with US American religious and seminarians, and was able to show that the decisions regarding entry, perseverance and leaving were significantly influenced by unconscious motives. The experimental results were published in the 1970s, along with the theories Rulla developed on their basis about the psycho-social dynamics of Christian vocation.<sup>2</sup>

From 1971 onwards, Rulla worked at the Institute for Psychology at the Gregorian University. With his colleagues he sought to develop still further the theoretical basis of his research, to extend the range of empirical data on which it drew, and to apply it within the formation practice of the time. Out of this work, the two volumes of *Anthropology of the Christian Vocation* grew. Here, the psychological focus of the earlier writings was complemented by both philosophical and theological approaches. The result was a truly interdisciplinary study yielding a comprehensive theory of human personality. Nevertheless, despite the broader disciplinary and methodological basis, the central focus of the research remained the formation of priests and religious.

<sup>1</sup> These were published in Rome by the Gregorian University Press. The first bore Rulla's name alone, and carried the subtitle *Interdisciplinary Bases*; the second was co-authored by Rulla, Joyce Riddick, and Franco Imoda, and was called *Existential Confirmation*.

<sup>2</sup> Luigi M. Rulla, *Depth Psychology and Vocation: A Psychological Perspective* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1971); Luigi M. Rulla, Joyce Riddick and Franco Imoda, *Entering and Leaving Vocation: Intrapsychic Dynamics* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1976).

The empirical data brought together in the second volume are about these groups, almost without exception, and the practical or pastoral conclusions drawn are about seminaries and houses of religious formation.

If we are to understand Rulla, therefore, we need to bear in mind what the situation of priests and religious has been since the 1960s. Vatican II's documents on priestly formation (*Optatam totius*) and on religious life (*Perfectae caritatis*) encouraged styles of formation that were more strongly pastoral, taking their cue more from the needs of the world. The practical consequence was a sharp rupture with older traditions and symbols. Plausibility structures that were previously very important for the way priests and religious constructed their reality just fell away. The result was that many priests and religious became significantly unsettled both in their faith and in their vocation, thereby showing that the values they were embodying had not really been fully internalised. They were being supported by outward mechanisms rather than by any deeply rooted inner convictions.<sup>3</sup> If social pressure arose from outside, therefore, these people were especially vulnerable; and this was a time of powerful movements of protest and emancipation, challenging accepted structures and traditions in society as a whole, and encouraging self-development and individual freedom. The ecclesiastical changes, therefore, combined with the atmosphere of protest in society at large, led to sharp tensions within the Church, to an ideological rejection of tradition and authority, and to crises of identity among priests and religious. These people were asking disturbed questions about their role: some redoubled the search for external confirmation, while others simply left the institution.

How was it that this phenomenon of crisis in vocation and faith could arise? How was it to be addressed? Rulla was trying to answer these questions with his research. In what follows I shall begin by showing how Rulla understands Christian vocation within a wider picture of what it is to be human. Then I shall look at how his vision differs from that offered by other schools of psychology, before summarising his empirical and theoretical description of the psychological dynamics underlying spiritual motivation. This will lead into an account of his recommendations regarding formation today. At

<sup>3</sup> See *Anthropology of the Christian Vocation*, vol. 2, pp. 11-21.

the end, I will name a few points that seem to me important to bear in mind when interpreting and evaluating Rulla's approach.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Christian Vocation and the Nature of Humanity***

Rulla defines Christian vocation as:

. . . the call of God to the human person so that the latter might co-operate as a partner in the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31; Ezekiel 36:26) which God willed to establish between Himself and man [sic].<sup>5</sup>

This call is an unmerited gift; moreover, humans can accept the call only because of the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit within them. Nevertheless, God's call touches two fundamental features of human nature. In the first place, human beings have a capacity to orient themselves to God, to go beyond themselves. This fundamental capacity within the human person for God-centredness and self-transcendence is the basis not only of the divine call, but also of an innate sense of duty: the human duty towards objective values beyond the self as these values confront people during their lives. Encounter with these values brings with it a sense of 'you must', enjoining people to live according to moral and religious values, and not just to strive for natural goods (economic, political, social and so on).<sup>6</sup> In the light of this, we can begin to understand a second definition of vocation offered by Rulla:

***Human beings  
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capacity for  
self-transcendence***

Every Christian is called to be a witness to a love that is self-transcendent and centred on God, in other words to take as the focus of his or her life the self-transcendent virtues which were revealed and lived by Christ. The essence of Christian vocation is to be transformed in Christ, so that one internalises his virtues to

<sup>4</sup> For a fuller discussion, see my *Identitätsfindung im Ordensleben: Eine Auseinandersetzung mit L. M. Rulla über die spirituelle und psychosoziale Dynamik in der Ausbildung zum Ordensleben* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> *Anthropology of the Christian Vocation*, vol. 1, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted, even here, that Rulla does not really think the relationship between 'religious values' and 'natural goods' through. His language often implies a crude contrast between them, in a way quite inconsistent with a gospel of incarnation and grace. This weakness in his theory leads to problematic consequences, as we shall see in the latter part of this article.

the point of being able to say, 'it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me'.<sup>7</sup>

But then we need to bear in mind the other basic human characteristic which Rulla names. Humanity is not simply endowed with the capacity for theocentric self-transcendence and with the quality of freedom that this entails; it is also in many ways finite, limited. And these limitations can restrict to a greater or lesser extent human freedom for self-transcendence towards God. Thus Christian vocation occurs within a fundamental tension or dialectic, shaped by two opposing tendencies: a capacity for self-transcendence fostering human partnership with God, and a limitation on freedom that can impair this partnership.

### ***Psychology and the Christian Vision of Humanity***

The programmes of formation that were set in place after Vatican II did not, for Rulla, pay enough attention to these limitations. Rulla is concerned to put forward an account of Christian vocation that does justice to both sides of the tension: to what a person *should be* and what they *actually are*. Thus Rulla presents his account as a mediating position between two extremes, both of which are in danger of oversimplifying what a human being is. There can be an abstract over-spiritualism, which simply assumes that growth in priestly and religious vocation is guaranteed and can be trusted to look after itself. This leaves candidates too much dependent on their own resources: those in charge of formation simply make the external arrangements, otherwise remaining in the background so that the candidates have complete freedom to respond to God's call. This model has a very high view of God's call, but it does not reckon sufficiently with how the human freedom to respond is a restricted one. The candidates are not offered enough help in overcoming their psychical restrictions, or in their growth in the freedom to internalise faith-values.

There are other models that take their lead from modern psychology, especially from the humanistic schools (Rogers, Maslow and the like). Reacting against an earlier approach that was rather impersonal and legalistic, these models stress interpersonal

<sup>7</sup> *Anthropology of the Christian Vocation*, vol. 2, p. 11, quoting Galatians 2:20.

relationships, life in common, and personal development. On this model again, formation personnel are non-directive, but for a different reason. In these models, relationships and community life easily become ends in themselves. People are oriented towards individualistic self-fulfilment rather than to the transcendence of self proper to Christian vocation. In the face of such developments, church authorities often become very suspicious of psycho-social approaches to formation, and may indeed block them completely—something which then removes the great potential for good that psychological help can foster.

If psychology is to be used fruitfully in Christian formation, it is of central importance—as Rulla sees the matter—that an operative model of the human person be established which can incorporate what psychology has to offer while at the same time honouring the theological reality of Christian vocation. When the use of psychological approaches leads to negative consequences, this is often because people have taken on board, along with the psychological method, a secularist vision of the human person underlying it, often only unconsciously. For Rulla, therefore, it is important that we pay attention to the differences between the Christian vision of humanity and the implicit visions of humanity informing humanistic psychologies. The Christian vocation to theocentric self-transcendence is in no way reconcilable with accounts of humanity which link its capacities of self-transcendence simply to personal fulfilment, or to social and political ends, rather than to an ultimate *communio* with God. It is quite decisive for Rulla's approach, therefore, that right from the outset he reckons—even in psychological research—with an orientation of the human person to ethical and religious values, to a theocentric self-transcendence.

It follows that a proper study of Christian vocation cannot draw on other human sciences or psychologies without critically scrutinising the assumptions underlying them. This is not just a matter of avoiding theories that are openly antagonistic to the Christian vision of humanity. We need also to be critical about theories where the opposition is only implicit, or where the question is left open. For Rulla, these accounts too, even in areas which seem only peripheral or methodological, can convey, subtly and implicitly, a vision of humanity which conflicts with the reality of Christian vocation. Rulla cites Carl

***Psychology must be used in a way that honours the theological reality of Christian vocation***

Rogers' psychology, with its stress on a positive self-image and its absolute refusal to judge the self. Again, Erik Erikson's developmental psychology and Eric Berne's transactional analysis do not include any direct reference to the goal of human life. But implicitly they convey a sense of the ideal in terms of 'fulfilment' or 'self-development'. This rather excludes the sense of 'ought' proper to theocentric self-transcendence, and tends to strengthen a secularist sense of subjective autonomy.

Thus there is, for Rulla, an enormous ambivalence surrounding the use of all these approaches and methods in Christian formation:

Clearly, any vocational formation based on such presuppositions can be of some help in favouring growth in the natural sphere of human development, but may easily become an obstacle to development in the direction of theocentric self-transcendence, while the latter is basic to Christian vocation.<sup>8</sup>

A comprehensive view of Christian vocation must be informed by an adequately Christian account of what it is to be human. Only then will it become clear that Christian formation is not governed simply by what humans *want to be* or are *capable of being*. It must also be striving for the values and ideals specific to Christian vocation, in other words for what people *ought to be*. There is of course plenty of scope for changing structures, norms, roles and the like, but the essential, immutable values of Revelation must not be touched.

At the same time, an adequate theory of Christian vocation must reckon with another reality besides that of sovereign grace. Our freedom to orientate ourselves to God is limited to varying degrees and in different ways. This conflict within human freedom manifests itself in how our capacity for internalising Christian values is limited, and in our consequent vulnerability to social pressure and external influence. How are we to explain the psychological dynamics of this restricted freedom?

<sup>8</sup> *Anthropology of the Christian Vocation*, vol. 1, p. 22.

### ***The Psychological Dynamics of Spiritual Motivation***

The empirical researches of Rulla and his collaborators in the Gregorian University's Institute for Psychology have shown that the spiritual motivation and development of priests and religious are decisively shaped by unconscious psychological dynamics. Even when a person is orienting themselves fully—in so far as their motivation is conscious—towards the values and ideals of religious life, their real relationships and behaviour may be determined by unconscious needs and attitudes in conflict with these values. There can be mismatches between the conscious ideal-ego and the unconscious real-ego. People might have inferiority feelings, or repressed sexual or aggressive impulses, arising largely from buried or unintegrated childhood experiences. In later life, these find expression in excessive needs for security, harmony, affirmation, recognition or emotional attention. What otherwise appear as particular problems such as difficulties in prayer or permanent conflict within communities may have their origins here.

***Conscious and  
unconscious  
motivations  
in conflict***

Rulla sets out the range of human needs in terms of how their content and function relates to the internalisation of religious and ethical values: are the needs in conflict with this internalisation, or are they neutral? This theoretical basis enabled Rulla to conduct empirical research into religious motivation, and to explore the consistencies and inconsistencies between the unconscious real-ego and the conscious ideal-ego. He investigated 946 subjects, using various structured tests and depth-psychological interviews that addressed both conscious and unconscious elements in the personality. By using various tests on the same subject, and by investigating different sorts of subject in different situations over a significant time-span, Rulla was able to arrive at secure empirical conclusions. The generalisations drawn from these could very probably be regarded as valid.

According to Rulla's researches, between 60% and 80% of priests and religious are influenced by unconscious inconsistencies. Typical manifestations of this are stereotypical styles of behaviour inappropriate to the real situation; uncontrolled projections; the inability to change one's behaviour even given good insight into the situation and a ready will. These restrictions on human maturity impede spiritual growth and apostolic effectiveness. If these unconscious inconsistencies are not worked through and overcome,

then it does not matter how intensive a spiritual, pastoral and communitarian formation the seminary or the religious order offers: it will not make any significant difference to the person's human and spiritual maturity. Quite the contrary: the discovery that 'it doesn't make any difference' leads often enough to embitterment, hopelessness and cynicism. The person feels alienated from their vocation: either they leave (with or without entering into a relationship), or else they organize their lives—including their vocation—around their needs. Neither of these is really a solution: the person is not working through their problems, but pushing them away and repressing them,

Rulla's research also showed that this dynamic of unconscious inconsistencies in priestly and religious vocations could in principle occur in any social or ecclesial context. The changes introduced by Vatican II make no difference here: the problems raised by unconscious inconsistency are still there despite all these changes. The ideals and symbols of priestly and religious life may have changed, but the danger remains that the motivation of young priests and religious, unconsciously, is fixed regressively on these ideals, rather than on the actual values of religious life. The roles adopted by priests and religious may have changed, but the danger remains that their motivation remains more strongly linked to the roles as such than to the values that those roles are supposed to promote. Respect for the observance of the Rule may have vanished; people may be assigning much more significance to interpersonal relations; people are no longer identifying themselves so much with the institution and its norms as with specific individuals, groups and tasks. But the danger still remains that even these enlightened forms of identification are somehow not right. These too might be traceable back to inconsistent unconscious motives such as the wish for security or affirmation rather than to the values of religious life.

### ***Contemporary Formation***

Given this background, Rulla suggests that priestly and religious formation should contain a further important component, over and above the internalisation of the values associated with religious life: people's capacities should be extended and deepened through their working through their psychological blocks. By working through their unconscious inconsistencies, a person will be helped to grow in inner



freedom and maturity, to accept and internalise the values of religious life, or alternatively to choose another form of Christian vocation, this time in maturity. If this inner freedom and maturity are not there, young priests and religious will simply identify themselves with their vocational ideals, and adapt to conventional expectations and customs, but without really internalising the values of religious life in a process of spiritual growth.

If this growth is to be promoted, formation cannot simply concern itself with conscious convictions and responsible behaviour, because the most important obstacles to a person's spiritual growth arise from unconscious dynamics. Consciously lived spirituality and freely chosen self-discipline do not go far enough. If formation is to promote this kind of maturity, it must draw on methods and ideas from the realm of psychology.

Formation is not only supposed to convey a sense of what Christian vocation means, but also to enable people to grow in the inner freedom that will enable them to live that vocation more fully and wholeheartedly. Experience has shown that it is not enough to change external structures, because this does not pay sufficient attention to the structural complexities of the human person. Priestly and religious formation needs to be based on a comprehensive account of Christian vocation so that it can proceed more realistically and therefore more effectively. These ideas need to inform formation planning, the structuring and evaluation of particular exercises in formation, and above all personal spiritual direction, which is the most important means promoting growth in Christian vocation.

***Formation  
should promote  
freedom***

Clearly this vision of formation makes great demands on formation personnel. Formation must be neither authoritarian nor permissive. It needs to avoid both reductionism regarding the spiritual life and naivety regarding psychological reality. It must provide real help towards maturity and integration of the unconscious. Thus anyone working in formation needs to be themselves a mature person, a vibrant model, a competent director. They need themselves to have internalised the values of the gospel that they are trying to convey. They need, too, a practical training that will enable them to help candidates grow in their own inner freedom. In this context, Rulla claims that there has been a serious lack in the systematic and practical training of formation personnel, compared—say—to the enormous effort put into intellectual formation. He therefore suggests

that we need to think in terms of two new kinds of formation personnel.

The first kind (novice directors, seminary rectors, spiritual directors and so on) need to be able to recognise every dimension of possible difficulties and problems, both conscious and unconscious. These people need themselves to have received an integrated formation, and to have worked through the inconsistencies in themselves. This will make them capable of avoiding projections, double messages and rigorism, and of promoting mature styles of communication. They will also be able to provide for immature candidates to receive help from specialists.

The second kind of formation personnel will be such specialists. Over and above the capacities of the first kind, these will be able to work through problems arising from unconscious factors in 'vocational growth sessions'. They will be able to support other formation personnel with their specialist knowledge, obviously with all due provision being made for the safeguarding of confidentiality. It will also be helpful if these specialists are themselves priests and religious, who have personal experience of the problems raised by their own ways of life, and who can guarantee the integration between psychological and spiritual direction.

In short, Rulla's *Anthropology of the Christian Vocation* and his other psychological researches have a pastoral purpose. He is trying to render our shared Christian life, and the apostolic mission of the Church and its institutions, more credible and trustworthy. He therefore seeks out some general principles and criteria for an integral human and Christian formation that do justice both to the natural and the supernatural. In psychological terms, he is concerned that people work through their unconscious inconsistencies. In spiritual terms, he is concerned with discernment, with discrimination between spirits—not, however, between virtue and sin (in the style of the First Week of the Ignatian Exercises), but between what is really good and what only appears to be good (as in the Second Week). What he says about formation, and about the training of those in charge, is a response both to the demands of Vatican II and to those of secular culture. If the Church's task is to foster people's freedom, responsibility and

credibility, then ‘more mature subjects will be needed, and more mature formators who can help these subjects become mature’.<sup>9</sup>

### **Questions Arising**

Over the past twenty years, the literature on the psychological dimension of Christian faith and of vocation has grown enormously, and Rulla’s contributions were certainly significant. He was one of the first Roman Catholics active in psychotherapeutic practice to strive towards conceptual clarity and general competence in handling the relationship between theology and psychology, between faith and psychotherapy.

However, closer scrutiny shows that Rulla’s very strengths are also sources of weakness. Critical questions can be asked. I propose to focus on three points: how Rulla sets out the relationship between theology and psychology; the idea of ‘theocentric self-transcendence’; and the so-called ‘structural approach’.

#### *Two Disciplines*

Rulla starts from a Christian vision of humanity. He is very keen to distinguish his approach from that of secular psychologies that either deny or bracket any reference to relationship with God. That means, however, that theology provides a set of norms governing the way he uses psychology: psychology becomes a kind of ‘auxiliary discipline’, to be understood and applied only as a source of descriptive empirical data. This understanding has great strengths: theology and psychology are clearly distinguished; the theological approach is taken absolutely seriously, while the psychology guarantees the empirical basis on which everything is done. But the strengths also imply weaknesses: psychology’s own claims to interpret reality are not taken seriously, and not brought into relationship with theology and faith. There is no critical dialogue with theories of personality or development elaborated by psychologists, or with how psychology perceives and interprets social structures—and for that matter Church structures. In such a

<sup>9</sup> *Anthropology of the Christian Vocation*, vol. 1, p. 396.

model, perhaps, faith and theology are in the end insulated from the disturbing questions raised by secular theories. But they are also then impoverished, because they lack the stimulus that such theories might bring.

*'Theocentric Self-Transcendence'*

The point becomes especially evident in connection with self-development. Rulla takes 'theocentric self-transcendence' as the starting-point and as the criterion for an adequate vision of the human person. He criticizes what he sees as the quasi-religious claims made by secular developmental theories. But then, conversely, he runs the risk of contrasting far too blatantly a theological concept like 'theocentric self-transcendence' with psychological categories. Is it really the case that *no* sensible correlation can be drawn between basic Christian ideas and the values of secular psychology? Surely self-expression and self-development can be understood by Christians as thoroughly legitimate if they are seen in the context of the doctrine of creation (and therefore in a real sense—albeit one different from Rulla's—theocentrically). Indeed, these 'secular' values can draw attention to elements of properly Christian tradition that conventional styles of education and formation, fixated as they were on ideals and norms of 'selflessness', rather repressed and neglected. We might think, for example, of healthy self-love: this, in harmony with love of God and love of neighbour, has a place within any mature Christian spirituality; indeed love of God and love of neighbour can only flourish if self-love is present. What, then, is 'theocentric self-transcendence' supposed to be? On what basis do we distinguish it from 'natural self-



transcendence'? When reporting his results, Rulla presents the following as 'self-transcendent' attitudes: self-discipline, humility, observance of rules, and mortification. By contrast, 'self-sacrifice for the sake of a better world', 'doing my duty', and 'serving the community of which I am part' count as natural values!<sup>10</sup> The model of formation with which he is working seems, to put it mildly, one-sided.

#### *The Limitations of a Structural Approach*

How far this model of religious life influenced Rulla's therapeutic work is not a question that we can investigate here. It is, however, striking that Rulla's theories are remarkably vague on what 'maturity' and 'immaturity' amount to in practice. One reason for this is that Rulla adopts a 'structural approach', which seems to imply that 'theocentric' and 'natural' versions of transcendence are two wholly separate structures. This does have the advantage that the theological category of relationship with God is taken seriously in empirical research. But Rulla's focus on a proper relationship between the theological and the empirical leads him to neglect issues about the latter. What do 'maturity' and 'immaturity', 'consistency' and 'inconsistency' look like, especially when these realities are also unconscious? Can we make any connections between these categories and particular personality profiles, particular patterns of social or ecclesial socialisation, particular life-events? What effect do Church symbols and roles have on the spiritual growth of the person?

It has to be said, regretfully, that Rulla does not answer these questions, or even pose them. Nevertheless, Rulla has done serious research on the religious aspects of human motivation, and opened up a new set of methodological issues. And for that he must be given credit.

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<sup>10</sup> *Anthropology of the Christian Vocation*, vol. 2, pp. 408, 413.