

COLLABORATION: ITS PROFITS AND ITS PITFALLS

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HERE IS NO DOUBT THAT THE DOCUMENT *Directives on formation in religious institutes* (2 Feb 1990) has a very different tone than documents of its kind in decades past. With much less emphasis on rules and much more concern for the value development of different stages of formation, it contributes to the notion of religious life as process rather than form. It shows an awareness of new developments in religious formation and an openness to them, as well, despite a degree of caution about their effects. It demonstrates a concern for the problems facing religious orders today and the effect of local conditions on community formation programmes regardless of how homogenizing the general norms may seem. The result is an image of religious in conversation with their world, competent in their fields and committed to finding the presence of God in the present rather than the past. What the document does not do much of, on the other hand, is to recognize the positive effects of collaboration on the prophetic role of religious life and what that collaboration will do, both to the nature of religious life and to the character of the Church.

The document calls for collaboration at every level. And the levels are many.

Formation directors and team members are to work together with the superior of the community to promote a unified and organic programme of formation that is rooted in the charism of the order and faithful to the unity and spirit of the community. The underlying message is clear: the formation programme is not a world in itself and cannot be in tension with the ideals being taught by the current superior. Formation programmes are not hotbeds of revolution or pockets of resistance in the community itself. Their purpose is to determine whether or not the candidates at hand have the desire to be religious and the means to make this particular order's charism clear today.

The superior is responsible for seeing that the formation programme itself has the intellectual resources and qualified directors it

needs to guarantee the spirit of the community in the future. Formation, in this document's view, is not simply an exercise in deprivation and asceticism. Members chosen to direct these programmes are to embody the order in ways that are understanding and attentive and idealistic as well as regular.

The directors are to understand that the position of formation director demands total priority and complete cooperation with the values and teachings of the present administration. They are, at the same time, to be skilled in working with people. They are not only the keepers of the institution and its customs, books and constitutions. They are to discern the growth of the people with whom they work, they are to attend to their souls, they are to be gentle companions in their search—rather than simply marshals of isolated codes of behaviour designed to measure the endurance rather than challenge the spirit of those who seek God in religious life.

The person in formation herself is to cooperate with the programme set up for her. She needs to work through with her directors the struggles she feels and the questions she has and the needs with which she is wrestling. She needs, then, to be open to their experience, trustful of their guidance, accepting of their suggestions, knowing that growth in the spiritual life takes effort and that every part of the programme laid out for her is tested by time and considered essential to her future life and happiness. There is no formation, in other words, without the collaboration, most of all, with and from the very people who are being formed. Formation is not something that is done to us; formation is something that happens within us.

Culture, in this document, is not seen as something to be fled but something to be understood and given right place in the development of religious life. It warns against because it misunderstands, perhaps, some of the most important cultural adaptations and insights of our time: the formation of middle-class religious among the poor themselves, ministries that are discerned instead of arbitrarily assigned, and a sense of justice that is 'the constitutive dimension of the gospel', not an 'ideology'. Yet, almost gone from this document is the odour of fear of the world that once permeated so much of the literature on religious life. Instead, religious are called to appreciate the local culture, to learn from it, and to inculturate the faith and form of religious life within the local church.

Formation, it seems, is to enable young religious to function in the world as friend instead of foreigner. Formation, apparently, is for

real life, not for escape from its understandings and insights. There is, the document says, 'an affinity between the religious life and culture'. The implications of the statement for a life that has long lived as if only cultures that have passed are perfectible are at least intriguing.

Other ecclesial movements—the Cursillo movement, the charismatic movement, the Catholic Worker house movement, perhaps—are to be collaborated with by religious orders, the document makes clear, but they are not to become merged. The movements are not religious orders and religious life is more than a movement, however similar the two may sometimes seem. Religious life is a perpetual commitment to a life-style. The movements are, for most at least, a temporary commitment to a ministry or spiritual practice that enhances the rest of life but which does not itself become the total arbiter of our life choices. Most of all, perhaps, the document is clearly warning religious that they cannot serve two charisms and two institutes at the same time which might divide loyalties and confuse life questions with a struggle between goods.

Bishops, of course, are to be collaborators in the development of religious life. Because religious orders have such major influence on a diocese, the autonomy of the order is not to obstruct the development of the local church. On the other hand, the needs of the diocese are not to subvert the character of the religious life. Because a bishop needs people for a new ministry does not mean that the religious orders under his supervision either want to give people to a ministry which they see as foreign to their spirit or that they can give members to one more work, whatever its value, and still maintain their way of life. The document steps gingerly around the two poles—public ministry and a privileged way of life, the obligation of bishops and the protection of religious charisms—by deciding that the bishop 'should be at least informed' of the nature of religious formation programmes in his diocese. The collaboration called for, then, is a collaboration of understanding and communication; a witness of the one Church rather than a demonstration of a Church at war with its own best gifts.

Inter-institutional collaboration is a key and a central question in the development of religious formation programmes today. The fact is that a good many religious communities either lack the internal resources necessary to operate their own formation programmes or they lack a large enough number of candidates to make wide-scale programmes feasible. The fact is, then, that groups are going to have

to centralize their programmes, to share resources, to use outside institutions to train their candidates, and that jointly perhaps.

The point is, of course, that in a world on the brink of globalization, under the eye of satellites, connected by arteries of modems and fax machines, threatened by high-tech warfare and at risk of nuclear devastation, collaboration is not a management strategy, collaboration is a virtue. A virtue of rank. A virtue, perhaps, to be listed with the others we have seen as the glue of human life: peace, joy, faith, hope, magnanimity, seven other Fruits of the Holy Spirit and, in our time, collaboration. If religious cannot witness to it, who can we expect, in fact?

The problem is that the collaboration outlined in this document on formation in religious life has both profits and pitfalls. The very thought of working on formation teams and trying to outline formation programmes for the youngest to the oldest, the newest to the longest-standing members of the community is a formidable and time-taking task in a period where the already overworked are now doubly burdened in the face of waning numbers and increasingly complex ministries or, on the other hand, in the face of rising numbers and increasingly demanding ministries. The process of collaboration itself takes great commitment, mutual respect and no small amount of skill in group dynamics. It risks interpersonal tensions and internal community divisions. It demands detachment from the personal dimensions of counselling and guidance and attachment to the goals of the group. Most of all, perhaps, it requires a group consciousness of the living spirit of the community, as it is embodied in the members and interpreted by the present elected leadership. Being on a formation team, in other words, is a formation, renewal, a personal recommitment to the tradition and values of the order in its own right. Being on a formation team is not for the weak, the timid and the superficial. It is only for those who most reflect the best in the community, the best in the tradition and the best in the charism. They do not have to be perfect people but they must be loving people, gentle people, insightful people and deeply committed people themselves or all the constitutions in the world will not provide in formation what the models of it lack.

The superior, too, will find in an era of collaboration that working through a programme with a team that constantly changes it and a community that constantly evaluates it as either too lax or too rigid demands both flexibility and clarity of vision. It is necessary to know where we want the programme to go. It is also necessary to know that

there are multiple ways of achieving the goal. The important thing is that we continue to test the strategies against the vision and use the vision to evaluate the strategies at all times. The temptation, of course, is to put people through a system when what we really must be prepared to do is to walk with them through a search for what is true in them. For the superior this means walking with the team, the community and the candidates. It is an exhausting and hardly perceptible work but it alone assures the future of the Order.

The person in formation, young or adult, must come early to understand by the collaboration process that her life is now not independent any more. Her growth in religious life will be mediated by the community and by the people of God, not simply by whim or by experience. She will be expected to draw wisdom from the lives of those around her and the reservoir that is the Church. She will need to come to realize that the way she feels about a thing is not its only measure and that the way she thinks about a thing is subject to new information, other people's perceptions and the gratuitous changes of the Holy Spirit. She will come to find that the presence of God in time is not static and that the provisional may indeed become the permanent. She has to learn, in other words, to be open, to be flexible and to be conscious of the fact that though she has a piece of the truth, she does not have it all.

Collaborating with the culture is a balancing act in itself. To be leaven and light, student and keeper of a culture without giving away our souls to it, takes formation of the highest calibre. It demands the constant question of what we need to take from where we are as well as what we have to bring to where we are. It means that we must discover both the gifts and the needs of the world around us and see that its gifts touch us and that our gifts touch it as well. This, of course, is a different kind of religious life from the one that modelled a Church under siege. And this one takes the kind of character the world sees in the Christ who was 'in the world but not of it'. Training people, especially those who have put off medieval clothes in order to move freely into the multiple wounds of the twenty-first century, to relate to the world sinking to its level of entertainment or values or goals, calls for the ultimate in interiority. To do this, communities must be deeply, clearly and regularly prayerful; highly cohesive; devoted to the poorest of the poor wherever they are in society. It is easy to have Catholic institutions in a culture. It is more difficult—and more meaningful—to have Christianity there.

Collaboration between religious communities and local bishops has been a point of theology and a matter of debate for centuries.

Mutuae relationes, in many ways, only serves to confuse the issue rather than to clarify it. It is easy to say that religious orders enjoy internal autonomy but ministerial accountability or dependence on the bishop. The fact is, however, that the ministries of a congregation often come closer than anything else to touching its real internal autonomy. What ministries a congregation does or does not have can touch its character more deeply than anything else in its history. To leave a superior and council with the right to determine who in the community shall be responsible for groundskeeping or how long a personal vacation can be, but at the same time deny them the right to open those works that best make their charism present in this day and age whether a diocese sees the need for it or not, is to deprive the community of its real authority. On the other hand, for a bishop to have no means of pastoral planning because religious will not work with him to determine and provide for the needs of the local church is to warp the charism for the sake of the community rather than to give it for the sake of the Church. The challenge of collaboration is to honour one another's role while listening with openness to the work of the Holy Spirit in each. Inter-institutional collaboration is a new moment in the lives of most religious orders. Up until this time, formation was a simpler process, more homogenized, more behavioural, more self-contained. People in formation attended our schools both before and after they came to the community and, if not ours, at least some Catholic institution. Putting large groups of them under the direction of a single director was clearly necessary and clearly possible. Now, both the number of candidates themselves as well as the availability of formation personnel is, in most places, at an all-time low. We no longer have the schools we had. The candidates no longer have the background in either religion or theology that they once had. And, at the same time, we have never needed good formation programmes more. The answer has been collaboration among congregations and conference centres and institutes and colleges. The problem is how to preserve the character of the order, the transmission of the charism and still provide a basic Catholic formation. The question is, who determines the curriculum, who decides the goals, who evaluates the teachers, who directs the programmes? The directors of the teaching institutions or the superiors of the communities from which the candidates come? And on what bases? It is hardly a simple snag. On it may well depend the complexion of the order for years to come.

Collaboration and integration are two different things. The document is clearly concerned with the possibility that the involvement of

religious, especially religious in initial formation, with equally strong programmes in distinct ecclesial movements may well undermine the character of religious life itself. The question is a real one but not serious enough, it seems, to warrant distance between the two. Religious obligations must always come first. When they do not, in any category, that may well be a sign that the religious vocation was never there in the first place. Where that kind of balance is possible and clear, then the two groups can be a gift of wealth to one another.

The prophetic dimensions of these collaborations may well be the sign of religious life to the twenty-first century. It is a prophetic act for superiors to recognize the truth in others, to honour it and to enable it. Collaboration is not a euphemism for benign authoritarianism. Collaboration implies that the work of a superior is to enable the work of everyone else, to define it but not necessarily to direct it, to hear it rather than to argue it or discipline it or suppress it or persuade it into oblivion. It is prophetic because it recognizes the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church itself rather than simply in its anointed caretakers.

It is a prophetic act for directors and formation teams to work out formation programme after formation programme after formation programme because it says institutionally that times change, that absolutes are a thing of the past, that it is the spirit of religious life and not its previous form that counts.

It is a prophetic act for people in formation to look upon the formation programmes in which they are involved to be as much their responsibility as the responsibility of the formation team itself because it says that religious life is for adults, not children, that it takes spiritual effort rather than material conformity, that we are responsible for our own souls in a culture that 'simply takes orders' and works on assembly lines and considers itself powerless in the face of large companies and remote governments. The restoration of a sense of personal responsibility is essential to the very preservation of the globe. We can each of us do something to forestall that and we must. But, if our very formation programmes model a kind of spiritual dependency on an unseen hand, then how will we ever teach people in formation that our ministries can make a difference in the world, if 'make a difference' is what we set out to do?

It is a prophetic act for formation programmes to take the culture seriously for culture is what cries out for the charism of religious life, not for its mystique or its romantic differences and ghetto existence, but for its power to make Christ present in time, to transform as well as to transcend life.

It is a prophetic act to work well with bishops and institutions and other ecclesial movements because the world is full enough, is overfull, in fact, with people who are trying to take all the territory for themselves, all the control for themselves, all the profit and all the credit for themselves. It is time for the Church and its religious to model harmony and respect, truth and wisdom, empowerment and support among its own, for its own, as proof of what it teaches among its own, North and South, hierarchy and lay, female and male.

The *Directives* is a good document because it notes clearly what is going on in religious life around the world. It is nevertheless only a beginning. We need a document that calls for collaboration not as a strategy but as a virtue sorely needed in the twenty-first century and able to be modelled best of all in a universal Church that has itself been built on centralization rather than the collaboration the gospel enjoins on us, 'two by two'.