

The Constitutions of the Institute of Charity

“Called to be saints together”



Antonio Belsito IC

Foreword

The Holy Spirit is always full of surprises. There were many religious orders at the time of Blessed Rosmini, and yet, it was the God of surprises that inflamed the mind and the heart of this holy and humble priest with a new, unique charism for the Church.

The new gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church found its embodiment in the Institute of Charity, and received its formal recognition by the Church on 20th September 1839, with the Apostolic Letter “In Sublimi”. There is no doubt that the full description of the unique charism of the Institute is to be found in the Constitutions.

Unfortunately, it seems that, over the past 30-40 years, we have lost sight of the special vision for the Institute, as it is described in our Constitutions. At our meetings, assemblies, and chapters the Constitutions are often neglected, with the result that we find ourselves without vision, direction, and even purpose. In our confusion, we look at other Congregations, at “common sense” approaches to the great issues of formation, community life, works of charity, life of prayer, etc. We seek for guidance in the documents issued by the Congregations, not so much for enriching what we already possess, but to find a way in the Church.

What has happened to our unique charism? The nature of a charism is such that it has vision, purpose, direction, and power; without it, all is lost, and the Institute is no longer the embodiment of the Founder’s charism, but something else.

The renewal of the Institute has to begin with the re-discovery of the Constitutions. Fr Founder considered the Constitutions to be the full expression of the charism given him by the Holy Spirit, - with particular intensity on 10th December 1825, as he wrote in his Diary. He had the Constitutions copied again and again, and send them to bishops, cardinals, Popes, and to any interested person making enquiries about the new special charism in the Church. To the young Gentili, who was considering becoming a member of the Institute, he gave the Constitutions to read, saying that he would find in them the true spirit and the full expression of his charism.

We have neglected the Constitutions at our own peril, and it shows. It is urgent that we stop the deep feeling of a loss of direction and of purpose by turning to the book which has the most authentic claim for our being the “little army” of the Church in the present world. We should not discuss formation, or community life, or the religious vows, or the life of prayer, or the organization of our important structures, without a prior sustained examination of the Constitutions. Other Church documents are very important, but we need to read them and make use of them from the sure standpoint of our own special charism.

On the matter of community life, for example, few are now aware that its presence is an *essential* dimension of our being “Rosminian”. The Constitutions, in fact, stress from

the start that we are “*called to become holy together*” – hence the desire and commitment for holiness and the assurance that there is a community of like-minded people to help us achieve it are both essential parts of the same charism. No Rosminian should be without the full support of a religious community, except in the most unusual circumstances.

The aim of the present book is to invite all our religious, the Ascribed, and any other person interested in knowing the special charism of Blessed Rosmini, to discover the heart of Fr Founder’s spirituality in the Constitutions, and to have a clearer view of the vision, direction, and purpose of the Institute of Charity.

This book is didactic in style, being the result of two courses on the Constitutions given to our Formators, the first in 2006, the second in 2015, which were intended to provide them with a thorough knowledge and understanding of the Constitutions, studied in a systematic way, in the light of the most recent Documents on Religious Life issued by the Church.

The book has 13 chapters, dealing with the following topics:

1. **Holiness** *(Brief Description of the Institute of Charity)*
2. **Indifference** *(First Probation or Postulancy)*
3. **Tools of the spiritual trade: Vows and Virtues** *(Second Probation or Novitiate)*
4. **Obedience** *(Scholasticate)*
5. **Prayer** *(Third Probation)*
6. **Qualities of Persons** *(Presbyters, Coadjutors, Adopted sons, Ascribed)*
7. **Divine Providence**
8. **Humility and the Elective State**
9. **Universal Charity and Love for the Church**
10. **Superiors as Spiritual Fathers – The spirit of intelligence**
11. **Fr. General in the Constitutions**
12. **Justice and Love of God**
13. **The Well-Being of the Society**

It is important that we know our Constitutions, to make sure that, as St. Paul’s said of the gospel he was preaching, *we are not running in vain*, without a vision, without purpose, and without direction. The Constitutions are a rich treasure, and it is in them that we will find the answers to our problems.

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Session One

HOLINESS

Constitutions 1-16

(Rule of Life 1-8)

Brief Summary:

*The Constitutions issue from a **single principle and seed** which contains the purpose and nature of the Institute.*

*The “**end**” of the Institute is the **personal perfection of all its members** through the fulfilment of the two great commandments, “Love God with all your heart” and “Love thy neighbour as you love yourself”.*

*The “**persons**” belonging to it are Presbyters, Coadjutors, Adopted Sons, Ascribed Members, classified according to the manner of charity exercised by them towards their neighbour.*

Mission Statement of the Institute of Charity

Societies are formed with a clear and definite purpose. What is the purpose of the Society of Charity? For what end has it been established? The answer to this question will constitute the “**single principle and seed**” from which the whole Institute of Charity has been developed:

“The end of this Society is to care lovingly for the sanctification of the members who compose it and, by means of their sanctification, to expend whatever longings and strength it has in all works of charity, and especially for the eternal salvation of every one of its neighbours.”

This mission statement should be made very clear to everyone who wishes to join the Institute or is involved in the various stages of formation. The Institute exists simply and purely to provide every support to members who want to become holy, against a background of universal charity. The Institute, having been approved by the Holy See, has the necessary means whereby members can achieve evangelical perfection.

Great use should be made of this brief description of the purpose of the Institute. It is very common today for organisations and educational establishments to have a clear

“mission statement”, a short and clear description of what the organisation is, displayed prominently with the purpose of focussing the minds and the efforts of those who belong to it, and as a means of advertising its own essential nature to those outside.

For reflection:

- *The Institute would be a failure if it does not “care lovingly for the sanctification of the members”: in the light of your own experiences what recommendations would you like to make to help the Institute pursue its end more earnestly?*

If the end of the Institute is the sanctification of its members, what reason should people have for joining the Institute? What is the fundamental requisite of anyone who wishes to become a member of the Institute of Charity? This is Fr. Founder’s answer:

“The Institute consists of faithful Christians who, in their ardent desire of living as disciples of JESUS Christ, our Lord and Master, apply themselves vigorously, with mutual help and encouragement, to their own perfection.”

People who apply to become Rosminians should know that the essential requirement is their desire to become saints in company of other like-minded persons. “Becoming saints together” should be the fundamental purpose, “the one necessary thing”, for joining the Institute. The implication is that “holiness” should be desired, discussed, examined as the central concern of all members, especially in their initial stages of formation. We are in the business of becoming saints together, this is what really matters in the Institute. This should be the yardstick whereby we assess the suitability of those who wish to join us or remain with us. The simple, pure intention of desiring to become holy with the help of others in an Institute that exists for the purpose of caring lovingly for the sanctification of its members is the necessary condition for anyone who wishes to be a Rosminian.

In his Apostolic Letters “**In Sublimi**” by which Pope Gregory XVI approved the Institute of Charity and its Rule, both the mission statement of the Institute and the necessary intention of those who wish to be part of it are highlighted forcefully. Not only does the Pope include the relevant numbers from the Constitutions, but in his own introduction he ratifies the purpose of the Institute, the sanctification of its members, that will be achieved, he writes, “*by leaving nothing untried in the endeavour to obtain a store of perfect virtue by cleaving to God through their continuous meditation on heavenly things... and by loving, helping and serving their neighbour in Christ with the utmost zeal.*”

Moreover, “**to become holy together**” must be the intention and desire of all who wish to join the Institute: “*The members, seeing the wonderful example of their companions, try to follow in their footsteps; they encourage one another in sound doctrine; they earnestly desire the higher gifts; modelling themselves completely according to the will of holy people, doing nothing of their own volition, depending in all their actions on their decision and command, they can more easily irradiate the brightness of every virtue.*”

Fr. Founder affirmed and clarified the “end” or purpose of the Institute in many of his writings, and especially in his letters. Writing, for example, to Fr. Luigi Schlor in 1837, he says: *“The end of the Institute of Charity is absolutely simple: it is goodness, that is, moral perfection, in all its extension, which consists in fulfilling completely the law of the gospel, summed up by our divine Master in a single word, charity. For this reason the Institute takes its name from this divine word which expresses its end and characterises the school of Jesus Christ”* (Ascetical Letters, Vol.3, n.37). And again, *“I want to remind you about your calling to the holiness of love. I beg each one of you to press on to your calling, that is, to holiness, which does not consist in brain-power, nor in human glory or achievement, nor in outward success, but in the practice of the virtues manifested in JESUS Christ, our Saviour and example, especially when He hung upon the cross: humility, poverty, abnegation, obedience, mortification, patient and burning love which contains them all...”* (EC 6:440).

Recommendation:

It would be most beneficial for postulants and novices to do extensive research on this theme in the Ascetical Letters (J. Morris) of Fr. Founder. They should receive guidance by their Formators who should themselves become very familiar with the main references.

The Common Rules take their inspiration from the description of the “end” of the Institute, inscribed right at the beginning of the first chapter in Rule 2: **“The end of this Society is the salvation and perfection of our souls”**; and the same single principle and seed is the starting point of our Rule of Life (nn.1-4).

From a didactic point of view it could be useful to display in a prominent place in our Houses of formation the following:

“The end of this Society is to care lovingly for the sanctification of the members who compose it and, by means of their sanctification, to expend whatever longings and strength it has in all works of charity, and especially for the eternal salvation of every one of its neighbours.”

“The Institute consists of faithful Christians who, in their ardent desire of living as disciples of JESUS Christ, our Lord and Master, apply themselves vigorously, with mutual help and encouragement, to their own perfection.”

The Constitutions and the Maxims on holiness

We know that the call to perfection is **universal**, addressed to all persons. Fr. Founder is very clear: *“All Christians, that is to say, all disciples of JESUS Christ whatever their state or circumstances, are called to perfection: for all are called to the gospel which is a law of perfection, and our divine Master was speaking to everyone when He said, “You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Max.1.1); “The disciple, then, must go on longing for holiness, until it comes about that he is consumed in charity, and he can say like St. Paul, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Max.2.5); “He needs to understand that all things must be subordinated to this desire for pure holiness. In other words, his desire for anything must derive solely from its capacity to make him more holy, and not because it has any value in itself apart from this” (Max.2.8).*

Why is there a need for religious life in the Institute of Charity given that the call to holiness is common to all disciples of Christ? Fr. Founder answers this question in the Maxims 1, 3-6, where he says that the three vows are very useful means to achieve more readily perfection. The vows are evangelical counsels not meant for everyone but only for *“those generous disciples of JESUS who actually divest themselves of wealth, pleasures and their own will in order to be more free to give all their love to God and their neighbour”*. It can be said, therefore, that all Christians are called to perfection but that some Christians want to pursue their call to perfection by taking the three religious vows in the Institute. It is important to stress the “unique quality” of the vocation to the Institute, which, apart from the profession of the three vows, is very much the vocation of every Christian.

This unique quality rules out as primary aim the direct intention of joining for a specific work of charity, “I wish to join because I want to be a teacher, a doctor, a missionary, a priest, etc.” Instead, we must indeed have “a great love for all works of charity”, but it will be through the vow of obedience that God will manifest to us His divine Will. We shall study later, however, both the “universality” of obedience and its “reasonableness”.

For reflection

Given that Fr. Founder himself firstly “chose” to become a priest and secondly “chose” the religious life, undoubtedly moved by God and carefully listening to His voice, what should a Formator’s approach be to postulants or novices who declare their attraction to the priesthood?

The Constitutions and Vita Consecrata on holiness

All baptized Christians are equally called to follow Christ. For some, on the basis of a special vocation and in virtue of a particular gift of the Spirit, their baptismal consecration develops into a radical response in the following of Christ: *“By professing the evangelical counsels, consecrated persons not only make Christ the whole meaning of their lives but strive to reproduce in themselves, as far as possible, that form of life which he, as the Son of God, accepted in entering this world” (VC, 16).* The call to consecrated

life is an initiative coming wholly from the Father, who asks those whom He has chosen to respond with complete and exclusive devotion.

The deepest meaning of the evangelical counsels is more clearly seen in the light of the Holy Trinity, the source of all holiness: *“Chastity is a reflection of the infinite love which links the three Divine Persons, Poverty proclaims that God is man’s only real treasure and it becomes an expression of that total gift of self which the three Divine Persons make to one another. Obedience shows the liberating beauty of a dependence which is not servile but filial, a reflection of the loving harmony between the three Divine Persons”* (VC, 23).

Fr. Founder identifies in Baptism the source of the universal call to holiness. Vita Consecrata equally states that *“everyone in the Church is consecrated in Baptism and Confirmation”* and such consecration *“common to all members of the people of God”* is the foundation of the call to holiness. But diversity is also a work of the Spirit. It is the Spirit that establishes the Church as an organic communion in the diversity of vocations, charisms and ministries. There is a *vocation to **the lay life***, a *vocation to **the ordained ministry***, and a *vocation to **the consecrated life***. Three types of vocations, all directed harmoniously towards the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Postulants and novices should have a clear view of the three possible types of vocation in order to establish more securely, with the help of their Formator, their own personal vocation. It would be plainly wrong, for example, to use the consecrated life purely as a means to become priest.

They should also be made aware of the excellence of “religious perfection” which commits them to making their own – in chastity, poverty and obedience – the way of life practised personally by JESUS and proposed by Him to His disciples: *“As a way of showing forth the Church’s holiness, it is to be recognised that the consecrated life, which mirrors Christ’s own way of life, has an objective superiority”* (VC, 32).

For research:

The Virgin Mary is the perfect model of consecration and discipleship. What has Fr. Founder to say about devotion to Mary in the Institute of Charity? (see the Ascetical Letters (J.Morris), and the Maxims, in particular, Instr. 6,7)

The universal call to holiness in recent Church Documents

Many recent documents of the Church stress the importance of the universal call to holiness. What follows is a recommended list of documents for special study, which could be very useful for personal and community reflection.

1. **Lumen Gentium**, in particular chapter five “The call to Holiness” (nn.39-42). The text is rich in biblical references which Formators should know in order to

- help those in formation (postulants, novices, scholastics) do their own research work in the Bible. The chapter establishes the source of holiness for the Church, Christ who “alone is holy”, and provides theological foundations for holiness in the various states of the Christian life.
2. **Perfectae Caritatis**, in particular nn. 1-5-6-15 that deal specifically with holiness and means for achieving it.
 3. **Evangelica Testificatio**, in particular n.7
 4. **Pastores Dabo Vobis**, in particular nn. 19-20, “A specific vocation to holiness”, and 33, “Renew in them the outpouring of your Spirit of Holiness”
 5. **Novo Millennio Ineunte**, in particular nn.30-41, “Holiness”
 6. **Vita Consecrata**, in particular nn.14-15-35-41-42-72-75. Of great relevance is the foundation of the religious life “in the mystery of Christ and of the Trinity”, with the teaching that religious life is a reflection of the life within the Blessed Trinity.

Biblical research on Holiness:

It is recommended that Formators research the word “holiness” in one or all of the following books:

1. *Dictionary of biblical Theology (Xavier Leon-Dufour)*
2. *Dictionary of the Bible (J. MacKenzie)*
3. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*

The idea is not to produce an exhaustive piece of biblical research, with quotations and scholarly opinions, but to write down the main theological concepts arising from the biblical use of the word “holiness” as outlined in one of the biblical dictionaries. For the purpose of our course, a general understanding of the various meanings attached to the word will be sufficient.

However, a detailed biblical study of the topics should prove very useful to postulants, novices, and scholastics not only for the actual investigation, but also as a means of acquiring that love for Scriptures that is the foundation of any authentic formation (see Rosmini’s Five Wounds of the Church, chapter 2, on the importance of the Bible during the period of formation).

What follows is an example of the approach that is suggested for Formators. It could serve as a pointer for subsequent research work on other topics. This brief work on holiness is based broadly on the Dictionary of Biblical Theology by Xavier Leon-Dufour.

1. The liturgy acclaims God, “**holy, holy, holy**”; all Eucharistic Prayers proclaim the holiness of God: “**Lord, you are holy indeed, the fountain of all holiness**”. “**Tu solus Sanctus**”, we repeat to JESUS when we say the Gloria. We also speak of

the holy gospels, of holy week, of holy places, we are called to become holy, and we celebrate the feast of all saints. *Holiness, then, appears to be a complex reality which touches on the mystery of God, but also on worship and morality.*

2. The Hebrew word **kds** or **qodes** (holy thing, holiness) has the basic meaning of “to cut off, separate”, expressing the separation from the profane: *holy things are those which one does not touch or approach except on certain conditions of ritual purity, they evoke a feeling of mixed terror and fascination (mysterium tremendum et fascinans)* which makes man aware of his utter unworthiness before the manifestation of the divine (the *numinous*).
3. In its common usage, however, *the word stands for the **essence of God**, for God Himself*. In Am. 4:2, God swears by His holiness (i.e. by Himself) and in Ho. 11:9 God affirms that He is God and not man, the Holy One. Isaiah created the title, “**The Holy One of Israel**”. The force of this title is seen in the inaugural vision in Is. 6: the Angels cry out in adoration, “Holy, Holy, Holy”, but for Isaiah the presence of the Holy One generates great fear and a profound sense of moral unworthiness, and yet also a powerful attraction.
4. *In creature, the quality of **holiness is derived from God** through some fearful experiences of the divine: God is the very source of holiness, and all holiness is derived from Him*. God’s presence makes persons, things, places “**sacred**”: thus it is often an “**external**” holiness imposed on persons or things by the manifestation of God. This derived holiness will become real and interior only by the gift of the Holy Spirit Himself, through the Sacraments, especially Baptism and the Eucharist, that make man a “temple of the Spirit”.
5. *God communicates holiness*: all places “**visited**” by God become holy (see the stories of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, for example); persons become holy according to their proximity to God (priests, Levites, first-born, prophets), even objects (vestments, offerings) and times (Sabbaths, jubilee years). It is the holiness of God that engulfs people, places, objects, sacrifices, seasons making them holy by participation.
6. *Israel becomes the “**holy people**”, the “priest-people” because chosen and set apart by God*. Thanks to an inexplicable love, God lives and walks in His people’s midst (Ex.33, 12-17); He manifests Himself to them in the cloud, the ark, the temple. This active presence of God confers a holiness on the people which is not simply a ritual holiness, but a genuine dignity, calling for moral holiness. It is in order to sanctify His people that God promulgates the Law (Lev.22,31ff).
7. *In the New Testament, the holiness of JESUS is intimately bound up with his divine Son-ship and with the presence of the Holy Spirit in Him*: “Conceived by the Holy Spirit, He will be holy and will be called the Son of God” (Lk 1, 35). In JESUS, the “Holy One” is in our midst: the Father calls Him His “well-beloved Son” as He receives the anointing of the Holy Spirit. He drives out demons and

they refer to him as “the Holy One of God” or “the Son of God”. JESUS manifests His holiness by His mighty works and His preaching, but especially by His perfect and constant union with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

8. *The sacrifices of the Old Testament conferred only “external” holiness (He 9,11), but the obedient death of the Son of God brings about “true”, “interior”, holiness.* The Christian participates to the inner life of Christ by faith and by baptism, and becomes “holy in Christ” through the presence of the Holy Spirit. They are the “temple of the Spirit”, they abide in JESUS, and through JESUS, in the Father. They participate in the divine holiness itself; they are the true “holy people”, the true “royal priesthood”. They must give God true worship by offering themselves with Christ in “holy sacrifice” (Rom.12,1; Ph.2,17).
9. It is to the Church and its members that the term “holy” is more frequently applied. The basic meaning is derived from the idea of Israel as a people holy to Yahweh (Ex.19,6 quoted in 1 Pet.2,9), which refers both to the union of the Church and its members with the Father through JESUS, and to the moral quality of the Church. Christians are those who have been made holy (Acts 20,32; 26,18). *The common designation of the members of the Church in Acts and in the letters is “the saints”.* The primary agent of the sanctification of the Christians is God (1 Th.5,23), through whose Will the sanctification is accomplished. God sanctifies through JESUS, who is Himself called the sanctification of the Christian (1 Cor.1,30) in the Spirit. The means of sanctification are faith (Rom.15,16) and baptism (1 Cor.6, 11) and union with Christ.
10. *The holiness of the Christians demands that they cut themselves off from sin; they must act “according to the holiness which comes from God and not according to the wisdom of the flesh” (2 Cor.1,12; 1 Cor.6,9; Eph.4,30-5,1).* This demand for holy living is the basis of the whole Christian ascetical tradition; it rests not on the ideal of a law which remains exterior, but on the fact that the Christian “captivated by Christ” should “share his suffering and death in order to arrive at His resurrection”.

For Reflection:

God alone is holy. It is God who communicates holiness. What idea of holiness do we have and how do we rate the teaching we have been given about achieving the only “end” of the Institute and of our vocation?

The Persons of the Society (Const. 6-16; Rule of Life 5-8)

Holiness is the end of both the Institute and its members. In the Constitutions, Fr. Founder will explain in a variety of ways what is the “content” of this word, what is the essence of holiness. But already in these preliminary pages he indicates clearly that holiness is first of all the fulfilment of the two commandments of love: **“Love God with all your heart and love your neighbour as you love yourself”**. The quotation from the

Bible chosen by Fr. Founder as the frontispiece of the Constitutions is, “**He who loves is born of God**” (1 Jn.4,7).

All members of the Institute must be consecrated to Charity, must be burning with love for God and neighbour. But in the practicality of life not all members will be required by the Will of God to exercise charity in the same manner. Some will be asked by obedience to exercise charity towards their neighbour in a pre-eminent manner, the pastoral care of souls; for others the Will of God will demand that they exercise charity in a more restricted manner, by working in a hospital, or by teaching, etc.; others will find that their state in life, established for them by Divine Providence, will allow them to exercise charity in a even more limited way.

But since they are all longing for universal charity and they are all intending to pursue it in accordance with the Will of God, then all can be members of the Institute of Charity, in different degrees. Hence, Fr. Founder lists four categories of persons that belong to the Institute:

1. **The Presbyters**, who make a full profession of charity and exercise charity in a general way, ready at any moment to give up their life for the sake of obedience in the exercise of charity. They belong to the Institute in the strictest sense.
2. **The Coadjutors**, who follow the Will of God in a more limited exercise of charity, either in the pastoral care of souls or in temporal works of charity. With the Presbyters they belong to the Institute in a strict sense.
3. **The Adopted sons and daughters**, who are prepared internally to live the full religious life and to dedicate themselves fully to whatever work of charity obedience may decide for them, but are impeded by some just reason; and yet they practise charity to the extent they can possibly master in their situation in life.
4. **The Ascribed Members**, who share the desire for universal charity and who wish to be united with the members of the Institute, fulfilling at the same time the precepts of love as best as they can in their state of life.

We shall return to the four categories later in our study of the Constitutions, and we shall then discuss characteristics and qualities, also in the light of more recent documents. It is sufficient for now to understand the profound link between categories and the exercise of charity. The desire for universal charity, i.e. the desire for perfection, is common to all: the distinctions are simply at the service of charity, according to the Will of God.

Session Two

INDIFFERENCE

Constitutions 17-150

Rule of Life 10-19

Rules 1-72

Brief Summary:

*Having established the **purpose** of the Society and the **persons** that make up the Society, Fr. Founder proceeds by setting up the structure for welcoming people into the Society.*

***Fr. General is ultimately responsible** for admitting all applicants, but he may delegate the Provincial who, in turn, may delegate other persons appointed by him.*

*Those who are admitted begin their period of postulancy or **First Probation** which consists of:*

***Examinations** (the gathering of all necessary information, the assessment of the postulant's desire for perfection; his physical, intellectual, moral standing; his resolve for perfection; his resolve for perfection in this Society)*

***Instructions** (three in all: on perfection in general, on perfection in the Institute; on the way of life in the novitiate)*

***Exercises** (adoration, meditation, prayer, examination of conscience, confession, disclosure of conscience, the Eucharist)*

Admission into the Society

Fr. General is ultimately responsible for the admission of applicants, but he may delegate Provincials and Superiors in the various houses of formation. *All members of the society, however, should feel the responsibility of welcoming applicants, directing them to those who have been appointed for the specific task: “Any member may receive the postulant as a guest until he receives a reply from the person to whom the matter was referred” (C19, E2).* This openness by each member to possible vocations is implied also in Fr. Founder's comment that “*it is right for us to co-operate eagerly with the promptings of the divine call, taking care to increase the number of the perfect, and of those labouring in the vineyard of Christ, our Lord*” (C21, E).

For reflection and discussion:

“Should all members of the Institute do more to promote vocations?”

There is a useful debate going on between some who argue that it was Fr. Founder’s express indication that the Institute should not seek vocations in an active manner but rely entirely on divine Providence and others who claim, instead, that members should feel the responsibility of seeking vocations actively. The contrast is really only apparent, both sides stressing two essential features of every vocation: the personal call of the Father in the depth of one’s heart, and the necessary background knowledge of the existence of the Institute, of its purpose and charism, of its role within the Church.

Vita Consecrata stresses the same points: *“Besides promoting prayer for vocations, it is essential to act, by means of explicit presentation and appropriate catechesis, with a view to encouraging in those called to the consecrated life that free, willing and generous response which carries into effect the grace of vocation”*; and again, *“A primary responsibility of all consecrated men and women is therefore to propose with courage, by word and example, the ideal of the following of Christ, and then to support the response to the Spirit’s action in the heart of those who are called”* (VC64).

See also Ratio Formationis 46-48; Directory 8-11

Fr. Founder recommends great generosity in the admission of applicants:

*“Our ignorance about those whom the heavenly Father may send to be perfected in the Society must make us very cautious about rejecting persons who seek to enter it. In this matter we should imitate JESUS, the divine Master and Lord, who says, **“All that the Father gives me will come to me; and him who comes to me I will not cast out”*** (C134).

This generosity has been highlighted in the booklet, “Seeds in search of soil” (19). Prominence is given to letters written by Rosmini on this topic, in particular the letter to Fr. Pagani of 17 November 1842:

*“As for accepting applicants: I receive all those who ask for this and who show me that there is some hope that they will succeed... The reasons for which I so easily admit people are these: 1- I am very much afraid of making rash judgments concerning my brethren, and so I am inclined to think well of them... I deliberately expose myself to the possibility of being deceived, incurring expense, and meeting with problems...; 2- This practice seems to me a way of imitating the kindness of our Lord JESUS Christ, who said, **“I will not send away anyone who comes to me”**. These are the words which our Constitutions put before us, and they are quoted in this connection by the most outstanding rules of the holy founders of religious institutes...; 3- The Institute is equally anxious and attentive not to neglect any slightest opportunity for good that God’s generosity affords it... If a brother of mine asks me for something, and I have no positive*

reason for refusing him, I must not only welcome him, but patiently and lovingly exert myself on his behalf, and continue to do so, until I am convinced that he cannot successfully become a member of the Institute... I should like these maxims to be followed by every Superior who has the faculty of receiving aspirants. They come from the Constitutions. It is simply a matter of applying them” (J. Morris, Ascetical Letters Vol. 4, letter 81).

The same letter is an eye opener about Fr. Founder’s views on applicants who do not seem to have outstanding intellectual or other gifts. He writes, *“The true end of the Institute (which we must never lose sight of) is holiness. We must take little account of everything else; and we ought to have a special tenderness for those of our brethren who are poor, disabled physically, or even mentally. I can assure you that I have just as great an affection for the simplest and most uncultured of our brethren, provided that he is good and holy, as for the most learned, or one of noble family, possessed of brilliant gifts in the sight of the world. And I prefer the former, when I call to mind the love which JESUS Christ had for the poor and the despised... So I think we should receive all men of good will into the Institute...” (ibidem)*

The initial interviews must be dominated by a spirit of great charity, providing the applicant with every opportunity to give an account of his desire to enter the perfect life, and of his gifts and talents, together with his weaknesses and shortcomings. It should be an exercise in spiritual discernment both for the interviewer and the applicant.

It is clear, however, that we must not hesitate *“to send away those whom we know, through positive indications, do not come to us from the heavenly Father”*. Fr. Founder mentions two such “positive” indications: the lack of total freedom on the part of the applicant, and a serious lack of maturity and of right intention which are manifested by *“inconsistency of mind, lack of judgment, obstinacy, disordered or seriously intractable passion, lack of true will for perfection”* (C135). All recent Church documents on Formation stress the need for *“a sufficient degree of human and Christian maturity”* in applicants, and whereas in most cases the assessment can be made swiftly and clearly, in other cases it may require time and a good knowledge of the human heart. Fr. Founder’s indications of what may not constitute *“a sufficient degree of human and Christian maturity”* are most helpful and psychologically sound.

Vita Consecrata on Initial Formation

The document recognises the “decisive importance” of initial formation, stating that the primary objective of the formation process is to prepare people for the total consecration of themselves to God in the following of Christ, at the service of the Church’s mission.

It stresses the importance of personal responsibility for one’s vocation: *“The objective of formation is to say “yes” to the Lord’s call by taking personal responsibility for maturing in one’s vocation, this being the inescapable duty of all who have been called”* (VC65).

It stresses also the character of wholeness: “*Formation should involve the whole person, in every aspect of the personality, in behaviour and intentions. It must provide a human, cultural, spiritual and pastoral preparation, and it should address the psychological, spiritual, theological, and pastoral dimensions*” of the divine call (VC65).

Thus, two are the important elements of initial formation: Personal ownership and responsibility for one’s vocation, and a formation which has the character of wholeness.

The First Probation

The Constitutions do not specify the exact length of the period of postulancy, leaving it open to the personal requirements of the postulant and the successful progress in the series of examinations, instructions, and exercises.

This First Probation is required for all applicants to the Institute, those who wish to embrace fully the religious life, those who wish to become adopted sons, and those who ask to become ascribed members. Obviously, the first probation will vary according to the different states to which postulants can be directed. We shall deal firstly with the probation of those who ask to profess unlimited perfection in the Institute, being free of all impediments.

The First Probation is an intense period marked by three interdependent types of activities: examinations, instructions, and spiritual exercises.

Examinations

Fr. Founder highlights 7 examinations, the first 5 proper of applicants to the religious life in the Institute, the 1st and the 6th proper to those who apply to become Adopted Sons, and the 1st and the 7th proper of prospective Ascribed Members.

The seven examinations are:

1. External information about the applicant, his CV, references, etc.
2. Assessment of the freedom of the applicant to the religious life (there are five impediments, any of which precludes a person from admission to full religious life in the Institute: Is he burdened with debts? Has he contracted his work to another? Has he children or needy parents for whom he is still responsible? Is he bound by ties of marriage? Is he presently bound with vows or promises to another Institute?).
3. Assessment of the physical, intellectual, and moral standing of the applicant.
4. Examination of the applicant’s desire to follow perfection of life in general. This examination must be carried out in concomitance with the instruction about the concept and nature of evangelical perfection.

5. Assessment of the attitudes and desire of the applicant to pursue religious perfection in the Institute of Charity. Simultaneously with this examination, he must be given an appropriate instruction about the Institute.
6. Examination of those who ask to be received as Adopted Sons.
7. Examination of those who ask to be received as Ascribed Members.

Instructions

There are three fundamental instructions which must be presented clearly and comprehensively by Formators and which must constitute the basis for deep reflection, meditation, and prayer on the part of the applicant. The instructions communicate the essence of Christian perfection, the nature of the Institute of Charity, and are a solid preparation for the Novitiate. **These instructions constitute the backbone of the period of Postulancy, as they lay the foundations for life in the Institute of Charity.**

First Instruction: On perfection in general

All Christians are called to perfection, but what is perfection? *“Perfection consists in exquisite love of God and of our neighbour”*. Those who wish to join the religious life in general, intend to consecrate themselves entirely to loving God and neighbour, without the distractions and cares typical of the ordinary life of Christians, who are also called to perfection. To love God one must do what is most pleasing to Him. What pleases God is **justice**, or innocence of life, therefore, the postulant *“must desire to purify himself more and more from every stain and become more pleasing to God”*. This spiritual work of purification requires the rooting out, the rejecting of every other love from his heart so that all his longings may genuinely tend to his one Creator and Lord. In particular, he must reject sinful longings, and also longings which, although not sinful, are an impediment to his total consecration to God.

The effort to become more pleasing to God every day brings with it perfect **“indifference”** to all the means by which God may wish to bring about the postulant’s salvation. This indifference extends to everything in this world, so that he may not love one thing more than another until he knows God’s will concerning it.

This **principle of indifference** is rooted in the firm conviction that *“all things and all human events are means equally effective in God’s hands for human sanctification, and that we do not know what will be good or bad for us. God has reserved this knowledge for Himself alone until in His mercy He makes it clear to His faithful servants who are ready to listen to His voice”* (C48).

In particular, one should be indifferent to those things to which people are very strongly attracted by natural inclination: to contempt or to esteem, to discomfort or to riches, to sickness or to health, to a short or a long life, to works of charity that one likes or to those that one does not like. In all these things, what matters is not the natural inclination of the individual but solely the Will of God. So *“anyone who seeks perfection must examine*

himself and ask whether he is prepared, even in the exercise of charity, to lay aside his own will and show himself indifferent to all things, in accordance with the will of God.”

Second Instruction: On perfection in the Institute of Charity

Anyone who has been called to pursue perfection in the religious life must start from the clear understanding of what perfection is. We have seen that *indifference* is already comprised in the general meaning of perfection, it is an essential quality for “*anyone who seeks perfection*”.

But now we want to know why a postulant who has resolved to love nothing in this world except the will of God and to hold himself totally indifferent, should resolve to pursue perfection in the Institute of Charity. Fr. Founder answers: “*After reflection, the postulant may conclude that there can be no safer way of learning the divine will than that of obedience. Moreover, he may wish to use the judgment and discretion of the Superiors of this Society to discern the divine will, and consequently make himself over entirely to their direction, submitting himself to obedience in all matters. If so, he can be said to have made up his mind to enter this Society*” (C.66).

What is so special about obedience in this Society? It has two distinctive characteristics: it is **universal**: “*Obedience in the Society is as boundless as the charity of God*”; and it is **reasonable**: “*Whoever practises obedience in our Society does not abandon himself to human caprice, but to the conscience of a well-informed religious... A Superior in this Society is a spiritual father and as such is bound to bear in mind in all things the greater spiritual progress of the members... Precautions have been laid down to ensure the choice of superiors worthy of ruling, and they are warned and almost impelled to follow the single rule of divine prudence in governing, and to command their brothers, for whose souls they will have to account, with perfect circumspection and fear and love*” (C.68-73).

Obedience with its two distinctive marks of universality and reasonableness is, therefore, the specific means of pursuing perfection in the Institute of Charity. Since obedience is “*as boundless as the charity of God*”, then even **indifference** in our Society becomes universal and more clearly defined: one must be willing to go to any place and live there as obedience requires, one must be prepared to serve God and neighbours in any grade, high or low, that the discretion of superiors may destine him, and one must be ready to serve God and his neighbour in any post that obedience will indicate as the will of God. There are three kinds of indifference, therefore, to every place, grade, and post.

Anyone who wishes to pursue perfection in the religious life in general must embrace “holy indifference” and in spirit at least be open to all charitable works. In practice, however, the obedience and the scope of the charitable works he will pursue are already limited by the specific mission and charism of the Order he will attach himself to. The Institute of Charity, however, is truly open to all charitable works, hence obedience and indifference in the Institute will have to be necessarily universal. *The distinctive mark,*

*therefore, of the Institute of Charity is **universal obedience** “as boundless as the charity of God”, hence **also universal indifference** as the necessary pre-condition.*

The postulant is not expected to possess already the perfection described but to long for it, praying God to grant it to him as he wishes to enter the “school of JESUS Crucified”, the novitiate, in which the discipleship of Christ is taught and learnt.

To enter the novitiate with the right dispositions, the postulant must resolve to rely completely on the judgment of superiors in all things, practising **indifference** especially with regards to the priesthood, to studying, or to continuing his studies.

It is true that, humanly speaking, to become a priest or to study is more prestigious and offers apparently more opportunities for good, but not if such positions should go against the will of God for the individual. It may be more pleasing in the sight of God if a person serves Him in the lay state or without academic learning. Hence, the postulant must acquire “perfect indifference” about such matters in the knowledge that “**every defect in relation to holy indifference is directly opposed to his calling**” in this Institute of universal obedience (C82-85).

“Holy indifference is to be employed most rigorously with regard to the priesthood” (C82).

“He should be equally ready to undertake or to abandon his studies if superiors shall judge more helpful to his salvation, and more in conformity with the will of God” (C83).

It is this “**perfect indifference**” (C.85) or “**holy indifference**” (C.85E) that will allow the religious to render God and the Church “the greatest possible service”, since only God knows what is best for the person and for the Church.

If the postulant is willing to embrace the obedience and indifference typical of the Institute of Charity, then he is to be reminded of two important consequences. The first is that the novice should be like an open book before his superiors, with no secrets, and with readiness at all times to make a full **disclosure of conscience**. The superior, “**his loving father**”, will be greatly assisted by this openness in order to guide him with a spirit of intelligence in the work of charity best suited to him and to the needs of the Church.

The second consequence will be that obedience and indifference will guide in all things the poverty he will embrace. In his heart, the novice will have an absolute detachment from all goods, loving poverty as a mother, in practice he will let himself be guided in all things by obedience: “*In this Society the human being and anything he may possess is subject to obedience*” (C.89).

For reflection and discussion

Universal and reasonable obedience is the distinguishing mark of the Institute. But how can obedience be universal and reasonable without the full knowledge of aspirations,

abilities, attitudes, spiritual gifts, and weaknesses of the brethren as envisaged by Fr. Founder?

What ways have Formators found in their practical experiences to reconcile the requirements of the new Code of Canon Law (630) with the “full disclosure of conscience” to Superiors stressed repeatedly by Fr. Founder in the Constitutions as the means of achieving “reasonableness” in obedience?

Third Instruction: On the way of life in the Novitiate

The postulant must be given every opportunity to discern whether he has a vocation to enter the Institute of Charity. It is important, therefore, that he should know in outline the main features of the novitiate he is about to enter. The novitiate is a school of perfection *“where the candidate strives under holy discipline and by God’s mercy to obtain the perfection he desires”* (C98). Training in obedience and indifference will have the predominant place.

In the first place, it is important for the postulant to know that relationships with the world, with friends and relatives will be kept to a minimum, and always under the discretion of the Superiors. The novitiate is like a “going into the desert” to meet God in the most personal manner, hence the postulant must show willingness to leave all things and persons in secular life behind, and be at rest in obedience to Superiors. He will have to set aside *“every earthly longing for his relatives and change it into a spiritual longing; he should love them with that love only which ordered charity requires of one who, dead to the world and self-love, lives for Christ our Lord alone, whom he holds in place of parents, kindred and all things”* (C100).

For reflection

Fr. Founder maintained all his life very strong ties with all the members of his family and with his many relatives and friends, as the many visits and letters to them testify. In the gradation of “ordered charity”, family, relatives, and friends have clearly a high position for him. However, we also know of the firmness with his parents when they tried to put obstacles to his decision to follow God’s call to the priesthood, and of the stern words he wrote to his dearly beloved mother. (On relations with the outside world and the family during the novitiate, see notes 12-13 in Rules of the Institute of Charity, pp.158-159).

In the second place, the postulant should be told of the way of life within the Institute which is directed in all things by obedience. He must seek what is most humble, and he must expect that *“food, clothes and sleeping accommodation are those of poor people”* (C103). He must obey cheerfully and with humility anyone who is in charge of him in any way, from the cook, to the nurse, to the Superior.

Moreover, the postulant should be well acquainted with the two guiding principles of the vocation to the Institute of Charity, the Principle of Passivity and the Principle of

Indifference. We shall see later the centrality of both principles in the life of Fr. Founder and in the Constitutions, but this is the way he presents them in the present Instruction for the benefit of postulants who are being prepared to enter into the Society C108):

1- Principle of Passivity

The foundation of all perfection is a profound awareness of one's own nothingness before the Almighty God. *"The power of human beings, who "cannot make one hair black or white", is nothing in the sight of God, and all things are in the hand of the Lord"*.

A novice, therefore, should forget himself and love a life truly hidden with Christ in order to please his heavenly Father alone, who sees in secret. He must remain constantly at peace in his own state as if he were going to die there, and keep free from all anxiety. He should not seek or desire for any change of state for any reason, this would be totally opposed to the spirit of the Society. He must be firmly convinced that if he abandons himself entirely to the Providence of God his Father, the Father Himself will look after him and lead him to that lowly or noble state and grade in which he can better benefit his own soul and the Church of Christ.

2- Principle of Indifference

Even though Christ merited all things, He did not assume any honour or grade or duty for Himself, but accepted all things from His Father, and was able to say, *"I came not of my own accord, but He sent me"*. Indifference predisposes the spirit for every possible form of action, but the religious is not moved to action by his choices, desires or personal preferences but by the will of God alone. If he has no part in any change, he can be reasonably sure that his present and future state come from the Lord his God, and *"have not been usurped by himself"*. The person who remains tranquil in his present state, and tries hard to carry out its obligations, truly has God with him.

The two principles contain the essential characteristic of Fr. Founder's spirituality and the essential spirit of the Institute of Charity, therefore they must be presented at once to postulants with the view of developing them further during the novitiate.

For research

There are many letters of Fr. Founder that deal with both principles, explaining them from various perspectives according to practical situations. It would be a worthwhile exercise to make a collection of such letters for teaching purposes and for meditation.

The six tests

Finally, the postulant should be told about the six tests that novices will have to undergo at some stage during their novitiate to assess the degree of their indifference.

1. The first test consists in making the spiritual exercises for one month

2. The second, in serving the sick in hospitals or hospices for a month
3. The third, in making a month's pilgrimage, without money
4. The fourth, in carrying out humble and lowly duties with great care
5. The fifth, in teaching Christian doctrine to children and uneducated people
6. The sixth, in preaching or hearing confessions (priests) or assisting the poor.

Fr. Founder sees these tests as exercises in holy indifference: *"The reasoning behind these tests is as follows. We have enumerated three kinds of indifference, to every place, grade, and post; each of the tests is an exercise in each type of indifference"* (see C117E2 for a fuller explanation).

The instruction is brought to conclusion by a final reminder that progress in perfection will be possible only on condition that the novice will have the "mind of Christ", will "put on Christ": *"All his efforts must be devoted to accepting and desiring whatever Christ our Lord loved and cherished. They would desire to suffer contumely, calumny and injury and be thought fools (without themselves giving cause for it), if it could be done without offence to the divine Majesty, or sin in their neighbour. Such desire springs from their longing to emulate and imitate in some way their Creator and Lord JESUS Christ by putting on His garb and emblems..."* (C119).

Examination of prospective Adopted Sons

The principle that justifies the admission into the Institute of both Adopted Sons and Ascribed Members is presented by Fr. Founder as follows:

"The spirit and purpose of the Society, which rejoices in taking its name from the CHARITY of our Lord JESUS Christ, is such that it wishes to pour out and share as widely as possible with others whatever good it may obtain by the Lord's grace" (C126).

The sixth examination is proper of those who desire religious perfection but are bound by one or more of the impediments mentioned above. These persons truly wish to belong and subject themselves to the Superiors of the Institute and to profess the three vows if they could. The Institute, therefore, desires to share with such persons the spiritual goods bestowed upon it by God, by adopting them as sons and cherishing them with all charity.

The examination is meant to ascertain whether these persons truly desire religious perfection, and feel themselves ready to undertake the religious state in the Institute if the impediments holding them in secular life were to cease. If they reply affirmatively, then they will undergo some of the examinations and the instructions that we have already considered for the postulants (C124).

If circumstances permit and the purity of intention is beyond doubt, then these persons should be asked to bind themselves more closely to the Institute by taking one or other of the vows after the second probation, so that they may profess, at least in part, the ideal of religious life which they desire.

Fr. Founder considers as possible candidates for adoption members of other religious Institutes if they should desire to be linked to our Institute by mutual duties of love of Christ and by the merits each possesses. This adoption of religious of other Institutes would be a powerful witness of the unity of all religious in the one Church: *“How joyful it is in the Lord to keep before the mind and maintain in reality the exquisite unity presented by the monastic state in the early history of the Church!”* (C126).

Examination of prospective Ascribed Members

Ascribed Members are Christians well known for their good works in their daily lives who ask to be accepted into a more intimate communion of spirit with the members of the Institute, sharing with them the merits of all good works, prayers, and every other spiritual good. Our own religious and all adopted sons are considered ascribed by right (C129E), and diocesan priests would be very welcome, since they would extend the exercise of works of charity.

Examination of prospective ascribed members consists of the usual background information, but, moreover, of the persons’ desire for Christian virtue and exercise of charity towards God and neighbour according to good order in the widest manner for the honour of God and the good of the Church.

If some Ascribed should desire to co-operate in particular works of charity they may form a pious or religious society with specific rules drawn up by themselves and approved by Fr. General. This will be called a *“Sodality of Ascribed Members”* and its associates will be subject to its examinations, tests and probations as their own rules prescribe (C133).

Vita Consecrata expresses the same desire for a stronger communion among different Institutes, and communion and cooperation with the laity.

“Those who are united by a common commitment to the following of Christ and are inspired by the same Spirit cannot fail to manifest visibly, as branches of the one Vine, the fullness of the Gospel of love. Mindful of the spiritual friendship which often united founders and foundresses during their lives, consecrated persons, while remaining faithful to the character of their own Institute, are called to practice a fraternity which is exemplary...” (VC52). A significant contribution to this communion is made today by the Conferences of Major Superiors and by the Conferences of Secular institutes.

“Today, many Institutes have come to the conclusion that their charism can be shared with the laity. The laity are therefore invited to share more intensely in the spirituality and mission of these Institutes” (VC54). Contacts with the laity take the form of a relationship that is primarily spiritual, but often such contacts also translate into forms of pastoral cooperation.

Exercises in the First Probation

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”, proclaims Psalm 111; Fr. Founder considers the “power and fear and majesty of the Lord” the foundation of all exercises to be undertaken during the period of postulancy, which are intended to purify the candidate from all faults and sins in general *“so that they may cast off the old man and put on the new”* (C144).

Adoration of the divine Majesty is thus the first and most important exercise for the postulant, and the exercise should go hand in hand with instructions about God, our Creator and source of all that there is. Everything in the Institute flows from the profound understanding that God is God; we must recognise our own nothingness and open ourselves to God’s infinite love: *“Create a clean heart within me, O God: put a new and constant spirit within me”* (Ps.51,10), and again, *“Independently of Me you have no power to do anything”* (Jn. 15,5).

The means of obtaining this state of blessed humility before “such great and adorable Lord” who brings us peace are two: constant prayer (mental and vocal), and daily examination of conscience. The postulant, therefore, must practice constantly both means, becoming more and more familiar with them.

But it is God who will do the work in the postulant: the purification of his heart and the love of God in his heart will be brought about solely by God through the Sacraments, especially Confession, and the Eucharist.

Five are therefore the most important exercises of postulants: Adoration, prayer (mental and vocal), examination of conscience, Confession, and the Eucharist. To these, Fr. Founder adds disclosure of conscience with all humility and sincerity to the religious Superior.

Biblical Research on the Principles of Passivity and Indifference

The themes of “Election”, “Divine Calling”, “Fear of the Lord”, “Covenant” would be suitable for deepening what Fr. Founder presents in this second section of the Constitutions. Formators may wish to develop these themes for their own preparation.

However, we shall base our biblical study on a useful booklet written a few years ago by Fr. T. Deidun entitled, “Rosminian Spirituality and Biblical Theology”. Fr. Deidun’s work is an attempt to discover the biblical foundation of the two principles which constitute the essential spirit of the Institute of Charity. What follows is a brief and necessarily limited and free summary; it is hoped that Formators will be able to procure for themselves a copy of the booklet which, I am sure, they will find very rewarding.

Fr. Deidun’s starting point is the rich theological significance of the Covenant in Scripture, in particular of the New Covenant; his claim is that Fr. Founder’s two

principles are embedded in the long tradition of the Covenant, the essential reality of both Old and New Testament: *“What is essential in Rosmini’s spirituality – his distinctive charism – is a brilliant reflection of the essential novelty of the New Testament”*.

The first Covenant between God and Abraham envisaged God’s continuing protection and blessing on Abraham and on the many nations that would issue from him in return for Abraham’s and his descendants’ obedience and faithfulness to God’s commands. Circumcision of the flesh was the external sign of the covenant.

The Covenant was renewed in a solemn manner at Mt. Sinai, this time between the God who had saved them from slavery in Egypt and the descendants of Abraham, the people of God led by Moses. God reassured them again of His mighty help and protection, the kind of help they had experienced over and over again in Egypt and in the desert; they would be His people and He would be their God. In return, the people of Israel had to obey God’s commandments which had been cut on tablets of stone.

The history of the people of God from that time was a progressive awareness of the incapacity, of the impotence of the people to keep their side of the covenant, with dramatic consequences which included the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile.

This is the background to three great prophecies of a future Covenant: the time will come when God Himself will intervene directly in the hearts of the children of His people and “make” them obey His commands. The three prophecies are the following:

1. Deuteronomy 30,6: ***“Yahweh your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you may love Yahweh your God with all your heart and soul, and so be alive”***. Israel had proved incapable of obeying, incapable of loving: God will circumcise their heart, that is, God will make them capable to obey and to love. God and only God can give us the capacity to love. We must look to Him alone to create love out of the nothingness of our selfishness. *“My capacity to love, and so my life itself – that is my salvation – depend on my submitting to an activity that is not my own, but God’s. My role is essentially passive. Implicit here is what we might term a “principle of passivity” based on the conviction that of himself man is radically incapable of loving with a love that can save him, and that his salvation therefore consists in yielding to God’s love-creating initiative”* (Deidun, p.4).
2. Jeremiah 31, 31-34: ***“Behold, the days are coming –it is Yahweh who speaks– when I will make a New Covenant with the house of Israel and the House of Judah; not like the one I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of Egypt. They broke that covenant of mine, though I was their Lord. No, this is the Covenant I will make with them in those days: I will give my Law within them and write it upon their hearts. Then I will be their God and they shall be my People. There will be no further need for neighbour to try to teach neighbour, or brother to say to brother, “Learn to know Yahweh!” No, they will all know me, the least no less than the greatest – since***

I will forgive their iniquity and never call their sin to mind". The Law of the New Covenant will be written in the hearts of people directly by God, causing people to keep faithful to the Covenant. Human impotence is overcome by the active intervention of the loving God; weak and ignorant human personality will be enhanced by the power and the wisdom that comes directly from God. Note that only here in the whole of the Old Testament we actually find the expression "New Covenant", which JESUS will use at the Last Supper to interpret His death.

3. Ezekiel 36, 24-28: ***"I am going to gather you from the nations and bring you home to your own land. I shall pour clean water upon you and you will be cleansed. I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give you a heart of flesh instead. I shall put my spirit in you, and make you keep my laws"***. Before the desolation of His people in exile, the God of Israel takes the initiative and creates the terms of a new covenant, a covenant which will be brought to fruition by the almighty power of the Spirit of God in human hearts. Man is indeed impotent: God will love in him, God will operate in him, God will pray in him. *"Not only does God transform man's heart and endow it with a new principle of dynamism and a new capacity for loving: but this new principle and new capacity is God's personal activity. God loves in me. That is what St. Paul and St. John and the whole tradition of Christian theology – Rosmini with particular intensity – will see as the stupendous novelty of the Christian religion: God becomes the source of my own activity, elevating me to heights which infinitely transcend all human possibilities, and at the same time declaring all merely human possibilities completely useless for salvation – refuse, as St. Paul will say"* (Deidun p.5).

The three prophecies about a New Covenant founded on the gift of the Spirit were brought to fulfilment through the Incarnation, Passion, Death, and Resurrection of the Son of God. The Holy Spirit, which the Risen Christ sent down from His Father upon the whole Church on the day of Pentecost, brings to fruition the immense benefits that Christ has gained for us. To be sure, natural man is still impotent and incapable of loving, and if *"he remains in the flesh he is incapable of pleasing God"* (Rom.8,8); we must recognise our own impotence and God's sovereignty, and let ourselves be led by the Spirit of God.

This is the good news of the New Covenant: of ourselves we are incapable of any good, but with the Spirit of God in us we have been raised to the status of children of God; by ourselves we are impotent to keep the law, but with the Spirit in us we are made able to obey and to love. *"There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ JESUS – St. Paul exclaims with jubilation in Rom.8,1- for the law of the spirit of life in Christ JESUS has set you free from the law of sin and death"*; to the Corinthians he writes, *"Of myself I am incapable, my capacity comes from God"* (2Cor.3,5); and to the Philippians, *"I am no longer trying for perfection by my own efforts, but I want only the perfection that comes through faith in Christ, and is from God"* (Phil. 3,9); and again, *"My strength extends to everything in the One who gives me power"* (Phil.4,13). Commenting on this last verse, Fr. Deidun writes, *"This paradoxical combination of the consciousness of one's radical incapacity on the one hand, and on the other of one's infinite capacity in the power of*

God – of strength coming to perfection in weakness – is, of course, common to all authentic Christian spirituality; but it is characteristic of Paul, and, as we shall see, of Rosmini, that they possessed it with a peculiar intensity” (Deidun p.6).

The inner dynamism of the New Covenant is manifested most clearly in John 15. The passage presents the image of the vine and branches, and JESUS tells us that if we want to bear fruit, we must remain in Him (or in His love) and He (or His words) in us; for He is the source of all our activity. Jn.15, 5, Rosmini’s favourite verse quoted very often by him, expresses most clearly the idea of the New Covenant and of Fr. Founder’s source of his two principles of conduct: *“Whoever remains in Me, with Me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for without Me you have no power whatsoever to do anything”*.

All purely human efforts, all human initiatives are simply powerless in achieving salvation for ourselves or for others. This is the conviction that should constitute the launching pad for utter trust and reliance in JESUS alone, this is the origin of the principle of passivity that makes us acknowledge our nothingness and at the same time the primacy of God in our life: *“Of yourselves you can do nothing, but with Me you will bear fruit in plenty”*. Notice the paradox: of yourselves nothing, with Me all things! Our passivity in Christ issues in unbelievable dynamism and power: *“He will perform the same works as I do myself, he will **perform even greater works**”*, says JESUS of the disciple.

Fr. Founder formulated this rich theological realities brought about by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit into the two principles which constitute not only his own personal spirituality but the essential spirit of the Institute of Charity as well. Drawn from the depths of the New Covenant theology the principles take us back to the gospels of JESUS Christ. The two principles are most clearly stated in a document entitled “Rule of Conduct”, written by Fr. Founder on the occasion of his entry into the Novitiate in November 1830, in which he gives an account of the basic principles of his spirituality and of the way in which the Institute grew out of them.

“I, Antonio Rosmini-Serbati, unworthy priest, had resolved to follow a rule of conduct consisting in the following two principles: 1- To attend seriously to the task of correcting my enormous vices and of purifying my soul of the iniquity that had weighed upon it from my birth, without going in search of other occupations or undertakings for the benefit of my neighbour, finding myself quite impotent to do anything of myself to his advantage; 2- Never to turn down works of charity towards my neighbour, when divine Providence should offer and present them to me, for God has the power to use anyone and even myself for his works: in such cases I would maintain a perfect indifference in regard to all works of charity, doing the one proposed to me with the same enthusiasm as I would any other, at least as far as my free will was concerned...” (Rule of Conduct).

Having stated the two principles, Fr. Founder gives an account of how his fidelity to these two principles led him to found the Institute:

“It happened that the Marchesa Maddalena di Canossa, foundress of the Daughters of Charity in Italy, several times urged me to form a Religious Society, whose aim would be the exercise of charity towards neighbour. Up until 10 December 1825 I had always refused. But on that day I began to realise that if I was to be consistent with the second of my principles, then I ought not to decline the undertaking that was being urged on me, if God should offer me the means; but neither should I seek out those means, for by so doing I should be going against the first of my two beloved principles. Secondly, I realised that if God should send men who came asking me to form such a Society with them, I should only be able to give them the counsel that I myself followed – that is, to adopt as norm the two fundamental principles that I regarded as reliable for the regulation of the Christian’s conduct. I concluded, therefore, that if God wanted me to found a Society, then those two principles should form its whole Rule”. (Rule of Conduct)

Fr. Valle considers the day 10th December 1825 as a “day of enlightenment” which confirmed Rosmini as a religious founder, under the special inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Rosmini himself marked the day with entries both in his Diary of Charity and in his Personal Diary:

“I have written to the Marchesa Maddalena di Canossa and sketched the first draft of the Society of Charity which has as its foundation the principle of passivity in all undertakings” (Diary of Charity, entry of 10th December 1825)

“10th December 1825. On this day I conceived in a flash the plan of the Institute of Charity” (Personal Diary). The only person in whom he confided immediately was Maddalena di Canossa. In a letter which conveys the intimate joy of his communion with God and His Providence, he writes, “The Sons of Charity have been constantly in my mind and even more in my heart. I have thought about the matter for a long time, and warmly recommended it to God. I wait further light from the Lord to recognise His holy Will” (EC, I, p.170).

The providential sign came in 1827 when Rosmini was at Milan: *“1827, 8th June – Count Giacomo Mellerio introduced me to Giovambattista Loewenbruck who proposed the formation of a society directed toward the improvement of the Clergy. I explained to him my idea of the Society of Charity”. Rosmini explained that he could not change nor modify in any way the two principles which he considered the foundation of the Society; and Fr. Loewenbruck accepted them (Personal Diary).*

“Rosmini never did modify those principles. In all his correspondence (from 10th December 1825 on), in the plans of the Institute sent to individuals and in the more extended “Descriptions” of the Institute, the same two principles are presented as the basis of everything. The Maxims of Christian Perfection, of which Rosmini says that “they are the basis of the Constitutions”, that “they contain the spirit of the Institute” and that “they contain the Institute of Charity in embryo”, are only a meditated application of these two principles. It is certain that these principles express the charism of Antonio Rosmini and the essential nature of the Institute of Charity. We could never

abandon them or their implications without replacing the Institute of Charity with some other society” (Deidun, p.10).

We shall have a greater opportunity to clarify even more each of the two principles as we progress in the study of the Constitutions, especially when we shall deal with Providence (the foundation of the entire Society) and with Humility and the Elective state of the Society.

For now we conclude the study of this section by quoting from a letter of Fr. Founder to Don Pietro Rigler in December 1832 in which both “passivity” and “indifference” are explained in a rather colourful manner: *“We must always remember that our state of contemplation must never be a state of inactivity, but a state of preparation, a state in which we build up enthusiasm, generosity and grace to be ready and fervent in the work to which the Lord may call us. We must remain in hiding like the lion in his den; we must live at home in contemplation like bows stretched taut, like spumante ready to spurt forth, like a pressurised force that will expand and explode with all the more impact when the moment arrives. It is necessary for all of us to have a good understanding of this elective state of ours. But since man is limited, it is better to tell the young religious one thing at the time and first get them to appreciate the inestimable value of a hidden and retired life committed to meditation and prayer: and then, perhaps at the first occasion when the charity that constrains us calls us to active service, is the time to explain the other part of the teaching...”* (J. Morris, Ascetical Letters Vol. 2, p.66)

Session Three

NOVITIATE

Constitutions 151-237

Brief Summary:

Fr. General grants the faculty for transferring postulants to the Novitiate to Fr. Provincial whose special duty it is to watch over the novitiate house of his Province.

Qualities of the Master of Novices: must be a most trustworthy person, the most suitable of the brethren, peaceful by nature, gifted with holy simplicity and lovable in his love of Christ, discreet, learned, a true father and teacher.

Discipline of life in the novitiate: novices must be eager to serve God in charity, according to obedience. They need much supervision and holy discipline in order to purify themselves from vices, to cultivate virtue, and to unite themselves more intimately with God. This will be achieved with the help of external and internal solitude, silence, constant occupation, disclosure of conscience, confession, communion, examination of conscience, learning of Christian doctrine.

Effort required of novices. They must come willingly to this school of perfection, knowing that perfection is the “closest possible union of man with God”. This is obtained by loving Christ, and in Him all people to the point of being prepared to shed one’s blood for them.

Perfection is obtained by acquiring for life the “tools of the spiritual trade”, which are: harmony of wills, love among the disciples, self-abasement, mortification, poverty, chastity, piety, obedience, simplicity, courtesy, encouragement in the spiritual life, good intention and the love of God.

The tests proper to the novitiate are meant to prepare for the contemplative life and the apostolic life.

The ascetical teaching to be given in the novitiate consists of three parts: teaching about purification of conscience, teaching about the acquisition of virtues, and teaching about union with God.

Bodily health is an important means whereby one is permitted to dedicate himself fully to God and neighbour. Bodily penance must not be excessive, work must not crush the person. On the other hand, novices must strive to live in poverty, taking care of material things as goods belonging to the Lord.

1- The Desert Experience

The novitiate is a “**school**” where novices strive under holy discipline to obtain perfection. Fr. Founder calls the Novitiate “**the school of JESUS Christ Crucified**” and “**the school where Christ’s discipleship is handed on and learned**” (C79). It is also a “**work-house**” where the tools of the spiritual trade are learned and put into use for the sake of achieving the closest possible union with God.

All efforts of novices are directed towards achieving three specific tasks:

1. **Purification of all vices**
2. **Cultivation and acquisition of virtues**
3. **Intimate union with God**

This school or work-house must have a clearly set “discipline” to facilitate the progress of novices in the three objectives. And first of all, the novitiate must create the conditions for a “desert experience” of the individual novice and of the community. Fr. Founder associates the novitiate with the type of desert experience that has been a fundamental means used by God throughout the long history of salvation. He quotes directly from Hosea: “*Et ducam eam in solitudinem et loquar ad cor eius*” (“Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her” Ho.2.14).

The desert is important in the religious conceptions and theology of the people of God. Israel first met Yahweh in the desert, and the exodus account through the desert can be seen as the type of the encounter of man with God. In the Old and New Testament the desert is the place where man meets God. Israel knew that it could not have survived the passage through the desert were it not for the protection of Yahweh who took the initiative in every threatening event: “*Stand back and you will see what the Lord will do to save you today!*” (Ex.14,13; Deut. 8:14ff; Jer. 2:6). It was in the desert that Israel was tested, often failed, and was saved: Yahweh will lead Israel back into the desert in order to speak to her directly and recover her love (Ho 2:14). Elijah also met God in the desert (1Kings 19). The New Testament allusions to the desert experience of Israel are frequent. It is mentioned as a time of testing and failure (Acts 7:41; 1Cor. 10:5; He. 3:8). The desert experience was also a time when Israel found favour with Yahweh (Acts 7,36; 13,18). John the Baptist began his preaching in the desert and JESUS passed forty days of prayer and fasting in the desert. This was for Him also a time of temptation. The period which St. Paul spent in Arabia after his conversion was probably a sojourn in the desert (Gal.1,17).

The individual novice, therefore, must see the novitiate as a period of testing and of purification, during which he learns to rely exclusively on the mighty power of God and not on his own means. Like for JESUS, his own desert experience will lead to temptation but with JESUS he will be able to overcome the trial. He will find in JESUS the fulfilment of the marvellous gifts that God bestowed on His people in the desert: JESUS *is the living water, the bread from heaven, the way and the light, the light in the night, the serpent who gives life to all who look on it to be saved. He is also our Promised Land.*

Fr. Founder recommends two passages from Scripture for constant meditation during the novitiate: Ecclesiasticus 2 and John 15. Here are some of the verses from Ecclesiasticus 2, that stress the inevitability of testing, of temptation at the beginning of religious life and the means for overcoming temptations:

*“My son, if you aspire to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation.
Be sincere of heart, be steadfast, and do not be alarmed when temptation comes.
Cling to the Lord and do not leave Him, whatever happens to you, accept it and in the uncertainties of your humble state, be patient, since gold is tested in the fire.
Trust the Lord and He will uphold you, you who fear the Lord, wait for His mercy.
Those who fear the Lord do their best to please Him, keep their hearts prepared and humble themselves in His presence” (Eccl.2 passim).*

The desert was also the place where Israel became the “people of God”. God wished His people to be born in the desert, and it was in the desert that they worshipped God, received the Law, and made the Covenant: *“The Lord found His people wandering through the desert, a desolate, wind-swept wilderness. He protected them and cared for them, as the pupil of His eye. Like an eagle teaching its young to fly, catching them safely on its spreading wings, the Lord kept Israel from falling. The Lord alone led His people” (Deut. 32,10).*

The novitiate is the place where individuals are formed into a community, being moulded by the power of the Spirit according to the gifts and charism of the Church and of the Founder. **The “rosminian community” is born in the novitiate:** *“Ecce quam bonum et quam iucundum habitare fratres in unum!” (Psalm 133).* It is in the novitiate that novices should practice *“to seek and desire the better part for others, in spirit esteeming all superior to themselves, and offering with simplicity and religious sobriety the external honour and respect required by each one’s state” (C164).* The community dimension of the novitiate must not be underestimated. The “tools of the spiritual trade” which will be described by Fr. Founder in C184-187 constitute the “magna charta” of the nature and modality of the relationships that are at the foundation of our “rosminian communities”

The idea that the Novitiate is the birth place of the religious community is also highlighted in Vita Consecrata:

“The community is the chief place of formation. Initiation into the hardships and joys of community life takes place in the community itself. Through the fraternal life each one learns to live with those whom God has put at his or her side, accepting their positive traits along with their differences and limitations. Each one learns to share the gifts received for the building up of all” (VC67).

For discussion:

What is the personal experience of Formators in relation to the importance of the “community” during the Novitiate and since the days of their Novitiate?

Fr. Founder teaches about the necessity of external and internal “*holy solitude*” for novices. The novitiate house, he says, should be established “*in isolated localities*”, and the novices should “*willingly break off with externs all communication by word or letter*” and “*should not go out except when and with the companion the superior decides*”. The novices should “*not speak at will, but observe silence*”; and “*generally speaking, the novices should not talk amongst themselves, but observe silence, except in matters of necessity*” (C161-163).

However, external solitude alone “*is useless unless joined with internal solitude of spirit, and desire to flee this secular life*” (C164). The means of achieving this internal solitude is “*to guard the gates of their senses (especially the eyes, ears and tongue) from every bad inclination, and keep themselves in peace and true, interior humility which must be manifest both at times of silence and when they speak*” (C164).

Idleness is for Fr. Founder “the origin of every evil”, therefore there must be “*constant occupation*” for all in spiritual or external activities. The reading of the life of the Saints and of the history of the Church is recommended, as well as the learning of various manual skills and intellectual disciplines. Novices should be instructed and become proficient in their knowledge of the Christian Doctrine, of the Liturgy, of various types of prayer, of the meaning and practice of the examination of conscience and of the more efficient forms of meditation. Moreover, the meditation and the study of the Bible, not merely as an academic subject, but as a perennial source of the Christian and religious life should become the daily nourishment for novices. It is through reading and meditating on the Bible that a novice is enabled by the Spirit to acquire “*the mind of Christ*” (C166-170).

Disclosure of conscience is an essential feature of the Novitiate. Fr. Founder goes as far as to say that “*no one is to be considered suitable for the Society, or be co-opted into it*” until he has shown readiness to open his whole soul to the novice Master: “*A full, clear and simple disclosure of conscience is considered as an essential part of the perfection we seek in the Society, and the principal means of purifying the soul from all evil*” (C173). We have already discussed this point in relation to the new Canon Law, but it may be appropriate to mention that there seems to be an agreement in Church’s documents about the fundamental importance in formation of a constant and open dialogue between novices and their formators: “*The chief instrument of formation is personal dialogue, a practice of irreplaceable and commendable effectiveness, which should take place regularly and with a certain frequency*” (VC66). For Fr. Founder the relationship between the novice and the Master of novices should be one of great friendship. The novice should know that in his Master he has found a friend given him by God in His mercy: “*A faithful friend is an elixir of life; and those who fear the Lord will find him*” (Eccl. 6,16).

In his book “Travelling Light”, first published in 2001, Daniel O’Leary writes about his “desert experience” lived in the high desert of northern New Mexico, directed by Richard Rohr, a well known Franciscan priest. According to him, the desert teaches five life-giving truths that need to be meditated constantly and lived on:

- **Life is hard.** We simply waste our time when we try to make life easy for ourselves. Life is a struggle, a “carrying of the cross”, a rough process of purification from all impurities and selfish desires.
- **You are going to die.** The desert presents this truth starkly at every turn, hence one is always aware of the mortality and impermanence of our condition. What appeared so important and worth pursuing suddenly becomes meaningless. The desert, therefore, forces us to purify our intentions, to discover the proper order of things.
- **You are not that important.** The vast and intractable desert helps us to discover humility as the source of truth and happiness in our life. And with humility, we discover the beauty of all virtues that are simply different expressions of “living in the truth”.
- **You are not in control.** The desert is unpredictable and cannot be easily manipulated. We experience our own powerlessness and the sense of dependency from God. It makes sense to abandon oneself completely in Divine Providence.
- **Your life is not about you.** The solitude and silence of the desert help us to discover the presence of God and of neighbour as essential to our own existence. It was in the desert that Moses, Elijah, and the Fathers discovered the mighty presence of God; and it was in the desert that Israel became the people of God.

It is easy to see that Fr. O’Leary’s “*messages from the desert*” can be reduced to the three fundamental teachings and tasks that Fr. Founder says are to be pursued with great vigour during the novitiate:

1. **Purification of all vices**
2. **Cultivation and acquisition of virtues**
3. **Intimate union with God**

And indeed, the ascetical teaching to be given “*daily*” in the novitiate must concentrate on the clear presentation of each of the three fundamental themes so that the “*will*” of each novice may be stimulated into action by the intellectual vision of the truth (C210).

Fr. Founder goes as far as to write: “**These three parts contain all the education imparted to the human race by the divine Creator**” (C217). We discover here, therefore, the foundation of the ascetical teaching of Fr. Founder, so that if anyone should ask, “*But, what is precisely the “ascetical teaching” of Fr. Rosmini, and of the Rosminians?*” there should be no hesitation in answering by explaining each of the three principles in turn. Fr. Founder talks of the “**threefold syllabus**” that contains his ascetical doctrine:

- “The first part concerns man’s purification which is never to come to an end in this life, although very special care must be taken about it in the first years;
- the second part deals with the virtues with which the Christian, cleansed according to the favour of God, must be adorned;
- the third part, suited for the more perfect, touches upon the union by which the just man, replete with virtue, is intimately bound to God” (C212).

The three parts cannot be separated from each other. All are inseparably bound to one another and are *“three points of view from which the same indivisible form of human perfection can be seen and contemplated”* (C213).

Fr. Founder traces the source of each teaching from a “single principle”:

The teaching on purification springs *“from fear of the Lord and man’s end, according to Scripture, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Ps.110,10). The saving fear of the Lord stimulates man to root out his vices, “lest he fall away from the end for which he was created and redeemed by divine Goodness”* (C214).

The teaching on virtue begins with acknowledgement and love of truth, for Scripture says, *“The sum of Thy word is truth”* (Ps.118,160). Here we have a most beautiful definition of virtue: whether we talk of charity, of humility, of honesty, of temperance, of hope, of faith, of prudence, of justice, etc. we are talking about a clear vision of the intellect that acknowledges and loves the truth discovered in each case: *“All human virtues proceed from the simple acknowledgement and love of truth”* (C215). The virtue of humility, for example, is simply the acknowledgement and practical love of the truth about God, the other, and myself.

The teaching on the intimate union with God is based on JESUS’ commandment of charity, *“This is the great and first commandment”* (Mt. 22,38).

Fr. Founder sees these three teachings developing over the course of salvation history, with the teaching on purification being more extensive and appropriate during the time before the birth of JESUS, the teaching on virtues being stressed more during the time after Christ, and the teaching on love of God and union with Him beginning here on this earth through baptism but being brought to completion in the after life in the joy of God’s presence.

2- Lectio Divina on John 15, 9-14 (C182-183)

The novitiate is a school of perfection, novices, therefore, should have a most clear view of what perfection is. But Fr. Founder wants to make sure that “this idea” is well understood and often meditated, and therefore he produces for novices a “lectio divina” on John 15, 9-14 that should provide an example from Scripture that illustrates its meaning even further.

⁹“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. ¹¹I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹²My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command.”

The chapter presents the image of the vine and branches, with which we are all very familiar. V.5, in particular, is Fr. Founder's favourite verse, quoted more often than any other in the whole of the bible, expressing with great clarity the essence of the gospels and of Fr. Founder's special charism: "*Whoever remains in Me, with Me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for independently of Me, you have no power whatsoever to do anything*". This verse is the foundation of the principles of passivity and of indifference, as we have already seen. Using verses 9-14 Fr. Founder provides us with a stringently logical explanation of the essence of our spiritual life:

- Perfection is the closest possible union of man with God
- We obtain this union by loving Christ JESUS supremely (v.9)
- The love of Christ must be operative, in faithful obedience to his commands(v.10)
- Christ's command is "*love one another as I have loved you*" (v.12)
- Perfection, therefore, is "perfection in the love of neighbour". We ought to be ready to lay down our life for our neighbour: "*Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends*" (v.13)
- Selfless charity must be joined with wisdom, observing the supreme order of charity which is known to God alone; hence the need to follow the "will of God" in all things (v.14)
- The will of God is known by superiors appointed by the Church, through holy discernment given by the Holy Spirit. It is reasonable for a person to submit himself to the direction of such people, "*chosen from many and tested for a long period, bound to judge the cause of others in conscience, and with the counsel of discreet men*" (C183).

This is gospel perfection and is also the perfection we seek to achieve in the Institute of Charity: novices should keep this teaching very close to their minds and hearts.

3- The Tools of the Spiritual Trade

The novitiate is a school of perfection and a workshop in which novices are engaged in the hard and meticulous labour of acquiring the closest union with God. Fr. Founder identifies 12 tools "*by the constant use of which the novices will work out their own perfection*":

1. Harmony of wills
2. LOVE AMONG THE DISCIPLES OF CHRIST
3. Self-abasement
4. Self-mortification
5. Poverty
6. Chastity
7. Piety
8. Self-denial and OBEDIENCE
9. Simplicity
10. Modesty
11. Edification

Three of the twelve tools have been highlighted by Fr. Founder himself, expressing the special importance he attributed to them: Love among the disciples, Obedience, Love of God. There should be no difficulty in understanding the stress on Obedience, since the specific characteristic of the Institute of Charity is “universal” indifference and “universal” obedience, as we have already seen (C66). What follows is a brief description of each of the twelve tools, some seen in the light of one or two modern documents of the Church.

1- Harmony of wills

We join the Institute to “*become saints together*”, so from the beginning there is already a most solid base for building up a perfect harmony of wills. St. Paul encourages us to acquire “*the mind of Christ*”, that is, to think in all things like JESUS, and to will all that JESUS wills. Harmony of wills is, in a sense, having also the “*mind of our brothers*”, a perfect unity which is both at the intellectual and the affective level. It is clear that it will not always be possible to agree with others intellectually, but every effort must be made to work for unity, for example, by interpreting favourably what others say or do, by listening or talking with humility, by giving way immediately to opinions of others which have been proven true. As far as the will is concerned, the novices “*should be eager to be first to give way to the wishes of others in all things, hiding their own will that the will of others may be done*”. A first consequence of working together for this harmonious concurrence of wills will be “*a delightful warmth of affection*” and “*mutual harmony*” among the brothers who will truly become “*of one heart and one soul*” (Acts 4,32). A second consequence is that prayers offered to God by a united community “*will go up to the Almighty: “If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it shall be done for them by my Father in Heaven”*” (Mt. 18,19).

Harmony of wills is the foundation of sound community life, and it is not surprising that Fr. Founder stresses this “spiritual tool” in many of his letters to the brethren. There is an opportunity here for Formators to ask novices and scholastics to do some research work so that the rich and profound meaning of this first step may become more apparent. It would be useful also to meditate on the exemplary conduct and on the words written by Fr. Founder on occasion of his trials and persecutions after the condemnation of two of his books by the ecclesiastical authorities.

“Deus Caritas Est” (Encyclical letter of Benedict XVI)

The Pope mentions the importance of the harmony of wills for building up a community of love with God and with the brethren. His starting point is the importance of acquiring “the mind of God” for a perfect “coincidence” of God’s will and ours; it will then be easier for us to build up a community of wills with our own brethren:

“Idem velle atque idem nolle – to want the same thing and to reject the same thing – was recognised by antiquity as the authentic content of love: the one becomes similar to the other, and this leads to a

community of will and thought. The love-story between God and man consists in the very fact that this communion of will increases in a communion of thought and sentiment, and thus our will and God's will increasingly coincide: God's will is no longer for me an alien will, something imposed on me from without, but it is now my own will... Then I learn to look on this other person not simply with my eyes and feelings, but from the perspective of JESUS Christ. His friend is my friend. Going beyond exterior appearances, I perceive in others an interior desire for a sign of love, of concern. Seeing with the eye of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love which they crave" (Deus Caritas Est, No.17-18).

2- Love among the disciples of Christ

It is clear that love among the disciples of Christ is the source and the purpose of the other spiritual tools. The spiritual tools are essential for building up Christian communities of love, after the example of the early Church communities (Acts 4,32). Novices, therefore, should be of *"one heart and soul"* and they should be united to one another ***"by an extraordinary bond of charity unknown to others"*** (C186). Harmony of wills is a direct consequence of this beautiful bond of charity: *"This affectionate union and agreement of will, which the novices have to seek in all things, must spring from their charity towards one another. This is the charity which Christ desired to see amongst His disciples when He said to them, "This I command you, to love one another" (Jn. 15,17)"*.

Vita consecrata stresses the importance of the mutual love among the brethren:

"The fraternal life plays a fundamental role in the spiritual journey of consecrated persons. I therefore exhort consecrated men and women to commit themselves to strengthening their fraternal life, following the example of the first Christians in Jerusalem. Above all I call upon men and women religious to show generous mutual love, so that every community will be revealed as a luminous sign of the new Jerusalem, "the dwelling of God with men" (Rev. 21,3). The whole Church greatly depends on the witness of communities filled "with joy and with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13,52). She wishes to hold up before the world the example of communities in which solitude is overcome through concern for one another, in which communication inspires in everyone a sense of shared responsibility, and in which wounds are healed through forgiveness, and each person's commitment to communion is strengthened" (VC45).

For reflection:

The building up of a holy community is a fundamental aspect of the Novitiate, and therefore novices must be placed in a position of living in a "community". What can be done when the number of novices seems to be too limited? Is it possible to interpret Our Lord's words, *"If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it shall be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them"* (Mt. 18, 19-20) as meaning that a true community is possible even with a very limited number of brethren?

3- Self-abasement

It is very easy today to misunderstand this virtue and to ignore it as a result. It seems to imply giving a distorted view of ourselves, in a masochistic manner. It is, instead, a spiritual tool which is at the centre of the gospel, and JESUS' washing of the disciples'

feet is the icon expressing it in a most profound way. *“He who is greatest among you shall be your servant; whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted”* (Mt. 23, 11): the way to greatness is through humble service, is through washing each other’s feet. Self-abasement is living in the truth, before the Almighty Creator from whom we depend totally, and before our brethren in whom we recognise Christ. There should be no place for self-praise, for boasting, for desire to show off, for arrogance: humility is living according to the truth and it is with a humble and contrite heart that we should wish to serve God and our brethren.

4- Mortification

This is another example of a virtue easily misunderstood today. Members of Opus Dei have been taken to task by the mass-media for their assumed bodily mortifications with various gadgets, which seem to imply sadistic tendencies. Yet, the modern generations are often prepared to go through the most demanding bodily exercises and routines to acquire the perfect body, or to train for competitions! They are also aware of the dangers of giving in to excessive eating and drinking, to drug taking, sexual promiscuity, and uncontrolled consumerism. They often express the wish they had the will power of resisting such damaging influences in their lives.

The spiritual tool Fr. Founder calls “mortification” is nothing more than exercises in self control in order to train the will to keep in order the demands of instincts and passions. In a religious community the “demands of the flesh” may well be of a lesser nature than the ones mentioned above, but there are always many occasions which require self discipline, self control and rejection of negative tendencies. Fr. Cantalamessa, preaching to the Pope and his household a few years ago, reminded them of the necessity of mortification, of renouncing voluntarily even innocent bodily comforts in the daily life, and ended up mentioning as examples, among other things, the excessive attachment to mobile phones, computers, and the internet.

It is important to notice that mortification is not an end in itself, but a precious means to achieve holiness: *“So then, brethren, we are debtors not to the flesh to live according to the flesh, for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live”* (Rom. 8,12). The result of mortification is life in the Spirit, is living according to the demands of love: *“Without mortification, neither charity nor tranquillity are lasting”* (C188).

5- Poverty

Novices should *“love poverty as a mother”*, and should *“experience”* some of its effects in discreet measure. Novices must learn to be detached from all things, to acquire the true *“poverty in spirit”*, which allows a religious person to use all things from the standpoint of charity without any attachment of the heart. Fr. Founder quotes from St. Paul: *“I know what it is to be in need and what it is to have plenty. I have learnt this secret, so that anywhere, at any time, I am content, whether I am full or hungry, whether I have too much or too little. I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives*

me” (Phil. 4,12). Novices “*must use nothing as their own because in heart and mind they have truly left all things for Christ our Lord*” (C189). During the first five-six centuries of the Church, many people embraced wholeheartedly holy poverty by choosing to become priests or religious, often leaving behind great riches and positions of power; it is clear that Fr. Founder wants that anyone who chooses to become a member of the Institute of Charity does so that he may embrace holy poverty at the service of the brethren and in imitation of our Saviour’s way of life (see the fifth of The Five Wounds of the Church about the profound link between vocation and poverty in the early Church).

6- Chastity

Fr. Founder is famously parsimonious in writing about this “*truly lovable virtue*”, thus revealing his profound reverence for this precious gospel Counsel that allow novices to imitate fully the style of life chosen by the Word of God. Chastity in novices should shine through the way they act, in their words, thoughts, and in all things. “*God looks upon them with such favour that Christ in his sermon promises the vision of God as their reward: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mt. 5,8).*

Perfectae Caritatis on chastity:

The Vatican II document calls chastity “*an exceptional gift of grace*”. It frees the heart of the person so that he may become more fervent in his love for God and for all men. For this reason it is a special symbol of heavenly reality, and for religious it is a most effective means of dedicating themselves wholeheartedly to the divine service and the works of the apostolate. The Council recommends mortification and custody of the senses as a means of keeping this virtue.

The document, however, stresses the need for a progressive education during the formation years and even for some form of testing: “*The observance of perfect continence touches intimately the deeper inclinations of human nature. For this reason, candidates ought not to go forward, nor should they be admitted, to the profession of chastity except after really adequate testing, and unless they are sufficiently mature, psychologically and affectively. Not only should they be warned against the dangers to chastity which they may encounter, they should be taught to see that the celibacy they have dedicated to God is beneficial to their whole personality*” (No.12)

For discussion:

The approach to education in human sexuality seems to have changed radically from the times of Fr. Founder. Is formation provided by the Institute on this matter sufficient and in line with modern psychological views? What recommendations would Formators make so that our postulants, novices, scholastics may become “sufficiently mature, psychologically and affectively” to embrace chastity wholeheartedly for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven?

NB: The encyclical “*Deus Caritas Est*” has much to say about the sexual dimension of love. We shall examine it more closely later in the course, when we shall touch again on “chastity” in Part VII of the Constitutions.

7- Piety

It is clear that Fr. Founder's words on piety come straight from his heart and personal experience. The piety of novices, he says, "*should be afire, and, as it were, ablaze*". And the characteristic sign of such piety should be "*hunger for the bread of angels and thirst for the wine that makes virgins joyful*" (C191). The Eucharist is the source and means of our most intimate union with God: as we receive His body we are transformed into His body: "*As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me*" (Jn. 6,58). At the same time, the Eucharist is the source of the unity with one another: "*Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread*" (1Cor. 10,17).

"From this one source, therefore, they must draw an unceasing love of God and zeal for constant prayer, along with love for one another" (C191).

"*Bonum est nos hic esse*" (It is well that we are here), said Peter to JESUS during the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor. The same words ought to be repeated by the novices who are with JESUS on the mount of the Transfiguration, their Novitiate. The novitiate is a privileged time of prayer and intimate union with the Blessed Trinity; the time will come to descend from the mount and to meet the needs of all our brothers and sisters in the various works of charity. This is what **Vita Consecrata** has to say:

"For an overall picture of the essential characteristics of the religious life, it is singularly helpful to fix our gaze on Christ's radiant face in the mystery of the Transfiguration. A whole ancient spiritual tradition refers to this "icon" when it links the contemplative life to the prayer of JESUS "on the mountain". Even the "active" dimensions of consecrated life can in a way be included here, for the Transfiguration is not only the revelation of Christ's glory but also a preparation for facing Christ's Cross. It involves both "going up the mountain" and "coming down the mountain". The disciples who have enjoyed this intimacy with the Master, surrounded for a moment by the splendour of the Trinitarian life, are then brought back to daily reality, are invited to return to the valley, to share with Him the toil of God's plan and to set off courageously on the way of the Cross" (VC14).

Benedict XVI adds the example of Jacob's ladder which shows the inseparable connection between "ascending and descending love, between **eros** which seeks God and **agape** which passes on the gift received". He mentions also Pope Gregory the Great who tells us that "*the good pastor must be rooted in contemplation, for only in this way he will be able to take upon himself the needs of others and make them his own, after the example of St. Paul who was borne aloft to the most exalted mysteries of God, and hence, having descended once more, he was able to become all things to all men*". Gregory also points to the example of Moses, "*who entered the tabernacle time and again, remaining in dialogue with God, so that when he emerged he could be at the service of his people*" (**Deus Caritas Est**, No.7).

The saints, writes Benedict XVI, “constantly renewed their capacity for love of neighbour from their encounter with the Eucharistic Lord, and conversely this encounter acquired its realism and depth in their service to others. Love of God and love of neighbour are thus inseparable. Love grows through love. Love is “divine” because it comes from God and unites us to God; through this unifying process it makes us a “we” which transcends our divisions and makes us one, until in the end God is “all in all” (**Deus Caritas Est**, No.18).

8- Self-denial and OBEDIENCE

The starting point for the type of obedience demanded of novices is to be found in the words of JESUS in Mt. 16,24: “*If any man would come after Me, let him **deny himself** and take up his cross and follow Me*”. The novice should be careful to avoid carrying out his own will, instead, he should “*abide humbly in obedience to others*” for love of JESUS. It is for the sake of JESUS that novices renounce their own will and obey superiors who take the place of JESUS, so that in carrying out humbly all tasks demanded by obedience their eyes are always set on JESUS.

Novices should learn obedience from JESUS Himself, who came to do the will of His Father and not his own will: “*He learned obedience through what He suffered, and being made perfect He became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him*”.

The Father, whose will is sought in all things through obedience to superiors appointed by Him, will reward His faithful servants by transforming the relationship into one of great friendship: “*A faithful friend is an elixir of life, and those who fear the Lord will find him*” (Sir. 6,16). Not “superiors”, therefore, but “friends”.

9- Simplicity

For Fr. Founder, to know and to acknowledge “being” is to know and acknowledge “truth”. Now truth in God is the Word, the Son of God. JESUS himself had said, “*I am the Truth*”. Therefore, to know, acknowledge, and love truth is the same thing, implicitly, as to know, acknowledge, and love the living Truth which is Christ, the Word of God. Hence Fr. Founder’s immense love for truth, and his insistence on truth, not only at the intellectual level but at the affective level: truth is to be known, affirmed, and loved. No wonder, therefore, that he should view sincerity or simplicity as a most fundamental virtue. Simplicity is to live in all things according to the truth.

“*The novice who seriously desires perfection will strive very earnestly to avoid all duplicity of heart and hypocrisy, which can be ruinous for the spiritual man. His obedience, his relationships with superiors and other brethren, his inner reflections, must all be free from insincerity. Even slight dissembling can cause a piteous downfall of the whole person if it is not detected swiftly and rooted out by a very thorough examination of conscience and careful scrutiny of heart*” (C193).

Duplicity of heart, this “*ugly and subtle enemy*”, is the opposite of simplicity: it occurs when our intelligence does see the truth but instead of affirming and loving it chooses to cover it and rationalise it with false reasons which then move the heart to love the fictions

created by itself. This can happen in a very subtle way, often without even thinking about it. And this is the reason for Fr. Founder's insistence on a most thorough examination of conscience.

The novice must pursue and love truth in all things, and then he will experience the truth of JESUS' affirmation, "*Truth shall make you free*". Truth sets man free from the lies that have the devil as their father. To lie is to be a slave, is to be in darkness to the point that man no longer knows where he is going. Christ alone sets man free, because He is the living Truth: "*He who follows ME, does not walk in darkness, but has the light of life*". He who follows truth is in the light. There are many references in Fr. Founder's letters to "love for truth" and simplicity, the spiritual tool which should have a special place in the hearts of the brethren. Here are examples taken from letters to Don Pietro Rigler and to Don Paolo Orsi:

"Try to implant in everyone a heartfelt love for truth and for all good. If we have an overriding love for truth we shall seek it everywhere, and we shall consider ourselves happy in the possession of it. And if we meet with truth in the words of a friend or brother of ours we shall esteem it even more dearly, and feel indebted to him for having shown it to us" (Ascetical letters, Vol.II, p.73, translation by J.Morris).

"Anyone who teaches young people must be firmly persuaded that to induce them to be "good" and to have a useful and effective influence on their souls, there is only one simple means: and that is the "truth" in the fullest sense of the word. I mean "truth" both in its natural and imperfect form, and truth in its supernatural and perfect form. This latter is the grace of Christ, which works secretly in them, and from which alone can come the salvation, the interior virtue and the happiness of man... Reflect well that truth has an eternal beauty, such that it never grows less, never satiates or wearies those who look on it. Rather, the more it is contemplated, the more grows the desire for it..." (ibidem, p.229)

10 - Modesty

Inner joy and modesty is the result of simplicity of heart. This is Fr. Founder's description of modesty: "*Wherever they are, and whoever their associates, all their actions, their laughter, words, movements, their facial expressions, general comportment, the way they dress, should be signs of holy maturity and self-respect, of watchful prudence and deference, and a certain attractiveness in the Lord, not a cause of disgust or useless sadness*" (C194). Modesty is essential for building up a community of love, and, with modesty, inner joy. Fr. Founder had already condemned "*that element of melancholy into God's service*" which is the sign of a divided heart and of lukewarm commitment to one's vocation (C47E).

11- Edification

The novitiate is a time of intense personal work of purification, practice of virtues, and sincere desire to serve and please God in all things. This serious work of perfection is

being undertaken with others, with a community of like minded individuals, helping each other in the common purpose of achieving holiness. As Fr. Valle remarks, “*The whole community, that is, all the brethren in their mutual relationships, are to be concerned with their own personal sanctification and that of others. The tools are intended for this end, to which each religious is personally committed although held simultaneously to co-operate so that all the brethren attain it*” (A Valle, A Rosmini, His charism as Founder, p.42). Edification is precisely this common effort to build up holiness in each member of the community, it is the reason for our coming together into the religious family. This insistence on the essential nature of the “community” is very easily overlooked since our own tendency is to affirm our own “individuality” and to work on our own perfection.

For discussion:

The purpose of the Institute is “*to care lovingly for the sanctification of the members who compose it*”. What is the Formators’ own view about the claim that this essential dimension of “**community life**” is often seen as secondary and in practice dispensable? Have we spread ourselves too thinly on the ground to be able to have “communities”?

12- Good intention and the LOVE OF GOD

The final tool of the spiritual trade is clearly the first in importance. It is what Fr. Founder calls, “*the most perfect end*” of all our actions and aspirations. Holiness is to please God in all things and to be united with Him more and more. Here are Fr. Founder’s words:

“In every action, they should try sincerely to serve and please divine Goodness for its own sake, and for the love and marvellous benefits with which it anticipates our needs... Let them be encouraged frequently to seek in all things the closest union with God. As far as possible, they are to free themselves from all love of creatures, and concentrate all their affection upon the Creator, loving Him in all his creatures and all His creatures in Him” (C196).

Fr. Founder wrote extensively about the love of God, but perhaps his most refined and warm treatment of it is to be found in the fourth of his sermons to his brethren on the occasion of their religious profession. Fr. Cleary defined the sermon as “*a work of high theology, a treatise of profound mysticism and a song from the heart of a lover*” (Cleary, A Society of Love, p.43). The five sermons deal with the five links of the chain of gold which binds all Rosminians together: justice, providence, charity, sacrifice, and glory (the last link could not be developed by Fr. Founder because of illness, the fourth is nearly completed).

Novices should be well acquainted with them since they contain, as Fr. Founder says, “*the outline of our society to which we shall belong forever*” (ib.p.6). Moreover, the sermon on charity is of outstanding beauty and clarity, a source for profound meditations and for encouragement in their vocation.

Formators should make great use of the booklet, especially of the sermon on charity; it should become a most precious text during the two years of the novitiate. Here are a few quotations from the sermon:

“Yes, all Christians have been called to the perfect life, and have been given the rule of charity which is the fulfilment and goal of the Law, and may indeed strive to fulfil it, according to their condition in life. Nevertheless, only those reach the summit of perfection who, detached in spirit and truth, strip themselves of all worldly possessions, and of all attachment to their own life. They realise that they have no good of their own other than God, and that their sole daily work and profession is God’s own charity.” (p.45)

“Christ’s charity, dear brothers, is simply justice at its most perfect. It is right to love God, and so the just love Him. “The righteous love Thee” (Cant.1,3). But in the lover the special, proper object of love is simply the will of the beloved. Whoever loves, desires the fulfilment and satisfaction of the will of the beloved.

Charity, therefore, means loving and, in loving, fulfilling the divine Will. But what does the divine Will want? All it wants from us – what a marvel this is – is love itself. The divine Will is manifested and summed up clearly and fully in the great commandments of love of God and one’s neighbour” (p.46)

“Because the indelible character left upon our souls in the Sacraments is our Lord JESUS Christ Himself, the brightness of God’s glory and the figure of His substance (Heb.1,3), so Christ is the great lover in all of us. He is our power of love. Love is Christ’s very own Spirit diffused in our souls” (p.49)

Session Four

OBEDIENCE (Scholasticate)

Constitutions 238-391 (Rule of Life 34-50)

Brief Summary:

The pursuit of charity is our constant vocation, but charity must express itself in practical works of mercy which can be as universal as the needs of our brothers and sisters. Hence, at the end of their novitiate, all members must be trained in learning and in other ministries of charity and exercised in them.

Superiors will decide the type of ministry for each member, after extensive consultation, on the basis of “individual capacities and endowments”, and other criteria.

Those found unsuitable for the Institute will be dismissed by Fr. General in consultation with the other Superiors. Decisions to dismiss must be made with great reluctance and with great love, as the very last resort and in spirit of fraternal charity for all involved.

At the discretion of Superiors, a person who has already completed his studies or training could be promoted immediately to the Third Probation after taking his scholastic vows (but see changes brought about by Canon 665 that stipulates that temporary vows have to be for a minimum of three years). In some cases, a novice may be asked by Superiors to extend further the period of his novitiate.

Approved scholastics are those who take simple vows at the end of their novitiate and promise to enter the Institute as coadjutors “to live and die in it for the service of God” (Note that there is no reference now in Canon Law and Rule of Life to simple vows). They are assigned by Superiors to learning and training for specific future ministries in the spiritual, intellectual, temporal works of charity.

Scholastics must remain in perfect indifference as Superiors try to identify the will of God for each. Superiors, on their part, will maintain a degree of flexibility in their decisions and they will “weigh carefully the natural inclinations of each member”, looking for the gifts and propensities the Lord has given to each of them.

Superiors will direct scholastics for studies or training according to: 1- the needs of the houses in which we live, 2- the need arising from work of charity which we already have or are going to assume shortly, 3- the inclinations and propensities of the scholastics, 4- the occupations which are most useful to the local communities in which we happen to be. Superiors will also keep in mind the importance of consolidating the works we already have, without spreading the brethren too thinly on the ground.

Formators in charge of Scholastics should be persons “noted for piety and doctrine”. They should preside over the spiritual life of the scholastics, which should not differ in substance from life in the novitiate, and they should take a real and constant interest in the progress of scholastics in their studies or training.

The scholasticate is a period of hard and sustained work both in the spiritual field and in the academic or technical training. Formators should, therefore, be very vigilant about the health of scholastics, making sure that the workload is not excessive and that sufficient time is given to physical recreation and vacation.

Studies, normally, should be taken in public schools and public certificates obtained. Scholastics should complete all basic education before beginning their specialised courses. Scholastics trained for the priesthood should acquire a solid knowledge of Scripture, of the Fathers of the Church, of liturgical documents, of philosophy, and of all theological matters.

Formators must be vigilant and make inquiries about the content of all studies, making sure that it is in accordance with sound doctrine and truth. If necessary, they must complement courses with private tuitions and lessons at home. All scholastics should be taught “the art of study”, or methodology.

The rule of life in the scholasticate should not differ in substance from life in the novitiate, with spiritual exercises and the practice of virtues given special attention. The commitment to studying, however, must be whole-hearted, meticulous, and thorough.

The “first Obedience”

During the Novitiate candidates are tested in many ways in the virtue of obedience, but the first real test comes at the beginning and during the period of the Scholasticate. Just before or soon after taking religious vows the scholastic is given his “first obedience”, is told by Superiors what kind of studies, or academic training, or technical courses he is asked by obedience to pursue in view of the possible future ministry.

It is true that Superiors are asked to exercise a degree of flexibility throughout the period of the scholasticate so that the first obedience cannot be taken as a definitive decision, whether one is directed, for example, to be a priest or a brother, to pursue academic professions or manual and technical work. But, on the part of the scholastic, there should

be perfect indifference and a desire to embrace fully the Will of God manifested by his Superiors: *“Whatever is decided and commanded in the Lord for these candidates shall be done”* (C250). Even if in recent times the Institute has destined nearly every scholastic for the ordained ministry, it is clear that for Fr. Founder the call to the Institute is a call to religious life first and foremost. He had envisaged a strong group of brothers dedicated to teaching, to hospitals, to manual works, in accordance to the indications of Divine Providence. This openness of scholastics to perfect indifference and to holiness through it should be the very mark of the Rosminian vocation.

We have already seen that in the Institute obedience is as universal as charity, but it is also reasonable. It is precisely this reasonableness that should guarantee no great surprises for scholastics with regard to the obedience given them. It is true that Fr. Founder uses the famous three images of the unfinished alphabetical letter, of the corpse, and of the old man’s staff to stress the perfect interior disposition of the religious towards obedience (C534-535), but on the part of the Superior there must be every effort to follow the light of reason scrupulously in making decisions about each of the brethren in his care.

Although Superiors must weigh carefully natural gifts and propensities, as well as experiences gained before entering the religious life, and all knowledge accumulated through regular disclosure of conscience (recommended but no longer obligatory according to Canon Law), there remains always an element of unpredictability in obedience originating from its universality.

Fr. Founder mentions this unpredictability when he says, *“After we have endeavoured in the probation to perfect in some way the will of the candidates so that for the sake of charity it may not reject self-denial and suffering it is necessary to instruct them in the different studies and professional activities needed by mankind”* (C238).

But even this unpredictability is very “reasonable”, because Superiors have to consider that religious have, of their own free will, consecrated themselves to perfect charity even to the point of giving up one’s life for the sake of love of God and neighbour. Superiors should be in a better position to judge the needs of all the works of charity that God has manifested as His Will for the Institute, and should, therefore, rely on the perfect indifference of all members in order to achieve the greatest charity the Institute can produce.

Superiors must do all in their power to know each scholastic well: *“Superiors to whom novices have been entrusted will note their individual capacities and endowments, and note the activities for which each of the novices seems suited”* (C241); and again, *“The Superiors must indeed weigh carefully the natural inclinations of each member, and as far as possible distribute duties to the individuals accordingly”* (C286E); *“It is left to the prudence of the Provost General or diocesan to decide the different occupations on the individuals on the basis of their knowledge and information concerning them”* (C290).

However, there are other criteria that will direct the decisions of Superiors, and these criteria must be considered in their proper order:

1. The Institute has Houses that need spiritual care and expert administration, therefore some scholastics may be asked by obedience to study or to train in matters that deal with such future occupations;
2. The Institute has already various works of spiritual, intellectual, temporal charity and Providence may have indicated new ones to be assumed shortly, therefore some scholastics will be asked by obedience to prepare for them;
3. Thirdly, the inclinations and talents of each individual must also be taken into account, as stated above.
4. Some scholastics may be asked by obedience to prepare for some works which happen to become more necessary and urgent because of particular times and circumstances.

It is not true to say, therefore, that a scholastic has a right to receive the obedience that is in accordance with his aspirations, propensities and talents; these must be taken into account by Superiors, but it is expected that the scholastic will maintain universal indifference, trusting in Divine Providence and only longing to do God's Will, whatever it may be, through obedience.

Fr. Founder insists that "holy obedience" must be perfect in our outward action, in the will, and in the understanding. Obedience is perfect in the "*outward action*" when what is commanded is carried out well; in the "*will*" when he who obeys wills the very same as he who commands; in the "*understanding*" when the subject holds the very same as the Superior, and considers what is ordered to be well ordered. The last of the three elements can be the most troublesome, either because what is being commanded does not seem evident to us and perhaps contrary to our way of thinking, or because we do hold a judgment contrary to that contained in a superior's command.

But even in such cases, "holy obedience" is the safest means for our perfection, either because humility and prudence in dubious matters should prompt us to agree intellectually with the superior who has a greater authority and overall responsibility than ourselves, or, if we do hold firmly and reasonably a contrary opinion, because the Providence of God desires our obedience for His greater glory, for purposes which are totally beyond our human way of thinking. "*In this case – writes Fr. Founder – let us consider the superior as the minister of Providence, and revere him as such. What has been ordered (provided it is not certainly sinful) should be considered in harmony not with human reason, but with divine reason which constantly considers all things together*" (C535E).

There can be little doubt that Fr. Rosmini himself put this into practice during the difficult days of the examination and condemnation of his two books, dwelling even more profoundly into the mysterious ways and reasons of Divine Providence. His prompt and absolute submission to the Pope and the Congregation is a beautiful manifestation of his perfect obedience to the Church. He wrote to Molinari:

“Do not be upset by the prohibition of my two works, because the only thing that ought to upset us is sin. I wrote with an upright intention, as my conscience bears witness”; and to Michele Parma: “Thank you for your kindness in wanting to share the nearly incredible vicissitudes directed by the Providence of God. When I think of it all, I am lost in admiration, admiring I love, loving I want to sing; as I sing I give thanks; as I thank God, my heart is filled with joy”; and to Fradelizio, “Do not be sad about the prohibition of these two books: God has allowed it: sit nomen Domini benedictum. I am glad because it is the will of God, where alone is our treasure and where our heart should be” (Rosmini, C. Leetham, p.402).

For discussion:

Schools and Colleges have often very sophisticated Career tutors that help students make their mind up reasonably quickly with regard to the studies or training they should pursue, without passing aimlessly from course to course wasting their time.

Given the four criteria stated above and the depth of knowledge of scholastics that they have, should Superiors become far more confident and decisive in directing them to courses and training suitable for their future ministries?

Persons responsible for the care of scholastics

The master in charge of scholastics should be *“noted for his piety and doctrine”*. He will have assistants with whom he will preside over scholastics and their training. Fr. Founder expects very high standards from Formators, not only in guiding and strengthening the spiritual life of the scholastics but also in their active involvement and detailed interest over progress with studies or training. A scholasticate, for Fr. Founder, should be a place not dissimilar to the novitiate with regard to the essential spiritual exercises (daily one hour meditation, Mass, examinations of conscience, Rosary, weekly Confession) but it should also be a workshop full of intellectual activities:

“Care should be taken that love of religious life and solid virtue does not grow cold amongst the academics in the heat of study. At the same time, there should not be too much insistence on mortifications, prayers and lengthy meditations. Study requires the whole man, and when it is undertaken with the sincere intention of serving God it is not less, but rather more pleasing to God and our Lord than spending study-time in these other works... For the same purpose of avoiding distractions, the students should not be given responsibilities and occupations entailed by domestic duties or other works towards their neighbour” (C351.E1-2).

Formators must have a real interest in the courses that have been chosen for scholastics. They must be satisfied that both teaching and content are solid, especially with regard to philosophy and theology, which must always be in accordance with the Magisterium of

the Church. In the Five Wounds, Fr. Founder deplores what he considered poor quality teaching, non-existent methodology, appalling textbooks in the Italian seminaries or universities of his time.

Formators are real fathers and guides for the “carissimi”, a collective name often used by Fr. Founder for our scholastics, and they cannot abdicate their profound responsibility both for the spiritual progress and the academic or technical training of their subjects. Fr. Founder insists that Formators cannot simply discharge their responsibilities for the studies of scholastics by relying entirely in universities, lecturers, courses approved by the State or even the Church. He demands knowledge of the content, certainty that philosophy or theology, for example, are sound and solid, and additional teaching in the house if what is being taught at colleges is found deficient (C328).

For discussion

It is often said that no one should become a formator without a proper “course”. Yet, who should care to check the content, the details of what is being taught at the course? Especially today, the time of often brief and superficial courses on all matters, how can attending a “course” bring assurance that the person has truly become a “formator”?

Should the Institute send persons out for courses on formation or should it devise its own course based on sound Rosminian educational principles and ascetics? What views have Formators about the courses they have attended?

It was Fr. Founder’s view that good theology is founded on good philosophy. As a young student of theology and later as a young priest he was engaged in giving lectures on thomistic philosophy and theology to seminarians and priests, long before the re-discovery in the Church of the greatness of St. Thomas. In the Constitutions, Fr. Founder recommends a thorough study of philosophy for the duration of two years by scholastics who are going to become priests and by others:

“There will be a thorough two-year course of philosophy for the more distinguished of the students to be raised to the priesthood, and also for others in different branches of study” (C323).

It is clear that a completion of a university philosophy course, which is often little more than a history of philosophy with little time given to the great Christian philosophers – early Fathers of the Church, St. Augustine, St. Thomas, St. Bonaventure, St. Anselm, etc. – does not fulfil the demand Fr. Founder is making. For him a “sound” philosophy which would be a worthy base for theology is the philosophy of the Fathers, of St. Augustine, of St. Thomas. It was a tradition, certainly in the Italian Province, that scholastics destined to the priesthood had to do a two years course on Rosminian philosophy before starting their theology. The reasoning is easily understandable.

Fr. Founder’s philosophy is the most comprehensive Christian philosophy of all times, ranging from epistemology to anthropology, from psychology to ethics, from the

philosophy of right to the philosophy of politics. His theosophy is an incredible and daring attempt to dwell in the depth of being, where he finds the most profound link and continuity between natural philosophy and theology.

If this is the case, is it not obvious that Rosminian philosophy should be offered to all our scholastics for a period of two years prior to their undertaking studies in theology or in other disciplines? From the solid base of Rosminian philosophy our scholastics would be in a position of assessing, evaluating, understanding, criticising, and enriching all their subsequent studies.

For discussion

It may prove difficult at the moment to organise a two years Rosminian philosophy course for all scholastics, but would Formators appreciate a detailed and thorough programme that would allow scholastics to cover methodically and fully, over the years of the scholasticate, for a period of a month a year, the fundamental aspects of Rosminian philosophy?

Fr. Founder stresses also the desirability for “internationalisation” in the formation of our scholastics, based on our call to universal charity. He writes, “*Scholastics need to be taught how to comport themselves as workers in this Society whose members have to live in so many different parts of the world and with so many different types of persons*” (C372). He stresses the importance of learning foreign languages and of having houses of mixed nationalities (C310-320).

Fr. Hegarty, in his booklet, “Seeds in search of soil” has a perceptive page on this important aspect of the formation of scholastics. He quotes from a letter of Fr. Founder to Puecher in 1837: “*I consider it of great value that we have mixed Communities of persons coming from more than one nation*” (EC 6:288), and then from another in which Fr. Founder speaks about the novitiate as the place which teaches the “*virtues of universal charity on which our Institute is founded and to obtain this end it will help enormously if persons of different nationalities are together; they will learn from each other*” (EC 6:631). Fr. Hegarty concludes, “*Internationalisation, then, is implicit in our charism and the experience of formation in an international setting is enriching without in any way diminishing the particular cultural values of the participants*” (Hegarty, n.22)

The Dismissal of those found unsuitable

Fr. Founder gives this matter a rather lengthy treatment, from no. 251 to no. 275. His general message is clear: Superiors must dismiss with extreme prudence, after extensive consultation, with loving care for the spiritual welfare of the person to be dismissed. Members must not be kept in “*at all costs*”, but they must not be given the idea that “*the way out is open without difficulty*” (C275).

Five are the main reasons for dismissal, but in each case every possible avenue must be explored before the decision is taken (see C253-257).

Three groups of people must be fully satisfied that the dismissal has been done with prudence and loving care, 1- the person who dismisses; 2- the person dismissed; 3- all members of the household.

The person who dismisses must pray beforehand that the Lord may show clearly his most holy will; he must ask the advice of other responsible superiors; he must reach his decision only on the basis of the greater glory of God and the particular and common good.

The person dismissed should as far as possible leave the house without disgrace or loss of his good name; he should be dismissed “*with every possible consolation in the Lord*”; he should be guided about choosing another way of serving the Lord outside.

Members of the household should be given a sufficient reason for the dismissal to prevent disquiet among them, and they should continue to pray for and to love him in Christ.

Obedience in Vita Consecrata and in Perfectae Caritatis

Religious life is a gift to the Church and a prophetic witness. Obedience challenges that view of freedom which separates this fundamental human good from its essential relationship to the truth and to moral norms. A freedom which is disjointed from obedience to God and to objective ethical principles leads to slavery, injustice, even violence. This view of obedience as a source of inner freedom and as a proclamation of true freedom in our world is an essential characteristic of obedience, which is not, however, readily considered and appreciated.

The vow of obedience re-proposes the obedience of Christ to the Father and testifies that there is no contradiction between obedience and freedom. “*Indeed, the Son’s attitude discloses the mystery of human freedom as the path of obedience to the Father’s will, and the mystery of obedience as the path to the gradual conquest of true freedom. By obedience the consecrated persons intend to show their awareness of being children of the Father, as a result of which they wish to take the Father’s will as their daily bread (Jn 4:34), as their rock, their joy, their shield and their fortress (Ps. 18:2)*” (VC 91).

There was no fear in Christ’s obedience to the will of the Father, but pure relation of love. There should be no fear in the hearts of religious persons but their obedience should be simply living in the truth, a voluntary relation of love with the Father. The Will of the Father is, therefore, the whole truth for us and the means of achieving our own perfection. Holiness, our own perfection, is to do the Father’s Will in the freedom of the children of God. This profound truth about the nature of obedience is contained eminently in Fr. Founder’s insistence on the “voluntariness” of obedience and on “holy indifference”. Vocation to the Institute of Charity is, therefore, a **call to live in utter freedom**.

Obedience is, for Fr. Founder, the royal way of knowing the will of the Father, and thus of achieving perfection through universal charity. The Institute is consecrated to charity and to the greatest possible increase of charity in the Church and in the world. Obedience makes this task more effective and fruitful, because the longing and the strength of the individuals are joined together in the same direction under Superiors that have the achievement of the greatest possible charity as their aim. Both Vita Consecrata and Perfectae Caritatis make the same point:

“This testimony of consecration takes on special meaning in religious life because of the community dimension which marks it. The fraternal life is the privileged place in which to discern and accept God’s will, and to walk together with one mind and heart. Obedience, enlivened by charity, unites the members of an Institute in the same witness and the same mission, while respecting the diversity of gifts and individual personalities” (VC 92).

“Religious should be humbly submissive to their superiors, in a spirit of faith and of love for God’s will, and in accordance with their rules and constitutions. They should bring their powers of intellect and will and their gifts of nature and grace to bear on the executions of commands, realising that they are contributing towards the building up of the Body of Christ. In this way, far from lowering the dignity of the human person, religious obedience leads it to maturity by extending the freedom of the sons of God” (PC 14).

For reflection:

There is widespread “fear” in the heart of many people today, for many reasons. This fear is often present among our scholastics. We can help them overcome their fears by a presentation of the true meaning of obedience, which is to live in the utter freedom of the children of God. But do we readily associate obedience with freedom and love of God? Or does a wrong interpretation of obedience lead to more fear and anxiety? What is the experience of Formators in relation to fear and obedience?

Obedience in Scripture

The theme of Obedience and the Will of God should be explored in detail in the many biblical dictionaries. Those in formation would benefit greatly from extensive research work on the theme; they could be asked, for example, to prepare a written paper on “Obedience and the Will of God in Scripture”.

Xavier Leon-Dufour in his Dictionary of Biblical Theology begins the examination of the theme of Obedience with a brief and rich statement:

“Obedience is far from being an endured constraint and a passive compliance; it is, rather, the free adherence to the plan of God still enclosed in mystery but proposed by the Word of faith; and this obedience permits man to make of his life a service of God and an entrance into His joy” (p.397).

He develops the theme under 4 headings:

1. **Creation obeys God.** The God of the Old Testament is presented as the Creator and Master of all things, and all things obey Him joyfully. In the New Testament, JESUS is presented as calming the storm or casting out demons, as the one whom *“the winds and the sea obey”* (Mt 8,27). But more than the silence of the universe acknowledging its Master and the darkness over the whole earth at the moment of His death, what the Bible wonders at and expresses in outbursts of thanksgiving is the joyous enthusiasm of creatures responding in haste to the voice of God: *“The stars shine... in joy; He calls them and they say: “Here we are!” and they shine with joy for Him who has created them”* (Ba 3,34; Ps. 104,4; Si 42,23; 43,16-26).
2. **The drama of disobedience.** From the very beginning, Adam disobeys God, involving all his descendants in his rebellion (Rom. 5,19). The revolt of Adam shows, by contrast what obedience is: it is the submission of man to the will of God, who has a plan to fulfil, a universe to bring to perfection. To save mankind, God stirs up the faith of Abraham; and to assure Himself of that faith, He makes it pass through obedience: *“Leave your country... Walk in my presence and be perfect... Take your son and offer him as a holocaust”* (Gen. passim). The whole existence of Abraham rests on the Word of God, obedience is for him a test, a trial from God (22,1), and for God a priceless witness: *“You have not refused me your son, your only son”* (Gen.22,16). The Covenant is based on obedience: *“All that Yahweh has spoken, we shall heed and do”* responds Israel in adhering to the pact which God proposes to it (Ex.24,7). Fidelity to the Law is not the submission of a slave, but an attitude of love: *“Those who love Me keep my commandments”* (Ex.20,6); Deuteronomy repeats and develops the idea (Dt. 11,13,22); the Psalms celebrate the Law as the great gift of God’s love to men and the source of an obedience of love (Ps. 19, 8-11; 119).
3. **Christ, our Obedience.** But who obeys God? Israel is *“a rebellious house”* (Ez. 2,5), *“sons in revolt”* (Isa. 1,2), *“glorying in the Law, it dishonours God in transgressing it”* (Rom. 2,23). Slave of sin, man, who nevertheless aspires to obedience in his depths, is incapable of obeying God (Rom. 7,14). To arrive at this point, to *“find the Law at the heart of his being”* (Jer. 31,33) it is necessary that God send His Servant, *“Behold, I come to do your will”* (Ps.40,7). *“For just as by the disobedience of the one man the many were constituted sinners, so also by the obedience of the one the many will be constituted just”* (Rom. 5,19). The obedience of JESUS Christ is our salvation and enables us once again to discover obedience to God. The life of JESUS was, from “His entrance into the world” (He 10,5) and “until His death on the cross” (Phil. 2,8), obedience.

4. **The obedience of the Christian.** Having become through His obedience “*the Lord*” (Phil. 2,11) and clothed with “*all power in heaven and on earth*” (Mt. 28,18), JESUS Christ has a right to the obedience of every creature. It is through Him, through obedience to His gospel and to the word of His Church (2 Thess. 3,14; Mt. 10,40) that man attains God in faith. Obedience to the Church and to the authority of those approved by the Church brings salvation and the certainty of doing God’s will: “*He who hears you, hears Me*” (Lk. 10,16).

Session Five

LIFE OF PRAYER (Third Probation)

Constitutions 392-418 (Rule of Life 51-58)

Brief Summary

The final year of probation done in our houses after studies and professional training is called Third Probation.

In the Third Probation the candidate must acquire “final perfection” as far as possible, especially in charity, humility, meekness, patience, and intimate familiarity with God.

The faculty of admitting to the Third Probation resides with the General and those to whom he delegates this faculty.

At their entry into the Third Probation candidates will be asked whether they remain firm in their resolve for religious life.

The Third Probation is like a second, higher Novitiate, hence all efforts must be directed to achieve a more intimate union with God through prayer, mortification, silence, meditation on the Scripture and on the Fathers, and the guidance of the spiritual director.

Candidates will be taught the third part of ascetics, which treats of intimate union between human beings and God and the perfect consecration to love of God and neighbour.

The Superior in charge of those in the Third Probation shall be a person of a certain authority who ought, if possible, to have had experience of governing others and for whom candidates would have great esteem.

Candidates should not be made Coadjutors of the Society immediately after their academic or professional training, but should be exercised in some ministry of charity for one, two, three or five years, either before or after the Third Probation. Real virtue proved in action is needed for our way of life, a veneer of virtue is not sufficient.

Fr. Bertetti's account of the words spoken by Fr. Founder as he handed over to him the final and authoritative copy of the Constitutions, as his last solemn testament just before his death, could be seen as a warning against any changes and innovations that deviate from what is written in the Constitutions:

"...In order not to change the nature of the Institute it is necessary to observe faithfully all that it is set out in the Constitutions. It could happen that the reason for some enactment is not seen at first sight. But I assure you that I have studied everything profoundly and that with patient meditation you will find a reason for it all" (see Constitutions, Translator's Preface).

The point, however, which is often neglected but of great importance, is that Fr. Founder is extremely "*flexible*", allowing for a variety of possible situations and actions. Expressions such as "*as far as possible*", "*at the discretion of the Superior*", "*it is left to the prudence of the superior to decide*" abound throughout the Constitutions. There is even a passage, which could be applied easily to other situations, that reads, "*A case can be visualised in which the anointing of the Holy Spirit, rather than simple human foresight, suggests to superiors something different from that laid down here*" (C568 E2).

This flexibility and openness is evident especially in the Sections that deal with formation, as one would expect from Fr. Founder, who places the most profound respect for each individual person at the centre of all educational endeavours. In the article, quoted elsewhere and entitled, "*Rosminian Spirituality and Biblical Theology*", Fr. T. Deidun makes the very same point in the much wider context of the end or purpose of the Institute itself:

"We exist as an Institute for one purpose: to form loving individuals. In that case, the whole attention of the Institute must be focussed on the person of its present members: not on organisation, government, structures or works: but on the person. We exist for the person. The other things are important; some of them extremely important: but they must take second place to the person" (pp.19-20).

The Third Probation brings about the end of scholasticate years, according to the progress and the discerning decisions made by both Superiors and the individual person. Essentially a period of studies and of professional or technical training, against the constant background of spiritual engagement and progression, the scholasticate is the "*learning*" period for the religious.

At the end of it and before the heat of the immersion in practical works of charity, the Third Probation is a year of pause, a kind of second and higher novitiate, a year of intense personal prayer and of intimate union with God.

Coadjutor vows, for Fr. Founder, should not follow immediately at the end of the Third Probation. There is another important stage for the religious who has "*learned so much*" during the scholasticate: he has to put all his learning into practice, he has to be tested by the fire of practical and continuous engagement in the ministry chosen for him by

obedience. It is only at the end of “one, two, three or five years” of active life in the ministry that the religious will be finally asked to make his definitive and wholehearted commitment to the Institute by taking the Coadjutor vows, that seal the whole period of formation of the religious.

“They should not be made coadjutors of the Society immediately after their academic or professional training, but should be exercised in some ministry of charity for one, two, three or five years, either before or after the third probation... Real virtue proved in action is needed for our way of life; a veneer of virtue is not sufficient. The love of God, which they have obtained for themselves during the novitiate, must be translated into love of their neighbour so that the fervour of charity which glowed in the quiet of contemplation may burn in works of active life” (C414).

Writing to Puecher in 1837, Fr. Founder says, “... one thing we must never do and that is: admit to the grade of Coadjutor those who have not given **practical** proof of being filled with the spirit of the Institute” (EC6: 497 emphasis in the text).

We shall see in the next session the precise meaning of the “grade” of Coadjutor in the Institute, and discuss, perhaps, whether the new rule of making perpetual and Coadjutor vows at the end of the Third Probation (Rule of Life no.57) makes it more difficult to understand the precise significance of the grade of “Coadjutor” whilst giving a different slant to the whole purpose of the Third Probation. At the time of Fr. Founder, simple or “scholastic” vows were taken at the end of the novitiate and such vows were “perpetual” (C444).

Coadjutor vows, expressing full incorporation to the Institute, were taken after “one, two, three, or five years” of practical apostolic work in the ministry assigned by the Superiors after the long period of academic or professional learning. Not perpetual vows, therefore, but Coadjutor vows brought to an end the period of preparation and incorporated members fully into the Society. The Third Probation stood by itself, as a special time of contemplation and of love of God in prayer, a period of grace before full immersion into active ministry.

For Reflection:

It is often said that specific problems of individual persons become more noticeable after the learning period of the scholasticate, and precisely during the first period of their active life. Do Formators think that the reasons for the present praxis of taking Coadjutor vows at the end of the Third Probation, sanctioned by the Rule of Life and the Ratio – apparently supported by Canon no.1019.1 - are sufficiently strong for changing the very definite and clear purpose of Coadjutor vows as envisaged by Fr. Founder in the Constitutions? Do they think that the occasional works of charity undertaken during the scholasticate are sufficient to test the “learning” with the fire of the active life?

**Canon 1019.1 states that perpetual profession must take place before the reception of the diaconate: candidates must “have become perpetually or definitively members of the Institute”.*

The Third Probation: a second, higher novitiate

“In the third probation the candidate must acquire final perfection, as far as possible, especially in charity, humility, meekness, patience and intimate familiarity with God. The exercises and practical experience of this probation shall be suitable, therefore, for persons already more perfect” (C397).

“The aim of the third probation is more intimate union with God” (C402E2).

This year of special spiritual preparation should be organised very much like the novitiate. Silence, prayer, meditation, constant feeding on the word of God in Scripture and on the “*holy fathers*” should be the fundamental guiding principles. “*Besides the time for prayer which the novices normally have, each one will have the time helpful to his own individual devotion. They will practise mortification. They will seek silence, quiet. Like the novices, they will allow themselves to be led by their director*” (C402).

We have already seen that Rosminian Ascetics consist essentially of three stages, which, although clearly defined and separate are all “*inseparably bound to one another*”: the first stage is the purification of conscience and eradication of all vices, the second stage is the constant practice of all virtues which proceed ultimately from the simple acknowledgement and love of truth, and the third stage is the intimate union with God.

The first stage is most appropriate during the two years of the Novitiate, the second stage should be perfected during the scholasticate, and the third stage should become the main concern of the period of the third probation (C404). This is the reason for the insistence on prayer, on meditation of holy Scripture, and on the reading of the Fathers during the third probation: the focus is on perfect union with God.

The Third Probation, therefore, stands on itself; its direct function is not to prepare for public commitment, but to strengthen the spiritual life of the religious, to help the religious blossom in his vocation of perfect consecration to the love of God. It is a year of grace, of being with JESUS on the mountain in loving conversation with the Father, through the unction of the Holy Spirit.

Life of Prayer and Vatican II

There are many passages in the documents of Vatican II that link closely the vocation to the religious life to intimate union with God through a life of prayer and of meditation on holy Scripture. This is, for example, what Perfectae Caritatis says, “*They who make profession of the evangelical counsels should seek and love above all else God who has first loved us (1 Jn. 4,10). In all circumstances they should take care to foster a life hidden with Christ in God, which is the source and stimulus of love of the neighbour... For this reason, members of institutes should assiduously cultivate the spirit of prayer and prayer itself, drawing on the authentic sources of Christian spirituality. In the first*

place, let them have the sacred scripture at hand daily, so that they may learn “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ JESUS” (Phil.3,8) by reading and meditating on the divine scriptures” (PC6)

Another document entitled, “Instruction on the contemplative life” has a footnote that carries many references to the writings of some of the Fathers of the Church on the importance of prayer in the religious life:

“According to the tradition of the Fathers, the contemplative life portrays the prayer of Christ in solitude or on the mountain top. This is what Cassian writes, “Yet He withdrew into the hills by Himself to pray, thus giving us an example of withdrawal so that we likewise retire into solitude”. Jerome also says, “Seek then Christ in solitude, and pray alone with JESUS in the hills”; and St. Isidore, “But the fact that He passed the night praying in the hills, entails a foreshadowing of the contemplative life”; and Jerome again, “When He prayed, He typified the contemplative life; when He sat to teach, He exemplified the active life... Going out to the hills to pray and going out towards the multitude, He portrayed the union of both lives”. William of St. Thierry says, “The solitary life was intimately patronised by our Lord Himself and longed for in his presence by his disciples. When they who were in His company on the holy mountain saw the glory of his transfiguration, immediately Peter... decided that it would be good for him to stay there forever”. (Vatican II, p.660; see also Vita Consecrata, p.21).

Candidates to the Third Probation could be asked to do some research work on “Prayer” both in the Scripture and in the Documents of Vatican II.

The Third Probation provides an excellent opportunity for religious to **study in depth the Constitutions**. Fr. Founder says that “*they must be devoutly instructed about the nature of our way of life from the Constitutions, which they must read in their entirety and weigh carefully, and which the instructor must explain*” (C400).

Experience of more and greater works of charity is also recommended, as it is all through the various stages of formation. For Fr. Founder charity must not be “sterile”, a simple matter of “learning”, but must always tend to be operative, and therefore engagement in works of charity has to have a place in any education programme. However, works of charity during the period of formation must always be “subsidiary means”, helping formation but not becoming the primary purpose.

Fr. Founder wrote in one of his letters, “*It is one of the greatest dangers and quite contrary to our spirit to want to use the members in works before they have been formed according to the prescribed programme*” (EC6, 751 – emphasis in the text); and Canon Law no.660.2 states, “*During the period of formation members are not to be given offices and undertakings which hinder their formation*”.

Session Six

PERSONS AND GRADES (The Members of the Society)

Constitutions 419-461

Summary

It is of great importance that nothing be done in the Society simply as an external matter of form. Mere outward appearance has no inner strength and is against truth. Therefore, those who join the Institute must have a true vocation and possess the qualities necessary for the various grades which make up the body of the Society.

The Ascribed member must be a true child of the Church, mindful of his baptismal promises. He must not be ashamed of the Gospel, must lead an exemplary life, attend church regularly, and do works of charity.

The Adopted son must possess an effective desire of following perfection in the Institute as soon as circumstances permit. He must display an evident will to obey the superior of the Society, and show that he is indifferent.

The Coadjutor must embrace whole-heartedly indifference and obedience, dedicating himself to universal charity by means of universal obedience. Temporal Coadjutors will commit themselves to obedience in practical, temporal or academic activities, and must always be held in honour. Spiritual Coadjutors will be called by obedience to various works of spiritual charity.

The Presbyter must be a priest chosen from intern spiritual coadjutors, who combines keen intelligence, extraordinary learning, a certain sublimity of character, and greatness of soul. "Hence, perfected and consummated in all virtues, and rooted and founded in the love of God, the presbyter should not fear to undergo or suffer anything difficult for the name of our Lord JESUS Christ", in complete obedience to the sovereign Pontiff of the Church. The presbyter will be required to take a fourth vow of special obedience to the Pope, and a fifth vow of not doing ever "anything, for any reason, to relax the ordinances laid down about poverty in the Constitutions".

Fr. General has full responsibility to admit candidates into the body of the Institute, at the grade suitable for each of them. He will receive regular reports from all immediate superiors, and information about the needs of 1- each house, 2- diocese, and 3- province.

Fr. General has also the faculty of dismissal of any member who is seriously damaging the entire society “by not walking rightly in his vocation”. He will act only after extensive consultation, with great reluctance, when all other means have been pursued in spirit of charity and concern.

The chosen “tiny army of the Lord”

“By the word of the Lord they pitched their tents; and at His command they took them down; by the word of the Lord they marched: and kept the watches of the Lord according to his command by the hand of Moses” (Num. 9,23).

The Fathers of the Church saw the Exodus from the slavery in Egypt through the barren desert to the Promised Land as a figure of the journey of the Church, rescued from the power of the devil by the saving death of JESUS, lead by the sure and mighty hand of God through the arid desert of this human life, to the promised land of Heaven.

Fr. Founder, in a sermon given at Stresa on 28th October 1847 on the occasion of the religious profession of some of his brethren, explains and deepens this theme as he applies it first to the Church, then to religious orders as one body, and finally to the “*tiny army of the Lord*”, our own Institute.

“Look at the great numbers and marvellous order of the people of God! Six hundred thousand warriors, three million faithful distributed in twelve camps, all living in thousands of tents, yet arranged with wonderful symmetry in an immense desert. They travel, they rest, their soldiers are drawn up, they fight and conquer as one man. What a sight it is! What order! What irresistible power!”

Fr. Founder then compares the many religious orders to a “*well-ordered*” army within the Church, forming the camps of the Lord, and marching at His commands:

“The Fathers also tell us that the Israelites, chosen by God as his very own people, were more exactly an image of religious life – the many coloured robes, as it were, of the Bride of Christ, one in nature but divided into its various congregations”.

Many holy men and women, inspired by God, applied themselves exclusively to a single work of charity and founded congregations for that very purpose. Fr. Founder mentions Camillus de Lellis (spiritual assistance of the sick and dying), John of God (corporal assistance), Peter Nolasco, Raymond of Penafort, Felix de Valois (redemption of prisoners). He adds, “*In fact, almost every religious community has chosen to fulfil some heroic work of charity*”.

The Institute of Charity, on the other hand, has no special work of charity: “*These saints had special enlightenment from the Lord, enlightenment and stimuli not given to our*

Institute which cannot therefore predetermine the works of Christian charity to which the Lord may destine it. For the same reason, it cannot exclude any work... The Institute's special perfection consists in its lack of any special perfection. Its sole desire is that God's grace renders it excellent and even sublime in the perfection of charity set before all the disciples of the Redeemer".

Fr. Founder had made the same point on 25th March 1844 in his homily on the occasion of the religious profession of new members:

"If you wish, the Society of Charity differs from other religious orders in one way only. Their holy Founders, taught from on high, were not content with justice as the sole norm. They added, as an essential end of their profession, one or more exterior ministries useful to their neighbour and the Church, such as preaching, education and so on. Our Institute has its essential rule, its only aim, in justice alone. Consequently, whoever professes this Institute obtains all the Institute has set before itself and fulfils his calling simply by practising and reaching out for perfect justice. He is not bound once and for all to any specific good work".

In the same sermon, Fr. Founder expresses his profound desire that many people throughout the world may be inspired by almighty God to join the Institute in its untiring quest for justice and hence for charity, since *"Christ's charity is simply justice at its most perfect"*:

"Indeed, as I think of the end which the Institute of Charity holds out to us, I imagine many holy souls, scattered throughout every part of the Catholic Church and known to God, offering with Christ to the eternal Lord and Father of mankind and angels this beautiful prayer: "Open to me the gates of justice; entering them I will praise the Lord". Almighty God, listening to their passionate longing, answers in their hearts: "Unite in my name to profess justice; bind yourselves tightly together for this end alone; sacrifice yourselves entirely for this, sacrifice all you have as my Son did for your example; sacrifice even lawful pleasures and decent, earthly goods, and time and health and life itself, and your will. In a word, sacrifice everything without exception". Brothers, your Institute was born in this way. This is its spirit. Justice is its sole foundation. We can truly say of the Institute: "This is the Lord's gate: the just shall enter through it"

(For all quotations above, please see Fr. Founder's "A Society of Love", translated by D. Cleary, pp.2-42).

The simple aim of all members of the Institute, the sanctification and perfection of our souls, unites all members into one body, without distinction of grades. The ascribed, the brother, or the priest have as their specific vocation the pursuit of "justice", of holiness: this is the reason we join the Institute of Charity. This aim is also the universal aim of every Christian, and so the members of the Institute are one with the whole body of the Church, by means of Baptism, the sacrament by which we become consecrated to justice and charity. We join together in the Institute to pursue the one common end with the special means recommended by our Lord, the religious counsels, and a lifestyle which is closely modelled on the pattern lived by JESUS Himself.

Grades and universal charity

The distinction of persons and grades is determined simply by the extent of the practical exercise of universal charity. Everyone in the Institute is consecrated to universal charity in the depth of his heart, but the Ascribed will pursue charity within the limits imposed by his way of life, and the presbyter will pursue universal charity by making himself available to every types of charity under universal obedience not only to the Superiors of the Institute but, in a direct way, to the Roman Pontiff. The extent of our calling and dedication to universal charity determines the grades contemplated by Fr. Founder.

It is important, therefore, to keep in mind that grades are not meant to “separate”, but to unite all members of the Institute: by being part of the Institute, the ascribed member, the religious brother, the spiritual coadjutor, the presbyter, who follow God’s will in their life, will be part of and will benefit from the pursuit of universal charity which is proper of the entire Institute. Writing about the religious brothers, Fr. Founder says,

“They should be ready to undertake correctly, joyfully, laboriously and earnestly the technical work entrusted to them... When they do this, they will not only obtain their own complete reward, but will also share in all the good which God deigns to procure through the whole Society for his honour and praise. All members form one Body, and the members share together in the working of the whole body in which they co-operate proportionately” (C293).

There is today a re-discovery of the importance of the religious brother’s special vocation, seen as a reminder to all of the vocation to “consecrated life” for its own sake. Fr. Founder in the Constitutions presents the distinction between “*temporal coadjutor*” and “*spiritual coadjutor*”, a distinction based entirely on the special vocation of each to exercise universal charity in a determined, specific manner, through the indication of obedience, which is “the special feature” of coadjutors alone (C423).

All coadjutors, temporal and spiritual, must possess the same qualities: “*All coadjutors must follow the devout life common to all Christians, have a real desire for the evangelical counsels, are free from any impediment to professing them, and have finally attained, with the grace of Christ our Lord, great indifference, self-abnegation and obedience. Proved under all these headings, they can be admitted to the roll of coadjutors by the superiors*” (C423).

For discussion:

Religious life, by its nature, is “neither clerical nor lay” (Canon Law 588): do we value sufficiently the vocation of our religious brothers? Do we stress sufficiently to postulants, novices, and scholastics that vocation to the Institute is not the same as vocation to the priesthood? Do we have structures that allow the “brothers” in the Institute to feel that they are valued, respected, honoured?

Coadjutors are asked by obedience to exercise charity in a particular and limited work or ministry: in a school, for example, or in a parish. Within their specific field of charity, they must give themselves totally to the pursuit of “justice” by means of the work which obedience has decided for them.

Fr. Founder gives a list of more specific qualities demanded by the grade of “spiritual Coadjutor”: noticeable progress in virtue, especially in contempt of self, obedience, fraternal charity, simplicity, longing for poverty, love of our way of life; good knowledge of theology, philosophy, of the Fathers; proven experience of teaching, preaching, administration of the Sacraments; zeal for the salvation of souls, for prayer, and the contemplative life (C432 E1).

All Coadjutors must strive to lead a life of humility and simplicity, and therefore, after profession of perpetual vows, they take a further vow, *“by which they renounce all ambition and promise not to seek, accept or refuse any honour or dignity, whether within the Institute or outside it, except in obedience to their own superiors”* (C452; RL 63).

Presbyters, on the other hand, have the exercise of universal charity as their specific work or ministry. Their role in the Institute is quite unique, serving as links of charity among all the brethren of the Institute, and links of charity of all members of the Institute to the universal Church.

Many presbyters have often spoken of their embarrassment at reading what Fr. Founder writes about them in the Constitutions. Indeed, the ideal figure of the presbyter as outlined by Fr. Founder is simply beyond the reach of most:

“They should be men who combine keen intelligence, extraordinary learning and a certain sublimity of character with special piety and affection for the Society. The burden of government of the Society and of other works of more universal charity must devolve principally upon these men. Consequently, it is necessary that they should excel the others in greater purity of life and more ardent love of God and their neighbour. In addition, they should be endowed with perceptiveness and liveliness of mind, and greatness of soul. They should also be imbued with sound doctrine and adorned with sufficient erudition to enable them in such an office to serve God suitably... They also promise to embrace wholeheartedly at a sign from the sovereign Pontiff any labour whatsoever that may be necessary and useful for the Church, even at the cost of their own life. Hence, perfected and consummated in all virtues, and rooted and founded in the love of God, they should not fear to undergo or suffer anything difficult or hard for the name of our Lord. The more they are also enriched with natural gifts, especially with vast and profound intelligence and a heart lifted and raised up to all great things, and the humbler they are at the same time, and greater lovers and followers of the cross of our Lord, the more they will be judged suitable for such work” (C429).

In his book, *The Republic*, Plato also provides a description of the “philosopher” which is a combination of a saint and of a most highly gifted person under all aspects, physical, intellectual, moral. Plato agrees that such person would be nearly impossible to find.

Many have seen in the description an image of Plato himself – though written without the intention of doing so.

We may also read the passage above about the “presbyter” as a description of Fr. Founder himself: he certainly fulfilled the criteria that make for a good presbyter. We all know that Fr. Founder considered as his most profound identity his being a priest: “**Antonio Rosmini priest**” was his usual signature. We may also think of other great “Rosminians” who have reflected in their lives the ideals presented by the figure of the “presbyter” in the Constitutions.

We must keep in mind that Fr. Founder is presenting in this Section of the Constitutions the “*ideal Institute of Charity*”, his vision of what the Institute would be like if every member should pursue holiness, responding with wholehearted commitment and great generosity to the gifts of the Spirit and the grace of our Lord. The ideal must have a sublime quality about it to draw the will of people to embrace it; it is like the Lord’s request, “*Be perfect as my Father in heaven is perfect*”. The important point is that we have a burning desire and a steady will to strive towards the ideal with all our strength.

The “*presbyter*” is also Fr. Founder’s view of the perfect priest. The grade of presbyter is the highest grade a priest of the Institute can obtain; it is the fullness of the process of formation of priests within the Institute. In the Five Wounds Fr. Founder gives us a fuller description of what he understood a complete formation of priests should entail, and one could profitably read what he says about the matter when he deals with the second wound of the Church, “*The insufficient education of the clergy*”.

The Rule of Life presents succinctly the role of the presbyter:

“After full consultation, Fr. General may choose from among the Coadjutors certain priests of proven charity, obedience and prudence, so that they may take a vow of special obedience to the sovereign Pontiff. By this vow they become presbyters of the Institute... This vow signifies and expresses the union of the Institute and the Church; it shows and expresses the end and the special nature of the Institute, which is dedicated to universal charity and lives solely for the Church” (RL65)

For Fr. Founder, the presbyters in the Institute of Charity form the “foundation of the Society”, and would be those who,

“On the one hand bind the members closely together among themselves, and on the other bind and subordinate the Society to holy Church. The presbyters bind the members among themselves because they alone can occupy the central offices in the Society, that is those to which all others are ordered. In this way, all the members of the Society would be bound by their vow of obedience to the presbyters from the moment they are appointed to those offices. The presbyters would also bind and order the Society to the Church. As they receive the obedience of the whole Society when they undertake offices within it, so they themselves offer obedience to the Sovereign Pontiff when they become presbyters, make their vow, and place themselves entirely at his disposition” (Description of the

Institute of Charity in its social organisation, written by Fr. Founder but left unedited – see A. Valle, pp. 60-62).

Fr. Founder makes often the point that the structure of the Church is of divine origin and is therefore the most perfect structure. The Pope and the Bishops form a Collegium that continues the initial Collegium of JESUS and the Apostles and, after the Ascension, of Peter and the Apostles. Governed by the Collegium we have, thereafter, a great variety of other grades that encompass the whole people of God.

It was Fr. Founder's wish that the structure of the Institute should reflect closely the perfect model of the Church as established by the Son of God. Hence, we have Fr. General and the presbyters governing the Institute, and then the vast array of grades – intern/external coadjutors, temporal and spiritual coadjutors, professed scholastics, adopted sons, ascribed. But the Institute itself is the “**servant of the Church**”: Fr. Founder does not want a body caught up in itself or divided from the Church, but one in full communion with her and committed to advancing her unity.

For discussion

It is clear that for Fr. Founder the terms “coadjutor” and “presbyter” have a substantial meaning as well as the terms “ascribed” and “adopted son”: what problems have Formators encountered in presenting these essential features of Rosminian identity to the candidates in their care? What arguments could they give against the tendency to “simplify things” by adopting structures and terms common to most modern religious congregations?

Finally, it is worth noting Fr. Founder's insistence that Fr. General must always keep in mind “**three principal things**” when he decides grades or ministries for the brethren. As usual, they are presented in order of importance:

1. The greater future well-being of each person and all the brethren in the Society, since Fr. General must exercise fatherly charity towards them first;
2. The greater universal good, that is, the greater charity that can be exercised through them;
3. The reports, advice and requests of superiors to whom they are subject.

Stressing again the “personal” interest and quality of the Institute, that is, “persons come first in the Institute” Fr. Founder adds significantly,

“Fr. General must give preference to the place where there is more need of members for the interior progress of the brethren and the observance of the rule, and for fulfilling obligations and exercising adequately ministries of charity already undertaken” (C434)

For discussion

Is there a danger that works of charity may take priority over the “interior progress of the Brethren”? Should the Institute take more and more works of charity at the expense of Houses dedicated to community life, observance of the rule, and contemplation? How to strike the right balance?

Session Seven

DIVINE PROVIDENCE

Constitutions 462-483 (Rule of Life 73-86)

Summary

*This Society rests on one foundation alone, the **Providence** of the heavenly Father.*

Two dangers must be avoided: presumption, found in members who place their confidence in the Society alone or in its striking organisation or in the number and greatness of its members and means; and excessive fear and anxiety for its well-being or the paucity of its numbers.

Sin and unfaithfulness alone are to be feared, since these alone can damage and even destroy the Institute. If we work for the good and the increase of the Church, the Providence of God will take care and protect the Institute; if it becomes useless or harmful, “the heavenly Father will rightly cut down and burn the sterile tree”.

This Society is not to be loved for itself, but in it the Kingdom of our Lord. The Church is everlasting and to be loved as an end, being the body and the Bride of Christ. The Institute is one of the many temporary means used by God to fulfil his divine plan for the Church; one day may well cease to exist. Let us always think of the Church of JESUS, not of this Society.

***Divine Grace** is the foundation of all supernatural activity of the members of the Institute. Whatever human beings do in the natural order is ordered by God to the greatness of the glory of his Son, even without knowing it or wishing it; but in the supernatural order all their efforts are useless without the grace of JESUS.*

The members of the Institute intend to act as children of the light whose desire is to fulfil, by the grace of their Saviour, their own sanctification and that of others. So, recognising our total dependence, and the fact that we have been privileged to be chosen, we pray with humility and perseverance to God for his grace.

*We must receive the free gift of grace with “fear and trembling lest after receiving it we lose it”. We must take constant care, therefore, to purify ourselves from every stain, working hard at achieving that **justice** that makes us dear to God.*

Disclosure of conscience and a firm desire to amend oneself are excellent means whereby we may cleanse our souls from every sin and imperfection.

The brethren must avoid both excessive scrupulosity, and even more, laxity of conscience. The former is rooted in the presumption that “great purity and even impeccability will be theirs” through their own efforts; the latter may indicate an over-reliance on some good works they do, and a mistaken idea of the mercy of God.

*The patient work of purification of our conscience will lead us more and more into the **love of God** alone, in every person and in every thing.*

In God all things and all persons find their origin and their end, all their good and their perfection. God alone, the end of all thing, is lovable and worthy of honour. It is because we love God that we love our neighbour, therefore in all our works of charity we must have before our eyes God the Father and his Son JESUS, the Beloved.

The love of God, therefore, is the single source of all cares and labours to which the members of this Society are dedicated. It is God who lives and loves in us.

We have reached the halfway mark in the Constitutions and Fr. Founder presents now a very short but extremely important section that deals with the “foundation” of the entire Society. He deals with four basic realities, described everywhere in his writings, that constitute the pillars of the Institute: **Divine Providence, Grace, Justice, Love of God.**

The four pillars are interconnected, and one cannot do without the others. The connection is described by Fr. Founder himself in n. 479:

“As the activity of this entire Society is ruled by the **Providence** of the heavenly Father, so the activity of the individual members is moved by the **grace** of our Lord and Saviour. On the part of the members, their first co-operation with the grace they have received must consist in purposing to purify themselves every day unceasingly and increasing through **justice**. The final end of their co-operation is the **love of God** alone” (C479).

It is because the four pillars are so connected that each of them has been presented by Fr. Founder as the “foundation” of the Institute. It is true that n.462 is indeed a very powerful and peremptory statement which does not seem to allow for alternatives:

“This Society rests on one foundation alone, the providence of God, the almighty Father. Anyone wishing to lay some other foundation seeks to destroy the Society” (C462).

But, in his sermon on “Justice” in 1844, Fr. Founder himself said, “*Brothers, your Institute was born in this way. This is its spirit. Justice is its sole foundation. I want to speak about this foundation*”. And, he continues, “*The Church of JESUS Christ, has as its*

end and its foundation, justice, the end and foundation of the universe"; so justice is the foundation both of the Institute and of the Church.

But love of God is itself defined by Fr. Founder as "*justice at its most perfect*", hence it could also be called the "foundation" of the Institute of Charity (see A Society of love, p.9; p.15; p.46). Moreover, if nothing good can be done by human beings in the supernatural order, then where would the Institute be without the "foundation" of divine grace?

Each of the four pillars, in a sense, contains the others and the more we scan the depths of each the more we discover the others. The words of the prophet Micah (Mi 6.8) present in a beautifully succinct way the four pillars of the Institute:

*"This is what God asks of you,
Only this: to act justly,
To love tenderly
And to walk humbly with your God"*

Divine Providence

Divine Providence had a special place in the heart and mind of Fr. Founder. His two principles of conduct – passivity and indifference – sprang directly from complete trust in Divine Providence, the "polar star" in the spiritual firmament of Fr. Founder, as Fr. U. Muratore says in one of his booklets, always shining from on high, a visible sign of the eternal and infinite love of God for all His creatures.

His masterpiece on Providence is "Theodicy", in which he shows the constant love and infinite wisdom of God in the government of the universe, always drawing the greatest possible good from his creation. The book presents the eternal and supreme wisdom and power of God far beyond anything we mortals can understand, and the extremely limited and finite powers and means of all creatures.

This infinite distance, however, is filled by the eternal and ever-present love of God for all that He has made, shown by the Providential laws that guide with a mighty hand all world events and people to a blessed and sure end (see the book, "Rosminian Spirituality" for few important selected passages from Theodicy, pp. 45-68).

The fourth Maxim, however, is the best starting point for a deep meditation on Divine Providence: "*To abandon oneself entirely to divine Providence*". Fr. Founder begins by saying that "*there is perhaps no other maxim which helps more than this to obtain the peace of heart and stability of mind proper to the life of the Christian*".

All things in the world, both great and small, rest alike in God's mighty hand, and nothing happens except as He disposes. God turns everything to the good of those who

love Him, for it is His sovereign will to bring forth from our lives and from the entire creation the richest possible harvest for our everlasting joy. Therefore in all circumstances we entrust ourselves to Him with child-like simplicity, confident that the more we do so, the more pleasing we become in His eyes and the more abundantly He blesses us: *“Adore, Be silent, Rejoice”*.

This maxim was recommended by our Saviour by His words and example. The beautiful words of his sermon on the Mountain, *“Do not be afraid, you are of more value than many sparrows... Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body... Consider the ravens... Consider the lilies... Your Father knows what you need... Strive for His kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well...”* (see Lk 12: 4-7; 22-34)

The words of JESUS on the loving care of Divine Providence can be expressed in **seven teachings**:

1. JESUS Himself, who did not refuse the name *“friend”* even to Judas, is the foundation of the Christian’s total and unbounded trust.
2. In the same way that it is reasonable to abandon oneself entirely to divine Providence, so it is foolish to trust in oneself, since we are utterly weak, and incapable of changing in the least the course marked out by God for everything in the universe.
3. Trust in God brings the freedom to abandon all human things for the sake of the kingdom and to *“fasten oneself to the bare wood of His holy cross, dying to the world and living for heaven alone”*, in a state of effective poverty.
4. We are forbidden to be anxious, to worry, but not to ask the Heavenly Father for what we need, as long as we do so only after asking for His kingdom and his justice. We are invited by JESUS to ask all things to our heavenly Father with great simplicity and trust, opening to Him all the desires of our heart. God will always answer our prayers – correcting our ignorance and lack of understanding – and giving us *“good things”*, never things that are harmful.
5. We are forbidden to be anxious and restless, but not to enjoy the things we have *“with simplicity of heart and gratitude”* because they have been given by God. But we must not feel any disquiet about future things, or things we do not have: *“Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own”*.
6. Since the perfection of the Christian life is to please God in all things, it follows that in everything we do in our ordinary daily life, in the enjoyment and the sorrow we encounter, our only aim must be to be pleasing to God. From this stability of heart like from a spring of clear water issue the **principle of passivity**, that is, the principle that we must remain *“contented and joyful”*, without looking for change, without worrying about altering our circumstances in life unless we have a sure indication of God’s will.
7. Trust in Providence alone is also the source of the second **principle, of indifference**, which is that *“we will be equally willing and content to make a change when the will of God is made known. This golden state of indifference causes us not only to serve God in all things, but to serve Him in the way in which He wants to be served”*. So the true disciple will often examine himself to

see whether he really “*is indifferent to poverty or riches, honour or contempt, health or sickness, a long or a short life*”.

These seven teachings on divine Providence are the foundation of Christian and religious life for individual members. In the Constitutions, Providence is presented from the perspective of the “foundation of the entire Society”. The points Fr. Founder makes within this perspective are the following:

- The Institute depends on and is guided solely by Divine Providence.
- Presumption, that may drive some members to place their confidence in the organisation and greatness of the Institute considering it as necessary to the Church of Christ, is entirely misguided and wrong. It is a grave danger.
- Fear and anxiety about the Institute’s well being and increase is equally wrong since the entire Institute depends upon the Providence of the heavenly Father, not upon human planning. Moreover, the Institute is not to be loved for itself, but in it the Church of JESUS.
- The Church of JESUS is the everlasting Kingdom and our hearts and minds must be burning with inextinguishable zeal for it. The Institute will be kept into existence by the Father in Heaven only as a mean amongst many others and only for the duration that He has established for it.
- “*Let us always think therefore of the Church of Christ, not of this Society*”; the Institute, willed by God, guided by God through Superiors bound up most intimately to the Church, must be loved by us “so long as it is useful to the Church”.

The Institute is for the Church, hence Fr. Founder reminds us of the fundamental importance of our baptismal consecration which has made us children of the Church:

“With the rest of the faithful we have the gospel of Christ as our great common codex. We must use it day and night. Our Constitutions, taken from the gospel, must lead us back to it. Hence the members of this Society should not set themselves apart from other people, but rather unite with all in the one body of Christ” (C464E).

For discussion

What is the Formators’ view about knowledge of diocesan problems and initiatives and co-operation with the bishop and the local clergy? Do they think that the education we provide is sufficient to make our members feel that it is the Church, not the Institute, the primary concern of all our thoughts and cares?

The grace of our Saviour

Grace is the perception of God in the depths of our soul, a perception which is real not merely ideal. In the order of nature, man can only have a negative idea of God with the light of reason alone. Fr. Founder argued strongly against Pelagianism – the view that

original sin caused only the privation of grace leaving intact all human faculties – and Protestantism – the view that original sin caused a complete corruption of all human faculties, incapable, therefore, even to establish the existence of God. Fr. Founder shared the traditional catholic doctrine that original sin not only deprived human beings of grace but also corrupted their nature, but not so radically as not to be able to bring man to the knowledge that God exists and that He has infinite qualities such as goodness and justice.

A person born blind can only have a negative idea of light and colours; different arguments may allow him to know that they exist and even that they must have certain characteristics. Without direct experience, however, he will never be able to have a positive idea of light and colours. It is the same with our knowledge of God based simply on reason: we know that He exists, and we can draw a variety of consequences pertaining to Him, but since we have no positive or direct experience of Him – we do not perceive Him, we do not see Him “face to face” – then we cannot say anything “positively” about Him.

This is where “grace” comes to our aid. The “character” and the “sanctifying grace” given at Baptism as an entirely free gift from God allow us to “perceive” God who “acts” really in our soul. God acts in us directly, creating in us a new “fundamental feeling”- feeling of the supernatural - superior to the other two “fundamental feelings” – feeling of our body and feeling of the idea of being enlightening our intellect – which we have since our natural birth. God, through grace, creates in us a new being, more precisely, completes and raises to perfection our human soul in way not possible to unaided human nature.

Grace operates in the intellectual essence of our soul because “the supreme being can communicate with what is most noble in the human being”. This action, even though is produced in the intellectual essence of the soul, is not “ideal” but “real”: the distance between what is ideal (purely based on ideas) and what is real (based on feeling) is immense. The operation of grace is real, not merely ideal: Fr. Founder gives as examples of this difference the “law of Moses” (purely ideal, incapable therefore of operating any change in human beings) and “the grace” of Christ, a real action operated by God in our soul and capable of drawing it to Himself.

We can say therefore that:

- through the action of grace God almighty Himself produces a real immanent action on the intellectual essence of the soul, uniting Himself to the soul;
- the soul, touched by divine grace, is elevated to a supernatural condition;
- both potencies of the human soul, the intellect (passive) and the will (active) are raised to a new supernatural level – a real creation;
- the supernatural will of the soul produces its effect through faith, which is always present, at least in a germinal way, in every soul touched by grace.

Fr. Founder calls grace a “**deiform operation**”. God performs many operations, like creation and the government of all created things. These operations begin in God and

terminate in something different from God. These operations are obviously divine, yet they are not “deiform”. Fr. Founder defines a “deiform” operation as “an operation which not only has God for its principle, but the operation itself and its term is God”. He is the cause and the effect:

“I define a deiform operation as that which not only has God for its principle, but God is also the operation itself or its term. God is the principle and the term or end of grace; He is the cause and the effect. The Incarnation of the Word is the pre-eminent “deiform” operation” (Supernatural Anthropology, Vol.1, p.113)

In the soul touched by grace there is not only a divine effect but there God Himself. God is therefore not only the “efficient cause” – producing various effects in our soul – but is the “objective formal cause” – that is, God is the cause and the effect at the same time of what is happening in the soul, without in any way becoming our soul.

The unity of the Divine Nature was the basis of the Jewish revelation and that of the evangelical revelation is the Trinity in which knowledge given by God to man has been completed. So it is clear that the grace which sanctified man before the coming of Christ may properly be called “deiform”, the title of “**deitriniform**” grace being reserved for the grace of the Redeemer. The grace of the Old Testament manifested itself in man by a divine power which made the law of God superior to all other things in his heart, and by a feeling of expectation, a feeling of hope which promised him the possession of the “totality of being” and gave him a certain pledge of that possession.

God unites Himself to us formally through grace. But God subsists in three Persons, hence, since the time of the revelation of the Trinity by JESUS, the three Persons of the Trinity unite themselves formally to the just person. The Christian therefore through grace experiences the Holy Trinity, though in an imperfect way in this life.

Though the feeling of the Trinity is indistinct it is a force acting in us and which fills us perfectly and satisfies and contents us completely so that we feel “all being”, “all good”. The feeling of this totality has three forms or modes: a feeling of infinite power and force that acts in us, a feeling of truth – a subsistent truth which illuminates – and a feeling of diffusing love. We experience therefore the real action of the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity, the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit.

Fr. Founder defines the “**character**” that we receive at Baptism as the “seal” of the Word of God in our soul operated by the Holy Spirit. We become the “image” of God, not because anything “created” can ever be the “image” of God – this is impossible – but because by the power of the Holy Spirit the “true and only image of the Father”, that is the Son, the Word of God, is impressed in our soul. It is the Son in us that is the “image” of God: the character is the “seal” of the Son in our soul, a seal which is indelible and which raises the soul to its supernatural state.

It is from the baptismal character that sanctifying grace springs up, enabling us to do what pleases God thus becoming holy. Grace may indeed be lost if we resist the Spirit, but the baptismal character, or our generation to supernatural life, cannot be lost:

“St Paul, speaking about the baptismal character says, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Ep. 4,30). What does it mean to say – do not grieve the Holy Spirit – if not that we may indeed lose sanctifying grace by means of sin? Thus it is clear that the Holy Spirit gives us both the “seal” or character and the sanctifying grace” (Supernatural Anthropology, p.233)

We could go into far more accurate and extensive details about the treatment of divine grace in Fr. Founder’s eminent books, “Supernatural Anthropology” and “Introduction to the gospel of St. John”: but what has been written is sufficient to give us an idea of the fundamental importance of grace in our Christian and religious life.

Human beings, by themselves, cannot do anything in the supernatural order, that is, they cannot do anything which can make them holy, pleasing to God. This is what JESUS meant when He said, **“Without Me you have no power whatsoever to do anything”**. The good in us is brought about by grace, by the living presence of the Trinity that operate in a real way in the essence of our soul.

This awareness brings humility and complete reliance in God. JESUS is the vine, we are the branches: **“Abide in Me, and I in you”**, this is grace that produces abundant fruits.

In the Constitutions, Fr. Founder deals with grace by stating beforehand that in the order of nature everything is geared towards achieving the greatest glory of God: whether willingly or unwillingly, “the children of this world co-operate with God’s plan” (C469).

In the supernatural order, however, *“mankind can do nothing without the grace of God and our Saviour JESUS. The creature’s work, study, planning, his efforts, the burdens he takes upon himself, are useless; there is nothing he can do of his own power, even though he possess every natural gift and the whole world besides, which would leave him with the slightest capacity for acting on the supernatural level”* (C470).

If man desires to do actions that produce his own sanctification or the sanctification of others *“he must first humble himself by careful consideration of God’s free choice, and pray. All other graces will come through this grace of prayer”* (C470).

The members of the Institute, therefore, who as children of the light want to pursue holiness must surrender themselves entirely to the grace of God, and let God work in them: *“Their confidence will be in the power of God which uses persons and things alike, making them suitable in His hand for every work”* (C472).

Fr. Founder backs up his words with a long quotation taken from his favourite passage from St. John’s gospel, chapter 15, 1-16, the passage that presents the image of the vine and the branches, with which we are already familiar.

Justice, our Yes to divine grace

“As a person without eyes cannot see, so human beings can do nothing towards eternal life unless the grace of our Lord and Saviour JESUS Christ works in them” (C473)

This free gift must be received with infinite love and gratitude, and with fear and trembling lest after receiving it we lose it. Our response to God’s grace is, therefore, to co-operate fully taking great care to correct our spirit through continual purification.

Everyone in the Institute is aware of the immense importance of the word “justice” in Rosminian spirituality, yet some may find it difficult to explain precisely what Fr. Founder means by this word.

We may begin by saying that justice has **three aspects** that involve our constant and simultaneous attention:

1. **Justice is “abstaining from sin”**, is a life-long struggle to remove from our lives whatever resists God’s holiness, is a constant process of purification. Under this aspect justice is purity, limpidity of heart, innocence of life, is putting truth at the centre of our heart and mind. Justice is to have a heart which is free from sin: pride, mendacity, passions, selfishness. In the Introduction to The Rule of Life we read Fr. Founder’s personal engagement in obtaining for himself this innocence of life, this “justice”: *“I, Antonio Rosmini Serbati, most unworthy priest, set before myself a rule of life consisting of the following two principles, 1- To think seriously of amending myself of my enormous vices and of purifying my soul of the evil which has burdened it since my birth, without looking for other occupations or enterprises for the benefit of my neighbour. I realised that of myself I was absolutely incapable of doing anything for my neighbour’s benefit. 2- Not to refuse the works of charity towards my neighbour which divine Providence may offer or bring to my notice (God is able to make use of anyone, even me, for his work), and in this case to be completely indifferent towards all works of charity, doing what is offered to me as willingly as any other work, as far as my free will is concerned”*. The Common Rules present a similar preoccupation with achieving “justice”: *“The salvation of our souls is reached through justice, that is, abstaining from sin. This justice is the foundation of the whole Society. Each member, then, should humbly make constant and persevering efforts, wholly relying on the grace of God, to purify his conscience more and more day by day”* (Common Rule 3).
2. **Justice is to know and to acknowledge the order of being, giving what is due to everyone and everything**. This is God’s justice in the first place, since He is absolute real Being, the creator of all that is. God, Absolute Being, is Love and God loves all that He has created, according to the order of creation. Justice is communicated to us by God himself. In other words, *“through the grace of God in JESUS we can see and appreciate all-that-is as God sees and appreciates it. Faith, enlivened by grace, enables us to act towards all-that-is with the reverence*

and love found in God Himself. It is our participation in God's justice that moves us to love God with all our heart and our neighbour as ourselves" (D. Cleary in A Society of Love, p.110). Justice in this sense compels us to give God the adoration, obedience and love which are due to Him as our Creator, our sovereign Lord and Master, our infinite benefactor and heavenly Father; and to give to ourselves and to all creatures whatever God has ordained to be due to us and them (see note 3, p134 of Rules of the Institute of Charity). Living in the truth, we are bound to seek to please God in everything we do, by doing His Will: *"Since it is justice that makes us dear to God, Christians must constantly pray to grow in justice and goodness... The more they ask this from God, the more they please Him. They will be reassured by Christ's own words: blessed are those who hunger and thirst after justice for they shall have their fill (Mt 5,6). In Christian life and worship, everything must be centred on the single desire of becoming more and more just, and on an unceasing, limitless, infinite plea for this justice... Upon this justice, obtained through His prayer, Christ has founded the Church of the elect which cannot perish..."* (First Maxim).

3. **Justice is Calvary, the hill of blood.** Calvary is the "sublime altar" empurpled by the precious Blood flowing from the veins of Christ satisfying the Father's eternal justice and bringing salvation to all. Calvary is a place of shame, but it was there that the sin of the world was taken away by the sacrifice of love of the Lamb of God. Jews and Gentiles, says Paul in Romans, have sinned and are in need of the mercy of God: *"Both Jews and pagans sinned and forfeited God's glory, and both are justified through the free gift of his grace by being redeemed in Christ JESUS who was appointed by God to be a "hilasterion" through faith by His Blood"* (Rom.3, 24). The Cross of JESUS became the "mercy seat" (hilasterion=the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies in the Temple, sprinkled on the Day of Atonement with the blood of a lamb as a reparation for the sins of the people) sprinkled with His Blood and which brings true salvation to the human race for all times. Calvary, therefore, is the hill of "justice": the hill where all sins were taken away by the Blood of the Son of God, the hill that manifested the infinite love of God for us – *"God did not spare His only Son, but gave Him up to benefit us all"* (Rom. 8,32) -, the hill from which all the means of salvation have come to us. From the open side of Christ, the new Adam, the Church came forth and with the Church, the two sacraments, baptism and the Eucharist, represented by the water and blood: **"Blessed is the wood by which justice comes"** (Wisdom 14,7). Fr. Founder deals with this fundamental and most important aspect of justice in his homily to the brethren on "Justice" in 1844 (see A Society of Love, p. 16-18). Justice under this aspect coincides with the love of God for us: see Paul's letter to the Romans chapter 8, and see also Fr. Founder's profound homily on "Charity" in 1851.

In the section of the Constitutions we are studying, Fr. Founder insists on the first meaning of the word justice, that is, abstinence from sin. No one can escape the fact that he is a sinner in God's eyes: *"He that is holy, let him be sanctified still"* (Rev. 22,11); *"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our*

sins, He is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us” (1 John 1, 8-10).

We must, therefore, endeavour to purify ourselves from every stain day by day. Two are the **means recommended** by Fr. Founder:

1. Disclosure of conscience, with complete candour and truth
2. Firm desire to amend oneself together with patience and tenacity

But there are also two opposing **excesses to be avoided**:

1. Excessive rigour and scrupulosity which is often the result of presumption, of thinking that perfect purity and “even impeccability” can be achieved;
2. Laxity of conscience, which is even worse, because it allows many vices to remain in our consciences undisturbed. We may feel easily satisfied by some good work we do and we think that the all merciful God will save us in any case. The idea that God is only merciful is tempting to many souls who say to themselves, “It does not matter what we do, God in His mercy will save us at the end”. Fr. Founder repeats the words that St. Bridget was told by JESUS: “*The foundation of the Church is faith, namely belief that I am a just and merciful judge. But now this foundation has been undermined. They all believe and preach that I am merciful, but practically no one preaches or believes that I judge justly. They almost consider me a wicked judge, for the judge who would free evil persons without punishment so that they could oppress the just would indeed be wicked. But I am a just and merciful judge; the least sin does not remain unpunished, nor the smallest good un-rewarded*” (C478).

The Love of God

God is the end of everything, He alone is to be loved in all things since everything comes from Him, the source of love: “*We are not obliged to serve the glory and greatness of any person, but give help and service from our hearts to all, not for the sake of flesh and blood, but for love of the one God who alone is lovable and worthy of honour*” (C481).

Christians, “the children of the heavenly Jerusalem”, must direct all their love to God the Father and to his Son JESUS. All other things must be loved for the sake of God, not in themselves: “*By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey His commandments*” (1 John 5,2).

The love of God is, therefore, the “*single source of all the cares and labours to which the members of this Society are dedicated*” (C483).

We need to deepen the meaning of the few words Fr. Founder says in the Constitutions about the love of God. One way of doing this is to study carefully what Fr. Founder said in his homily on “Charity” (p.44-85, a very long homily indeed!).

He begins by saying that “*Christ’s charity is simply justice at its most perfect*”: this applies to the love of Christ for us, and to the love we have for Christ. But to love someone is to do his will in all things: “*In the lover, the special proper object of love is simply the will of the beloved*”, hence loving God means doing His will in all things.

But, what does the divine will want? “*All it wants from us – what a marvel this is – is love itself*”, expressed in the two commandments of love of God and of neighbour. However, how can mortal, finite creatures ever hope to be able to respond to God’s infinite, eternal love? How can contingent beings ever hope to be able to match their own weak and limited will to the eternal, almighty Will of God? Isn’t the distance too great, impossible to fill?

Fr. Founder answers these questions by saying that the distance can indeed be filled, that our love and will can raise themselves up to the Almighty by means of JESUS Christ. It is JESUS who does the loving in us, it is JESUS who does the Will of the Father in us: “*Christ in us is our charity... Christ in us is the great lover*” (p.47, 49). It is Christ in us, therefore, that makes it possible for us to love God and to do His Will. We have learned from the letter to the Romans that the Holy Spirit prays in us on our behalf: “*For when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly, the Spirit himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words*” (Rom. 8, 26); we need to understand now how the Son loves in us.

The answer lies in the “**seal**”, the “**character**” impressed upon us in Baptism, and given even more depth in Confirmation, and Holy Orders:

“The sublime Word, God from God the Father, the figure of His substance (Heb 1, 3), through His everlasting mercy, impresses Himself upon our souls. He does this through the Sacraments which He, JESUS Christ, has instituted in His love for the sake of uniting and binding to Himself all other human beings” (p.48).

The seal is, therefore, JESUS Himself, the perfect image of the Father: this is the profound reason for the assertion in Genesis that man was created in the image of God. The true image of God can only be His Son, and at baptism the Holy Spirit impresses that image deep within our souls:

“This is the reason why many fathers of the Church teach that the image of God in man is given by the Holy Spirit, because it is the Holy Spirit that gives the character which He impresses in the soul by communicating the Word of God, the Son” (Supernatural Anthropology, p. 303).

The Holy Spirit, therefore, gives to the soul the divine Word, who becomes united to the soul by being impressed in it with a permanent seal.

“Because the indelible character left upon our souls in the sacraments is our Lord JESUS Christ himself, the brightness of God’s glory and the figure of his substance, so Christ is the great lover in all of us. He is our power of love. Love is Christ’s very own Spirit diffused in our souls” (p.49)

“What a wonder this is! Almighty God, as charity subsistent in us, is our charity! Charity in God, therefore, and charity in us, is one. It is of equal nature, of equal grandeur and of equal infinity. It is always Almighty God in himself and in us” (p.57)

“For charity to be in the world, it was necessary for God to come into the world because “God is charity”. Charity came into the world in JESUS Christ. When charity was in the world, the world could share in it: “And of His fullness we have all received” (Jn 1,16).

The love of God has been said by St. Paul to have four infinite qualities: breadth, length, height, and depth; qualities which we should also imitate.

The first characteristic is the breadth of charity: it enfolds everyone, the saints in heaven, the souls in purgatory, and all the members of the militant church on earth. But it embraces also our “enemies”: “Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that persecute and calumniate you. That you may children of your Father in heaven...”: Christ gives us His Father as teacher of charity; He gives us Almighty God, who is charity, as the example for all our actions. Our charity, therefore, must be as universal as the charity of God; must be marked by generosity and care for all. Charity must go beyond self, family, country: the true follower of JESUS is the sign of concord and peace, of meekness and humility, recognising in everyone the one God who is love.

Charity is also long and unbounded. God loves of an everlasting love: He has always loved, and He will always love. The length of charity is the constancy with which God-charity loves, who has loved all his works ab aeterno. This love has never allowed itself to be conquered by human waywardness of any kind, on the contrary, He paid our infamous debt with His own blood. We too must imitate the duration, longanimity, constancy of the love of God: we must never cease loving, never tire of doing good, never to abandon the good works we have begun, never allow the sacred fire to be extinguished.

Just as charity embraces all human beings and things through its breadth, and extends to eternity through its length, so through its end **it rises to a height which has no limit**, since the end of charity is God Himself who loves in us. All our desires, actions, endeavours have God as their end: the one necessary thing in our life is to love God with all our mind, heart, strength, so that God may be “all in all”. The whole universe is a manifestation of the love of God and is progressing, notwithstanding moral and natural evil permitted by the infinite Wisdom of God, to the fullness of the glorious kingdom of His Son. Charity reaches its height only when it is well-ordered and leads our actions to the eternal salvation of souls, the end of the universe. It is the height of charity that urges us to embrace all kinds of work for our brethren: temporal, intellectual, spiritual charity has the only purpose of saving our soul and the souls of people.

The limitless height of charity requires as its indispensable condition an **unlimited depth of humiliation, and of sacrifice, which follows on humility**. Anyone who is not humble without limit is unsuitable for the grandeur of charity. Pride is ignorant of charity. The humiliation of the Son of God brought charity to the humble: *“Being in the form of God, He thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men. He humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death...”* (Phil. 2, 6-8).

We also must be prepared to “lay down our life” for our brethren, to sacrifice ourselves for the others. Love is as strong as death and perfect charity is tied up to martyrdom.

Fr. Founder ends his homily by quoting from St. Thomas Aquinas who has left a very moving picture of the four dimensions of charity:

“Under the impulse of charity, Christ chose the death of the **Cross** in which we find the four dimensions we have mentioned. For the **breadth**, look at the *crossbeam* to which His hands were nailed; our works too must *stretch out even to our enemies*. For the **length**, look at the *upright from which hangs his body*; *charity must persevere and save mankind*. For the **height**, look at the *wood higher up where his head rests*; *our hopes must rise to eternal, divine matters*. For the **depth**, look at that section of the *wood buried in the earth* and invisibly upholding the cross; the depth of *divine love incomprehensible to us* because the reason for predestination exceeds our understanding upholds us”.

For research

It would be of great interest to compare the recent encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI, “Deus Caritas Est”, with Fr. Founder’s homily on the love of God. The concept that love is one, and that God is the principle and the term of love, the source and the purpose of love is the fundamental teaching of both documents: “Love is divine because it comes from God and unites us to God; through this unifying process it makes us a “we” which transcends our divisions and makes us one, until in the end God is “all in all”” (Deus Caritas Est, p.22).

Session Eight

HUMILITY AND THE ELECTIVE STATE

Constitutions 484-548

(Rule of Life 87-131)

Summary

*Our life will be perfect when we do all things according to the **light of reason***

*God is our Creator and Saviour, we depend entirely from Him: hence our first and absolute obligation is to seek and **cultivate the friendship of God**. The choice of contemplative life has also been recommended by JESUS as “the better part”.*

*Members of the Institute may find themselves in **two states**, the first “elective”, or chosen, dedicated to contemplation and divine worship, the second devoted to action for love of our neighbour if and when God’s will requires it.*

*The **contemplative life chosen by us** requires loving care for holy solitude, a withdrawal from people as far as possible, and a restraint from travelling or going out of the house.*

*Time is most precious in the eyes of God therefore every moment will be spent either in prayer or in work: “**Ora et Labora**”.*

***Prayers** need not be too many, but there must be “the unbroken hour of meditation”, the canonical hours, the Eucharist, and private prayers.*

***No corporal austerities** are generally prescribed, but each one will take up humbly that cross which the fatherly providence of God gives him.*

***Poverty is the abandoning of all possessions** in order to follow Christ. In their hearts, all members will imitate the poverty of Christ completely, even if they may be permitted by Superiors to retain the external possession of their goods for a time.*

*Poverty in the Institute is **subject to obedience**; in spirit, all members embrace evangelical poverty wholeheartedly, in practice, they will profess that degree of poverty which has been established for them by Fr. General.*

As far as the use of things is concerned, **everything is to be regarded as common**; no one may use anything unless he has received it from a superior.

There should be **nothing superfluous**, nothing unbecoming the poor of Christ in our houses: “Enough here for one so soon to die”; all members must love poverty as the firm bulwark of religious life. Presbyters and Fr. General make a special vow to safeguard poverty in every respect.

The vow of **chastity** is to be understood in the sense of the Church’s law prohibiting marriage to those ordained. Members must endeavour to “imitate angelic purity in the cleanliness of body and mind”.

Humility and obedience perfection the contemplative man in spirit and will. Members of the Institute must remember that they belong to “the Church learning”, not to the “Church teaching”. They come together to remedy their own weaknesses and vices, with the help of God and of each other.

They should always **assume in favour of others**, acting with great modesty and sincere and free humility. The state we choose is lowly and humble, a life hidden with Christ in God. Ambition is forbidden, and among members there should be “a holy parity”.

They will **obey and honour Superiors** as though they are JESUS, knowing that it is through them that they know the will of God: “Obedience has always been described by the Fathers as the safest and royal road”.

It is God’s will that charity towards our own souls and towards our neighbour should be exercised in an orderly manner; wisdom is to be united to charity so that we may discern the **true order of charity**, the order more pleasing to God. Religious obedience has the approval of the Church, and the very words of JESUS can be applied to religious superiors: “He who hears you, hears Me”.

All should study to observe holy obedience which is full of the will of God. Members must keep before their eyes God, our Creator for whose sake they give obedience to a human being. **Holy obedience must be perfect in the outward action, in the will, and in the understanding.**

Great care and charity should be shown to **our sick brethren**, especially those who are about to die. They must be accompanied to their LORD by prayers, loving assistance; and Holy Mass should be offered for them by all the priests of the Institute.

This charity which we show towards our sick and **dead brethren** must be a strong bond uniting extern and intern religious, and sons and ascribed, with the whole Society.

1- The Elective State

Members of the Institute may find themselves successively in two different states, the first – the **elective state** – dedicated to contemplation and divine worship, the second – the **active state** – dedicated to works of charity for our neighbours.

The elective state comes logically first, it is “*chosen*” for its own sake and for the sake of doing the will of God, and not our own, in the works of charity that will be presented to us “*as time goes by*”. We choose the elective state for at least two reasons:

1. **The light of reason**, which is the truth that enlightens our minds, makes it clear that God, the author and the perfecter of all things, is to be sought at all times as the absolute Good and the sole end of all things. The contemplative life allows us to dedicate all our thoughts, desires, and energy in seeking union with God.
2. **Our LORD Himself recommended the contemplative life**, not only by giving us His own example of 30 years of hidden life in Nazareth, but also by saying to Martha, “*One thing is needful; Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her*” (Lk 10, 42).

In his booklet, “Rosminian Spirituality and Biblical Theology”, Fr. Deidun rightly warns against the mistake made by some who believe that the Institute is essentially contemplative and that it undertakes works of charity only because driven by circumstances. He quotes passages from Fr. Founder’s writings that appear to confirm such “traditional” belief: “*The Institute is radically contemplative, dedicated to a life that is quiet and private*” (Letter to Mons. Grasser, Nov. 1831); and yet, only four months later, Fr. Founder writes to Don P. Bruni, “*Our society is not so much a society of quiet retirement, as it might appear, but of action and sacrifice for charity... It is true that there are periods of retirement, meditations and many other aids... but after that we are soldiers of Christ and very often we have to march with rifles on our shoulders, dispersed far and wide in the field of the Lord*” (Epist. Ascetico 1, 509).

The theological reason for the “elective” state, according to Fr. Deidun, is Fr. Founder’s Principles of Passivity and of Indifference, which are based on the biblical theology of the New Covenant. Fr. Founder discovered both principles by living them first, making them his two rules of conduct; he then made them the foundation of the Maxims, and of the Constitutions. They are his essential charism, firmly rooted in biblical theology: “*It is certain that these principles express the charism of Antonio Rosmini and the essential nature of the Institute of Charity*” (Deidun, p.14).

Both principles are based on the theology of the New Covenant, which we have already seen, and are explained in all their theological implications in Fr. Founder’s Supernatural Anthropology and Introduction to the Gospel of St. John. Fundamental for a proper understanding is the Rosminian distinction between “natural” and “supernatural”, “natural” denoting all that man is and does in virtue of his own faculties, and “supernatural” what he begins to be and do when God – through the character and grace of Baptism – becomes the inner source of his activity. “Natural” man can do absolutely

nothing for his own salvation and perfection; he is utterly impotent: “*Without Me you cannot do anything*” and “*No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him*”. Acknowledgement of one’s impotence, the basis of true humility, forces one to direct all attention and trust in God: God in us can accomplish the greatest things: “*I can do all things in Him who gives me strength*”; “*Without Me you are impotent; with Me you will bear much fruit: you will perform the same works as I do myself, and greater ones still*”.

The contemplative state, therefore, is a time when we take stock of our incapability of doing by ourselves any good whatsoever and allow God to act fully in us, knowing that with Him we can do any thing. We are at rest, at peace, working earnestly, driven by His grace, on the purification of our soul so as to become more and more pleasing to God, and prepared at the same time to spring into action for love of our neighbour if, when, and where God wants us to engage in the active life. We immerse ourselves in contemplative life as if we are going to die in it; but, at the same time, we remain completely open and ready to follow the will of God in the active life as soon as the Lord indicates it to us through obedience: this is what Fr. Deidun calls “**Explosive passivity**”!

For Reflection

“I had for a long time been practising the principle of passivity, prompted by the awareness of my own unqualified impotence and by the lesson of experience. For every time I had undertaken some project like, for example, the Society of Friends, it was always an absolute failure. God permitted this so that I might take a look at myself, put aside my native pride and come to know my impotence. When, subsequently, I reflected upon my passive conduct, I recognised expressly how right and necessary was the principle of passivity which, unbeknown to myself, had been my guide” (Diary of Charity, 1821).

Failures and disappointments can often be the source of great good for ourselves and for others, if seen in the light of God. Formators could use the example of Fr. Founder to encourage candidates who have experienced failures, to read in them God’s loving plan.

2- Piety and the Interior Life

The Benedictine Motto, “**Ora et Labora**”, expresses the essential activities of the contemplative life. Holy solitude must be filled in particular with an intense life of prayer. Chapter 10 of Section 9 of the Constitutions deals in a special way with prayer in the elective state (C758-768) and it begins with an important paragraph:

“The mystic union of that Society, by which JESUS has brought together for the sake of their salvation all those who believe in Him, is such that a secret and truly divine plan enables each to share in the merits of all who are united to the Head. Hence there is no work of piety towards God which cannot be rightly numbered amongst works of charity towards our neighbour” (C578).

The reality of the mystical body of Christ means that the prayers that rise to God from places of contemplation benefit all the members of the body. The Church has always valued contemplative Orders as “power-houses” for the whole world through their constant and faithful prayers. In the elective state our members can dedicate themselves more readily to prayer bringing graces and blessings to the Institute and to the whole of humanity. The example of St. Therese of Lisieux, a contemplative nun, doctor of the Church and patron saint of missionaries, should be sufficient to reassure people in the contemplative life that their life of intense prayer is valued as greatly beneficial to all.

In the Introduction to the Gospel of St. John Fr. Founder goes as far as to write, “**Christianity is first and foremost piety**”, since the essence of Christianity consists in the union and incorporation of the human creature with God; and in this consists also the principle of piety – which is first of all and fundamentally the experience and feeling of Christ. In the Five Wounds, Fr. Founder claimed that Christianity spread rapidly and peacefully throughout the world not because it was based on a philosophy or on preaching only; it converted the whole world because of the power of Christian worship and the communication of the power of Christ Himself through the Sacraments.

In Baptism we receive the character and sanctifying grace, the Word of God in our soul through the power of the Spirit whereby we become in Christ the “**image of God**”. By the impression of the Word on our soul we become a new creature, we are raised to the supernatural level with a new intellect, a new will, and a new fundamental feeling that allow us to perceive the action of God in us. Of all these new supernatural principles God is both the cause and the effect: God operates in us and His actions terminate in God. Our human intellect, will, feeling are taken up and raised to new supernatural heights by the action of God in our soul, an action which Fr. Founder calls “**deitriniform**”.

Christianity is based therefore on a **supernatural feeling** that originates from direct communion with Christ:

“Experiential mystical theology is concerned with actual communication with God, an interior revelation, the effect of His real action on man, made up of feelings and perceptions which make God known directly through experience, immediately, by means of a communication of His own substance made in us. This experience tells the man of God that a single such perception is of greater value than all the words, the disputes, the Schools, and the libraries of the world. His knowledge of God is in the nature of a fact, a positive cognition – something complete, satisfying and operative” (Intro, p193).

This is the reason for the priority of the contemplative or elective state in the Institute, “*the diligent preserving of holy solitude in which, as far as human frailty allows, we attend to God intensively and without interruption*” (C488). This is the reason for the priority of prayer in the Institute. It is interesting to note that the first duty and responsibility of Fr. General is “*uninterrupted prayer*”; the general government of the Institute must take second place to this.

The priority of prayer must go together with a **constant effort to purify oneself** from all vices and sinful longings. The Common Rules also remind us that *“the chief and most solid work of piety consists in striving by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to carry out more perfectly day by day all that is required of us by our state or grade, so as to join our lives ever more closely to God our Lord”* (no.11). If piety is intimate union with Christ, then anything that brings about this union is an act of piety: prayer, meditation, purification of our soul, doing perfectly the will of God through the duties that obedience has given us.

Fr. Founder stresses the need for a **full understanding of prayers**, especially the liturgical prayers of the Church. In the Five Wounds he laments the poor participation of both lay people and priests in worship due to lack of understanding of words and rituals: *“It is necessary that the people understand what is said and done in the holy sacrifice, in the administration of the sacraments, and in all church services. The separation between people and clergy at worship through lack of comprehension is the first of those gaping wounds dripping with blood in the mystical Body of JESUS Christ”* (Five Wounds, p.12).

“The eternal Lord, who is pure intelligence, sets no value on mere “sound and fury”. What He looks for is the worship of our rational faculties and the affections of our heart: our “rationale obsequium”. And so He can take no pleasure in prayers and invocations that are merely so in outward form, a mere husk, that altogether lack soul and life, that are dead. Such prayers, far from sending up an agreeable odour of incense, rather smell to heaven like the putrid stench of a corpse” (Rosmini, Conferenze sui Doveri Ecclesiastici, p.48).

Fr. Founder is for **simplicity in prayer**. He does not recommend lengthy, complicated formulas and devotions; rather, he thinks our souls can find their total rest in the great liturgical acts of worship of the Church and in the simple, **spontaneous personal prayers** like the Rosary – with its repetition of the Our Father and the Hail Mary - and devotional aspirations or “ejaculatory prayers” which are brief, and intense, prayers for the needs of the Church, of all our neighbours, of the Institute, and of our own personal needs (see the nine Pater/Hail Mary/Glory Be)..

The liturgy is “the great school of the Christian people”, which, in the finest periods of the Church’s history, taught the faithful through words and rituals, mainly in the Eucharistic Sacrifice and the other Sacraments: *“Liturgical prayer, which is the prayer of the Church, and has a precise foundation in theology, must always remain fundamental and have first place. Through Baptism the Christian becomes a living member of the Church, and at the same time becomes a sharer in her liturgical power, in the priesthood proper to the faithful”* (Valle, Christian Piety, p.21).

For Reflection

The Liturgy is the act of worship of the entire Church; it is therefore, the exclusive responsibility of the Church to define and promulgate the Rites that she finds consonant with her long liturgical and theological tradition. Members of the Institute of Charity,

with their professed love and obedience to the Church, should be the first to obey all liturgical directives provided by the Congregation for Divine Worship.

Do Formators feel that the Liturgy is given sufficient importance, time, preparation in all its dimensions during the years of formation?

The Eucharist, the supreme expression of Christ's love, "*justice at its most perfect*", is at the centre of piety and it should always be at the centre of community life, the source from which all good things come. What is typically "Rosminian" is the stress on the "blessing" of bread and wine, which represent all things in the universe and the universe itself. Mass, therefore, is seen as a cosmic event even from this angle.

"It will be a special point of devotion to see that the blessing of the Eucharistic bread be extended to everything the Christian uses in this world. In this way, all things will be considered consecrated to divine worship, and God, who is honoured in all things, will cherish and bless those who adore Him in spirit and in truth" (C497).

Fr. Founder says that our Institute could be called the "***Institute of Blessing***", because, through the Eucharist, we desire "*all persons and things to be blessed*". This blessing of everything in the universe through the daily Eucharist should provide a solid foundation for a theology of ecological issues, very important today given the strong emphasis on the environment and all related problems. Pope Francis' Encyclical "*Laudato Si*" is a powerful reminder of the urgent need to consider and feel the earth as our common home.

Devotion to the Precious Blood of JESUS remained constant in the life of Fr. Founder, since the time he received from Magdalen of Canossa a booklet of meditations and prayers to the Precious Blood. The booklet was on the cabinet beside his bed at the moment of his death on the Feast of the Precious Blood.

In the Constitutions, Fr. Founder recommends the "***offering of our blood***" in union with the Blood of JESUS our Redeemer, saying that "*it is an act of piety for which we shall have a special love*" (C762). This offering should be made frequently, during Mass, "*with humility, fear, and trembling*", especially by presbyters and major superiors, but also by all other members of the Institute.

For Reflection

Fr. Rosmini's ***devotion to Mary***, especially Our Lady of Sorrows, is well documented. He was looking forward to writing a special book on Mary in his Supernatural Anthropology. Writing to Fr. Paolo Barola, he says, "*The last book of a work I am at present engaged on will deal with our blessed Lady. Oh, what a consolation it will be to me if by my labour I succeed in arriving that far! I rejoice to think of it. Pray for me to our dear Mother that she may obtain this favour for me and give me light to write worthily of her*" (Ep. Comp. V, p.173).

His faith lead him to believe that it was a sign of Providence his being born on 24th March: “*God, when He granted me the grace of being born on the vigil of the feast of our Lady’s Annunciation, showed that He meant to give her as Mother and Protectress, and this I have always experienced*”.

Fr. Founder recited daily the **Rosary**, which, after Mass, he considered his most pressing duty of the day. In difficult times, he looked up to Mary for help and protection: “*I have a complete faith after God in our beloved Mother and Leader – Mary; and I entrust to her also this whole business, and remain entirely tranquil in myself. The whole Institute is her child; let us leave our Mother to act. Meanwhile I can tell you that she every day grants me new favours and new consolations*” (Ep. Asc. II, p.474).

For a more comprehensive treatment of Fr. Founder’s writings and devotion to Mary see the booklet, “Christian Piety and the Interior Life” (A. Valle, translated by J. Morris, pp.88-111).

After the teaching on prayer, Fr. Founder deals with the three vows giving particular emphasis to the vow of poverty and to “the humility of the elective state”. The vow of chastity is, as usual, dealt with very briefly, and the vow of obedience is explained in greater depth.

Poverty: “*mother*” and “*firm bulwark*”

Evangelical poverty, for Fr. Founder, demands the perfect renunciation of all that he possesses in order to follow Christ: “*Behold, we have left all things and have followed you*” (Mt.19,27). Members of the Institute must embrace wholeheartedly this “***unrestricted poverty***”, must be truly poor and ready at all times to go out begging for their food. All our Houses should welcome visitors with the cry, “***Enough here for one so soon to die!***” (C515).

However, poverty in the Institute is subject to obedience, and it will be Superiors who will decide the degree of poverty for individuals and communities. Moreover, “*the person who follows Christ with his whole heart, and by an act of will abandons all his possessions, may still retain for a time his worldly substance as far as his external and civil dominion is concerned*” (C503). This external retention is permitted until one takes the Coadjutor’s vows that make him “fully integrated” into the Society; it is a retention that may prove useful if one has to withdraw from religious life altogether.

There is another characteristic in the vow of poverty that appeared new, and even revolutionary, in Fr. Founder’s time. In the Institute of Charity, neither the religious Society nor the community exercises legal ownership. This is done by individual religious, in their capacity as citizens with civil rights. This was contrary to the current usage of religious Institutes approved by the Church: they had juridical rights over their

properties whereas all their members, by taking the vow of property, had to divest themselves totally of their legal capacity for ownership. Fr. Founder had to battle firmly with the Roman Congregation to persuade them of both the full religious validity and the civil wisdom of the characteristic of the vow of poverty in our Institute. These are some of the exchanges, starting with the Roman Congregation's objections:

"Leaving the individual with ownership annuls the most characteristic and essential part of the vow, that is real abdication of ownership. Furthermore, this concept of poverty was opposed to the gospel teaching and to the sacred Canons of the Council of Trent which prescribed that religious abdicate all ownership".

Fr. Founder clarified his views in his many letters to Card. Castracane, and especially to Fr. Setti, his procurator in Rome, who were dealing with the approval of the Constitutions:

"The external and legal renunciation of ownership is not necessary to constitute the substance of the religious state... Unfortunately we ourselves have seen religious orders destroyed at the hands of civil governments and vows no longer recognised by law... Given the present circumstances and the ubiquity of false teaching, the goods of a religious institute are considered as public property by almost all governments of the world. This is why governments feel authorised to lay hold of them" (see Valle, pp. 104-106).

It is only fair to add that Fr. Founder's new revolutionary understanding of the vow of poverty was soon adopted by many other new religious Congregations, and even by the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars in Rome.

Apart from the civil, external rights over properties, Fr. Founder was very demanding on the exercise of evangelical poverty. He also envisaged, for example, a special House where full poverty would be exercised by the members of the community, living *"solely on alms begged of the faithful for love of JESUS Christ"* (C505). He wanted community houses to reflect the interior poverty of the brethren, with nothing superfluous, nothing unbecoming the poor of Christ: ***"All members must love poverty as the firm bulwark of religious life"*** (C515).

"The enemy of mankind tries to weaken this refuge and stronghold which the Lord our God has urged us to use against the devil and the other enemies of perfection" (C516): to safeguard the Institute against possible decline and corruption in keeping true poverty Fr. Founder ruled that every presbyter will profess the additional vow against laxity in poverty.

The fifth of the Five Wounds deals precisely with poverty within the Church, and by extension in the Institute: *"The profession of poverty was for long the glory of the priestly ministry; the majority of men called to the priesthood abandoned their possessions or gave them away to the poor... The outstretched hands of the poor, of widows, lepers,*

slaves, pilgrims and the destitute became vaults where the Church could deposit her treasures without fear of theft”.

The early Church was poor, but free. **Her evangelical poverty was safeguarded by seven maxims which regulated the acquisition, administration and use of material goods.** Fr. Rosmini explains these ancient maxims with a passionate plea that the Church of his time, the Church of our time, (and the Institute), may embrace them once again if she is to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

1. The first requirement was that all offerings to the Church had to be **“spontaneous”**.
2. The second maxim protecting the Church from corruption was that goods should be possessed, administered and dispensed **in common**.
3. The third, precious maxim was that the clergy should use church goods only for the **strict needs** of their maintenance; the remainder was to be applied to pious works, especially in **alms for the poor**.
4. The fourth requirement governing Church goods and safeguarding the integrity of the clergy was that ecclesiastical wealth used for pious, charitable purposes, should also be assigned to **fixed, determined works** to prevent arbitrariness and self-interest from interfering with the management of the goods.
5. The fifth requirement safeguarding the Church from the danger of riches was “a **generous spirit**, prompt to give, slow to receive”.
6. The sixth requirement compelled the Church to **make public** the administration of all her possessions.
7. The seventh and last requirement is that the Church should administer her goods watchfully and **carefully**.

See The Five Wounds of the Church, pp. 133-156

The Humility of the Elective State

Humility is said to be “*the foundation of the whole life chosen by us*” (C521). We belong to the Church learning, not to the Church teaching. The immediate aim of our coming together is to be in a safe place, separated as far as possible from the tumult and dangers of this world, where we may become holy together by constant purification of our own vices and defects, with the powerful help of God’s grace.

This humility is expressed both by our withdrawal from the world and by the way we deal with one another, always prepared to give way to others, always presuming in favour of others until the opposite is known. Our tone should be that of brothers and friends, not

teachers; our speech should be sensible and sincere, avoiding rashness, pomposity, ignorance and any show of vanity.

“The state that we love and choose is lowly and humble, a life hidden with Christ in God; the member in our way of life is a person directed to his own interior life, weeping over himself, grounded in the bitterness of penitence. Nothing is more contrary to this state than ambition for posts of honour... There should be a holy parity amongst all members” (C525).

Session Nine

UNDERTAKING WORKS OF CHARITY

Constitutions 549-655

(Rule of Life 132-152)

Summary

The person who truly has love in his heart, ***wills every good***, because he wills only good; and so he wills both the good which is in God, who is good without qualifications, and the good which, qualified and participated, can be in a human being. From this it is clear that charity is of its nature universal since it extends itself to every good.

The realisation of the greatest possible good in the Institute will depend upon the judgement of the Superiors who will arrange the duties of every individual so that the harmonious work of many may result in the ***maximum amount of good***.

Although the Lord has given us the command of mutual love He has not obliged us to search for the needs of our neighbour. We must do whatever we can when such needs are ***disclosed to us by themselves***. Our Lord Himself did not go out looking for people to heal, but they came to Him; the good Samaritan did not search for people to help but he found one on the road to Jericho and helped him in every way.

The first rule for accepting works of charity is to ***wait for Divine Providence***; when an occasion of exercising charity offers itself we must take it as put before us by Providence.

The second rule is to let ourselves be guided by a sincere ***sense of humility*** that persuades us that by ourselves we are incapable of doing any good; when JESUS demands it then we are assured of his mighty help and strength.

The third rule is to ***wait to be asked*** by our neighbour, either expressly or tacitly. If many requests come our way we must attend first to the ones that were made first.

Three conditions must be kept in mind before accepting a new work of charity:

1. No new work should undermine the perfect execution of work which we already have, although minor inconveniences may be accepted in certain cases;
2. No new work combined with works already undertaken should form a burden exceeding and shattering the strength of the members;

3. Nothing should be started which cannot be executed with a certain perfection, with availability of well prepared Superiors and brethren.

The preferences to be observed in relation to those who ask are the following:

1. Requests from the Holy Father are to be given first and immediate priority;
2. Requests from Bishops equally should be given careful consideration; however, since the Society is not bound to Bishops by vow, Superiors are free to evaluate requests in the light of their overall responsibilities and commitments;
3. Generally speaking, Superiors should reflect that “the more universal the good, the more divine it is”, hence the help afforded great nations or well attended universities may be preferred to works of charity which are less universal;
4. ***“The charity of the Holy Spirit will teach those accepting work to rule the Society of love with love alone”.***

There are three types of charity considered in relation to the good of our neighbour:

1. ***Temporal Charity***, that consists in helping people in their temporal needs;
2. ***Intellectual Charity***, that deals with cultivating the mind and developing the intellectual faculties of our neighbour;
3. ***Spiritual Charity***, that consists in the salvation of souls and the eternal life.

All three types are closely connected since both temporal and intellectual charity must be undertaken for the sake of spiritual charity; and spiritual charity also deals with intellectual and temporal charity – in the work of a parish, for example.

The pastoral care of souls must be the preferred work of charity because “*it exhibits the full and perfect notion of spiritual charity. The care of souls is the greatest of all offices of charity, it encompasses and actualises universal charity. It must be considered as the complete perfection and fullness of this Society*” (C605).

Superiors should be more ***insistent upon the sanctification*** of members than on increasing works of charity, and on perfecting works we already have rather than spreading ourselves too widely.

We should never ***abandon works*** of charity because of the imprudence of Superiors when they first undertook them, therefore Superiors must always go forward with the utmost diligence and spiritual wisdom.

Works which are “*perpetual or require several persons working together*” should be abandoned only for “*some grave and obvious reason*”. With regard to subjects, all should be ready to leave any ministry whatsoever, and undertake a new one, without excuse or delay, when obedience prescribes (C654).

Session Ten

PREPARING FOR WORKS OF CHARITY

Constitutions 656-820 (Rule of Life 142-152)

Summary

Offices in the Society can be of two types, **primary and secondary**, according to the extent of the charity. Presbyters exercise general charity, coadjutors exercise particular works of charity.

Superiors of Houses dedicated to special, not general charity, are called **rectors**. Those who preside over Houses dedicated to general charity are called **provosts**.

Examples of special or particular charity are parishes, colleges, novitiate house, missions, etc. The charity exercised in such places is restricted to the special purpose assigned to them. Examples of general charity are houses dedicated to universal charity, like the running of the Institute, or of the Province, or of pastoral and intellectual charity which is at the service of wider communities of people.

*Fr Founder envisaged the formation of a **College or Academy of Doctors of the Society**, composed by religious, Adopted sons and daughters, and Ascribed. These are Scholars who are outstanding for their knowledge of philosophical, theological, biblical matters, etc. having dedicated their life to studying and publishing books, or in lecturing on these subjects. The College or Academy of Doctors should always be available for consultation, for presentations of themes, or for lectures in the Institute. Their knowledge and understanding should make them very precious on occasions of Assemblies, Provincial and General Chapters, or in disputed issues in a Province and in the Institute.*

Superiors must make every effort to acquire a **perfect knowledge of the brethren** so that they may be selected prudently and efficaciously to different works of charity. They should not rely on conjectures but on true assessment, and should always be led by pure charity.

Disclosure of conscience is the best means for acquiring true knowledge of the brethren and therefore there should be a real openness and sincerity of heart on the part of the brethren. Superiors can also discern the hearts and minds of the brethren informally, through conversations and discussions.

Frequent and extensive reports should also help Superiors to know the brethren; such reports should be sent from superior to a higher superior and to Fr. General. The purpose will be simply to identify oneself with the brother, having an intimate knowledge so that he may be given an obedience which will be the best for him before the Lord.

*Fr Founder highlights first of all **reports** on the brethren as merely means for getting Superiors to know them better. However, he insists also **on visiting them**, talking to them individually as spiritual fathers, and gaining their confidence and trust. The Society should truly be a “society of friends”.*

The members of the Institute consecrate themselves to perfect indifference and therefore they are **ready for all kinds of obedience** in the pursuit of universal charity. Superiors, however, are under obligation to see the natural inclinations and gifts of the brethren as signs of Divine Providence and decide obedience accordingly if possible.

If Superiors **cannot take into account** the natural inclinations of the individual because of particular circumstances they should appoint the person to a work of charity **temporarily**.

Ideally, the **sphere of office** (the work of charity which has been assigned to the religious) and the **sphere of activity** (the natural talents, powers, inclinations of the religious) should be in perfect balance. A religious can be frustrated by a work which he dislikes or in which his natural gifts and powers are not given sufficient space. We are under obligation to exploit the talents the Lord has given us, and all Superiors should try to make it easier for the brethren to enjoy their work, and to find in it ample opportunities to use all their natural gifts and talents (C686).

Although the authority of Superiors is so extensive, it is **not simply an authority to command**. Rather, in view of the importance of the dispositions which members have, it is **a ministry** expressing what they themselves must will, and what they do in fact will (C693).

Superiors' commands **are not left to their caprice**. When Superiors give orders they will consider the **voluntariness of the obedience** of their subjects and will genuinely perceive in that voluntariness the ruling principle and nature of the government they have accepted. Their authority is totally directed towards the salvation of the souls of the members.

“Every lover of Christ will choose, in all his actions, including his exercise of works of charity, that which will enable him to please God more abundantly. Hence a Superior, as it were transforming himself through charity into each of the subjects individually, will have the same zeal for each one as a true disciple would have for himself” (C702).

The brethren engaged in **spiritual, intellectual, temporal works** of charity must be helped in every way by Superiors so that they may discharge their duties towards our neighbour with great efficiency and every consolation in the Lord.

The **pastoral office** is the greatest form of spiritual charity; the **education of youth** of intellective charity; the **happy conclusion of discord and strife** is to be considered the highest form of temporal charity.

*Fr Founder insisted on **on-going formation** by means of brief courses for everyone, on preaching, liturgy, church music, theology, spirituality, biblical studies, etc. He also mentions studies on architecture, surveying, technical drawing and paintings, calligraphy, printing, etc. which could prove beneficial for the running of our own Houses (C773-774).*

Fr Founder was **parish priest** for the short period of one year, and yet we know that he spent all his energy in caring for his flock; it is truly amazing what he achieved in such brief time. In the Constitutions, there is a paragraph worth knowing, both for our own edification and for our own practice, should Divine Providence calls us to be parish priests. This is what he says:

“The Parish Priest is to be considered the true friend of all, and must be each one’s sincere helper. He will visit his sheep individually and repeatedly. These visits will be made without distinction of persons for the sake of the spiritual and temporal necessities of his flock. They will not be carried out purposelessly, nor for the sake of ceremony or worldly respect. No sheep, old though he may be, will ever become a stranger to him, nor will he be a stranger to his sheep, or un-distinguished for his love and kind deeds” (C793).

Reflection: **The Rosminian Superior**

*Obedience in the Institute is **universal** like charity, and **reasonable**. This statement means that Superiors have authority to command and to assign members to any work of charity. However, this apparently unlimited authority is abundantly checked by the other essential quality of “Rosminian obedience” which is “reasonableness”. This means that the Superior should be extremely cautious before giving a command: he has to take into account the gifts, inclinations, desires of the religious since these are God’s talents which ought to be developed; moreover, he has to find for the religious a work or ministry which will fulfil, as far as possible, the energy and abilities of the person. The Superior has to remember that “**reasonableness**” is promised and guaranteed since the time of the first Probation, and in all subsequent stages. Moreover, the relation between the Superior and the religious should be so smooth that they in effect will think and want the same thing at all times. The Superior is the spiritual father of the religious, hence all his efforts should be geared towards the spiritual and corporal well-being of the religious.*

Session Eleven

THE HEAD OF THE SOCIETY

Constitutions 821-951 (Rule of Life 153-228)

Summary

A well-structured Society like ours needs a Fr. General, **appointed for life**, who will take charge of the universal good.

Fr. General will have the following **seven qualities**:

1. He will have the greatest union and familiarity with God in prayer and in action;
2. He will be of example in every virtue, especially charity, humility, kindness, meekness, greatness of soul, and fortitude;
3. He will possess an outstanding gift of understanding and judgement, combined with learning and holy prudence and discernment of spirits;
4. He will show vigilance, management, and effort in directing affairs to a successful conclusion;
5. He will have bodily gifts: good health, right age, authoritative appearance;
6. He must enjoy general esteem and a good name;
7. He must be resplendent with every kind of virtues, goodness, justice, love for all, sound judgment, sufficient learning.

The same qualities should be found in all other major Superiors.

*According to the Constitutions, Fr General should be **appointed for life**. In case of severe illness, however, or of a serious decline of his mental faculties, he should stand back and let the Vicar General run all the affairs of the Institute. The Vicar General could be the Vicar of Spiritual Charity or another presbyter previously appointed by Fr General and approved by his advisers. Fr Founder discussed his reasons for keeping the appointment for life (C821); in view of the example given by Pope Benedict XVI, however, he might have reconsidered his objections to it. See also C1020, which mentions the election of a new Fr General during the life of his predecessor, in cases of grave sin on the part of the Fr General, and in other cases “without fault on his part” (C1020).*

Generally speaking, **Fr. General has full power** to:

1. Admit persons to the Society or to dismiss them, and to employ all persons subject to obedience for various duties;
2. Apply and dispose goods for different works of charity
3. Undertake, direct and relinquish the works of charity themselves.

Fr General has the power to arrange all things necessary **regarding temporal goods**, who is to have the “external ownership” of temporal goods, and when he is to relinquish it. He has power with regard to the sale and purchase of temporal goods. Provincials, administrators, and bursars will share this power in so far as the General communicates it.

In the **election of major Superiors** (e.g. Provincials), he should have various names proposed to him by other Superiors and he should normally follow their advice.

Fr. General is responsible for the universal **observance of the Constitutions**.

The care which the Society must have in regard to Fr General can be summarised under the following six points:

1. Lodging, clothing, personal expenses – as decided by the Institute;
2. Care of the body: work and great severity should not be excessive
3. Care of his soul, which can never be neglected even in persons of great authority;
4. The offer of greater dignity and office in the Church: the acceptance is subject to the decision of the Society;
5. Care and decisions in case of grave physical illness, or of old age, with no hope of improvement and with possible serious damage to public good;
6. Decisions regarding cases of serious misconduct, which could result in removing him from the high office or in his dismissal from the Society.

Fr. General will have **three immediate vicars** to assist him in spiritual, intellectual, temporal charity. He will also have a secretary, personal assistants, and an admonitor; he should also appoint advisers from each of the Provinces.

The **Vicar General**, appointed by Fr. General during his own lifetime, will take over the immediate government of the Society after the death of Fr. General; he will also arrange for the election of the new Fr. General. If Fr General has not appointed anyone to become Vicar General, at his death, the Vicar of Spiritual Charity will take over for the election of the next Fr General.

Session Twelve

AIDS TO UNION

Constitutions 952-1051 (Rule of Life 229-235)

Summary

Union in spirit among members will be helped by having fewer coadjutors and fewer presbyters, but truly worthy of their grade.

Superiors should **not be moved** from office needlessly, “*they should grow old therein*”. The higher the position the more difficult it should be to move them (C959).

When a superior is chosen he must be able to **work well with his assistants**, who, therefore, must also be chosen very carefully so that “*the superior and his aides may be knit together harmoniously*” (C960)

Members belonging to different **regions and languages** are to be **intermingled**, and no house composed of one nation only is permitted. All should learn the language of the region in which they live unless their own is more useful (C961).

Frequent correspondence between inferiors and superiors will be of great assistance. The purpose is to gain the necessary information about the brethren which will allow for the right obedience and the ideal sphere of activity for them.

The **election of Fr. General** is the responsibility of the **full Roman Congregation**. Numbers 967-1051 deal with the persons entitled to a passive or active vote, the procedures of the election, the election of the four assistants and of the admonitor. There is also the very minor distinction between “the full Roman Congregation” (not all who are entitled to vote need to be present but can send their vote by letter) and the “General Congregation” (they must be present in person - see 1043E).

General Congregations should be summoned only in very urgent cases – like the threat of a schism or profound division in the Institute. “**Generally speaking, Fr. General himself will act on his own authority, aided by the communication he has with the Society as a whole and by the work of those living with him. In this way he will free the Society as a whole from work and distractions, as far as he can. The full Roman Congregation will be sufficient for the election of Fr. General, and for other, even very important, business**” (1044).

Session Thirteen

THE WELL-BEING OF THE SOCIETY

Constitutions 1052-1068 (Rule of Life 246-255)

Summary

The Institute has been established not by human will and means but by the grace of God and our Lord JESUS Christ. The work, therefore, must be entrusted entirely to Him, by frequent prayers and sacrifices.

Essential means for well-being and growth are the solid and perfect virtues of the members, like uprightness, justice, charity, humility, pure intention, familiarity with God, and sincere zeal for souls.

The Institute must be “armed” with the following tools/virtues:

1. Profound knowledge of the Gospels, “*the spring from which these Constitutions have flowed like a brook*” (1054), and the consequent imitation of Christ;
2. Doing the Father’s Will, like JESUS. We must be at rest in the Lord, always attentive and ready to follow the directives of Divine Providence;
3. Love for the Bride of Christ, the Church, above all else;
4. Imitation of Christ in His humility and obedience. Members must get on with their duties, resolved to give up their life in the course of duty, fighting manfully without expecting help from anyone, not even the Institute, but from God.
5. Imitation of Christ’s justice and charity towards other human beings. Dealing with perfect justice towards all, avoiding rash judgements, fleeing every deceit, and not seeking any advantage of this world;
6. Sound and wide learning must be sought for the benefit of others;
7. Great care must be taken in the administration of temporal goods, it should be carried out honourably and openly. “*The Society should be able at any time to undergo judgement by the whole world*” in relation to temporal goods.
8. The suppression of ambition, the mother of all evils in every community, will be of the highest importance.

Good and evil in the attitude of the Head influences the whole body. It is necessary that members pray constantly for Fr. General and Superiors. “The quality of subjects will almost certainly be that of their superiors” (1062)

Strong community life will help all members; the bond of obedience will strengthen the harmony of their wills. There should be moderation in corporal and spiritual labour.

The Institute must be grateful to all **benefactors**, remembering them in prayer.

Finally, all must learn and **know the Constitutions** and put them into practice, so that they may achieve true human greatness: *“Rooted and grounded in love, may they have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the LOVE OF CHRIST which surpasses all knowledge, that they may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we may ask or think, to Him be glory in the Church and in Christ JESUS, unto all generations, world without end. Amen”*. (Eph. 3, 17-21).



“The Society desires, and each member should desire with it,
that its entire Constitutions should be observed
without any relaxation
according to our way of life”

(C706)

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