

Knowing Your Aspirants

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“As he passed by, he saw Simon and his brother, Andrew, casting their nets into the sea. He said, ‘Come, follow me. I will make you fishers of men.’ They abandoned their nets and followed him.” (Mark 1:16–17, NAB)

“He went on further and saw James and John, the sons of Zebedee, and he called them. They left their nets and followed him.” (Mark 1:19–20)

“As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the customs post. He said to him, ‘Follow me’, and he got up and followed him.” (Matt 9:9)

How, as a vocation promoter, I wish it was that easy! These sentences from the gospels are challenging for those of us who are vocation promoters. What Jesus could see in these people we often wish we could see in potential members for our congregations. But, sadly or fortunately, we do not have the same powers of vision. We console ourselves with the understanding that it is perfectly human is to be imperfect. Hence, we struggle on trying to find human solutions to the challenge of vocation promotion for our own group and for the life of the Church community we serve.

This has prompted me to do some reflection about issues related to such matters from my experience working, mostly in East Africa, with youth generally and with candidates in the pre-novitiate program of my own congregation.

Formation direction and vocation discernment, the personal ongoing dialogue and accompaniment between the vocation promoter and the aspirant for membership, is a vital component in the life of a congregation. Apart from checking the various pieces of information that have been provided through written correspondence or email contact, by engaging in this ministry we become a mentor for the people we are working with. The process assists the potential candidate to address the various steps of discernment in a planned and reflective way and to enter into a process of self-discovery. This increases awareness of needs, desires, and the necessity of developing the spiritual side of one's life.

After a period of time, perhaps one or two years, **this personal dialogue will give the vocation promoter a sense of the real desires of the aspirant.** Knowing this allows us to tap into the level of motivation and their ability to resist discouragement, generate enthusiasm for generous service of others, especially with those less well off, and sustain interest in matters spiritual. It enables more than mere evaluation of the person; it becomes part of the development of sensitive listening, mutual trust and openness that continues the process of formation that may lead to growth of the embryonic desire for membership of a religious congregation.

The Ministry of the Vocation Promoter

All of us understand that **formation is a process** and that a candidate's ability to engage in the process is not always easy to assess. As a vocation promoter, I also recognize that the call to religious life is uncommon. The fragility of our congregational populations is evidence of the uniqueness of the call to the consecrated life of commitment, whether to the vowed life of chastity, poverty and obedience or the consecrated lifestyle of members of missionary institutes. Hence, we must put some real human effort into this ministry of vocation promotion, especially the initial period of discernment. It is unfair to the individual and to the religious congregations to admit people into programs for which they are unsuitable and do not possess the appropriate abilities.

Initial Contact

The first contacts are critical in developing the trust that is essential for good discernment to begin. The first welcome will begin shaping the person's response to dialogue. It must be welcoming and encouraging. Here, vocation promoters begin to model the openness we are looking for in the aspirant.

To be able to **model this openness**, it is important that vocation promoters clearly communicate their commitment to helping the person explore what it is that will help them respond faithfully to what he or she senses as God's call. We must use all our personal human skills in this work.

In this initial contact phase, we begin to get into the territory of spirituality and the territory of sexuality. Both are at the core of consecrated life: spirituality at the core of our relationship with our God, with our brothers and sisters, and with the world beyond us, and sexuality at the core of our humanness. These are two of the important aspects of human life. There is a connection between them as they are components of our sense of ourselves.

The Dialogue

Most often, the dialogue is begun through written correspondence. There is a statement of interest, which should be met with a response to explore what the feeling of a call means. It begins with an invitation to share some of the experiences which lead one to think that serving God in this way is attractive. This starting point will be to begin to put some flesh on the vagueness of "I might have a vocation."

The **naming of experiences** in the Church community, the **desire for prayer** and **being of service** to others are the pieces of evidence that support the possibility of a vocation. Then there is the matter of personal suitability for living in community and working in the particular ministry of the religious congregation. What experience of serving others (e.g., in youth ministry, teaching catechism, or other voluntary work) has given the person the idea that serving as a religious would be a response to a call from God?

Given the situation in the world around us, there are often **unconscious needs** for security, education, peace, a place of employment, a sense of identity or just meaningful use of time. We must be looking for evidence of the conscious desire and the movements of the Spirit which seem to be

supporting a desire of responding to a call from God.

All of this is related to spirituality. The other component, our humanness and sexuality, will be discussed later.

What is Spirituality? What Are the Criteria? What Are the Signs We Are Looking For?

Pope Francis reminded all of us, “Every vocation is born of that gaze of love with which the Lord came to meet us, perhaps even at a time when our boat was being battered by the storm. Vocation, more than our own choice, is a response to the Lord’s unmerited call. We will succeed in discovering and embracing our vocation once we open our hearts in gratitude and perceive the passage of God in our lives.”¹

Since the **whole formation process is a gradual one** marked by phases, it is important to have some criteria for entry and progression through these phases, so that greater freedom underlies the all-important discernment of vocation.

Let us focus initially on spirituality. We need to distinguish between spirituality and religious devotion. The two are not the same. Spirituality is more about the personalization of our beliefs and our religious practices. Religious devotion is about the manner in which we live out our religious affiliation, and how we support our spirituality.

While we might be interested in the practices of religious devotion our aspirants are involved with, how many times a week that they pray, that they pray the rosary, that they attend Mass, we need also to be interested in how they are appropriating the beliefs and practices, how they are, in fact, living out these matters in their lives and what their stance is toward living life.

David Ranson, in his book *Across the Great Divide: Bridging Spirituality and Religion Today*, indicates that “Spirituality is a certain awakening to life that relates us more deeply to life. The imagination is opened to new possibility.

¹ Pope Francis, “[Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 2020 World Day of Vocations](#),” May 3, 2020.

Life can be seen and heard in a new way. There is recognition that there are deeper currents operating in life. There are dimensions of life yet to be explored, all of which offer greater depth, connection, centeredness and wholeness."²

We rely on our spirituality to give depth, meaning and resonance to what we do ordinarily, that is, through spiritual insight, we begin to understand how our life is making sense. We become more aware, more alert, more awake to life itself. It helps us to understand the connectedness in our lives, the relatedness to the world around us, to the people in the world and to our God.

The Cycle of Spirituality

Ranson goes on to talk about the Cycle of Spirituality. He talks of spiritual moments and religious moments.

Spiritual moments are moments of awakening, of awareness. Religious moments are the moments of interpreting and evaluating, of making sense of the spiritual moments.

These two moments form the basis of the Cycle of Spirituality, which has four steps or processes.

- A stage of attending, recognizing that something is calling me to a greater sense of who I am.
- A stage of inquiring, of exploring deeper aspects of this beckoning, calling in my life.
- A stage of interpreting, reflecting on the call, the deeper meaning of it all.
- A stage of acting, of implementing the change that I sense is needed in response to the call inside me.

² David Ranson, *Across the Great Divide: Bridging Spirituality and Religion Today* (Strathfield: St. Paul's Publications, 2002), 17.

The Signs to Look For

How do we detect signs for the potential to enter into this spiritual encounter?

One of the first signs we see is that of **personal responsibility** for our own lives. The ability to accept responsibility for self and the choices we make is a critical ability and sign of maturity, even for the young adult. This is so important to being able to be free. We need to become aware of what is going on inside us. There will always be many influences, but they must remain just that, influences, factors to be considered. Nothing more. We become aware of what drives us to do things, to participate in life more fully, to be aware of what captures our attention in life, the desires to help, the needs to be with certain people, the benefits we gain by making certain choices over others. The individual person must make a choice and be responsible for that choice. To be unable to make a choice is an unhealthy sign.

When the disciples see Jesus walking towards them on the sea, they first think that he is a ghost and are filled with fear. Jesus immediately reassures them with words that should constantly accompany our lives and our vocational journey: "Take heart, it is I; have no fear" (Matt 14:27). This, then, is the word I wish to offer you: encouragement.

What frequently hinders our journey, our growth, our choosing the road the Lord is marking out for us, are certain "ghosts" that trouble our hearts. When we are called to leave safe shores and embrace a state of life—like marriage, ministerial priesthood, consecrated life—our first reaction is often from the "ghost of disbelief". Surely, this vocation is not for me! Can this really be the right path? Is the Lord really asking me to do this?³

A second sign is to be able to be **self-reflective**. This involves exploring the various factors we have become aware of, to recognize giftedness and talents and to be able to name them, as well as being aware of struggle

³ Pope Francis, "[Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 2020 World Day of Vocations](#)," May 3, 2020.

points and the need for continuing conversion to overcome the difficulties we encounter.

A third sign is the ability to become aware of what gives **meaning to my life**, what things are important to me, what am I trying to achieve in my life, how it helps me to be the best person I can be, and what gives me a sense of purpose. This is often the first sign of where formal religion enters the spirituality equation. It is often concerned with the call to group worship and how we do it.

A fourth sign is the **consistency between intention and behavior**, the ability to match intention and action. The desire to serve God as a religious, by itself, is insufficient reason to be accepted by a congregation. Whenever God invites, God also provides the suitable giftedness and abilities to live out the calling. All vocation promoters desire to enable a person to come to the truth of what God wants, and so, they must be clear about what qualities and signs are needed to discern whether or not a call to religious life is present. There needs to be constant dialogue between the candidate and the vocation promoter about these qualities. The dialogue may be through writing or through interviews, but it must take place as a way of making real the fit between the desire and the corresponding giftedness.

Level of Faith Development

It would also be important to have a good understanding of the level of catechesis and faith development that the potential candidate has reached. There must be a readiness to understand some basic theological concepts that will necessarily be the starting points of the various elements in the formation program. There is also the need for a prayer life and a healthy sense of God's loving providence.

All these are indicators of a readiness to be engaged in the formation process. These become the focal points of the continuing dialogue between God, self, and the vocation promoter.

A Call to Religious Life Is Not a Common Call

Reflecting on the fragility of religious life in the church, we recognize ever

more clearly that a genuine call to the vowed life is not given to many people. I have already mentioned that vocation promoters and formators have a deep responsibility to the two partners in the formation process: the individual who is interested in joining the congregation and the congregation itself. When trying to discern with an aspirant, candidate, novice or temporary professed, we must ask such questions as:

- In what ways will the congregation be better off if this young person joins and stays?
- How will the reign of God be more fully realized if s/he continues?
- Will s/he be the best person s/he can be as a celibate religious, or as a married or single person?

We may not be able to easily answer such questions, but they must be in our consciousness as we discern. It balances the responsibility we have to both the congregation and to the aspirant.

What is Sexuality?

The second issue we need to consider is the area of sexuality and sexual history. Rather than focusing primarily on physical desires, I will treat sexuality in broader manner. Basically, sexuality is our energy for relationship. It touches deep within us. It drives us as men and women to involve ourselves in the life of others. It encourages us to pursue intimacy with others that we might begin to overcome our basic isolation and selfishness. It is experienced often as a hunger and tension, a drive towards seeking pleasure for its own sake, to overcome human incompleteness. It is the drive to be co-creators with our God of new life among us. We can only begin to explore this dimension of life with a person after we have built up a considerable amount of trust.

This is a broader field, but a very important one as it is a key to how we live as people. That we have bodies, feelings, and emotions is what makes us human. Hence everything we do is influenced by this humanness, this sexuality. It is at the center of ourselves as beings. It influences how we think

of ourselves, how we relate to others, how we express our feeling, how we show our love for others.

So, we need to have an idea of what we think is a normal way of being human, of expressing our relationship with others, and of managing our sexual behaviour. So how do we measure all of this? What are the normal signs of "good development?"

Developmental psychologists, such as the followers of Erikson, would center on one's **identity** as a person. This would focus on comfortableness with self, with sexual awareness and the associated feelings, with independence, decision making, relating to others. They would be interested in the many stories of life experiences in growing up as a young person, in dealings with parents at home, with teachers at school, with peers in the normal events we all encounter as part of life together. Because through these we begin to try out the various "identities" that we may wish to assume. Signs of not being able to deal with these tensions, signs of anti-social behavior, avoidance of family and peers, school failure, inability to be settled are indicators that the young person is not yet settled enough to pursue a serious lifestyle choice.

The same developmental psychologists would focus on any conflicts for the young adult around **intimacy** and **isolation**. Such conflicts reflect on the person's ability to have meaningful and appropriate relationships with the other people in the world around them, and the journey of further self-discovery in the process.

What is happening in the young person's life that demonstrates that s/he can relate appropriately to others in the wider community? Can s/he put into words the awareness of self through naming gifts and struggle points? Has s/he the ability to engage in ongoing study? Does s/he have the awareness to be able to identify any of the feelings and tensions within? Does s/he have the support of parents and brothers and sisters to make this move?

So, this aspect of our lives—sexuality—is a key factor in how we see ourselves as becoming the best person we can become. The key question we must answer is: how do I express myself in relationship to others? In consecrated life, I must be able to relate to others as brother/sister. Do I see myself as brother/sister to others—that I can relate to others, share stories,

do things together, enjoy the company with another, without becoming engaged in physical sexual behavior as a means of saying I love you?

The downside of an aspirant failing to deal with these questions, often as a result of fear or bad sexual experiences, can compel them to embrace loneliness, emptiness, deprivation, depression. This can drive us to seek refuge within ourselves and not go out to encounter people and the world around us. An aspirant could be looking for a place to hide from encounter. So how we behave sexually is significant in our development. Awareness of sexual arousal, making decisions about the expression of sexual feelings, occasional sexual encounters may be part of normal sexual development. Promiscuous sexual behavior, obsessive sexual behavior, either with others or by ourselves, are signs of mismanagement of our sexuality.

For these reasons, sexuality becomes something that vocation promoters need to find a way of discussing with the aspirant. Such a discussion could begin with the broader question about what the aspirant's understanding of celibate chastity is, because this is at the center of consecrated life as we know it in the various congregations and institutes. Then it might pursue how the person has been introduced to understanding sexuality education, and how they have already begun to understand their experiences from kissing to sexual intercourse, and what they have learned from the experiences. This is an important conversation and needs to be approached with sensitivity. Having experienced sexual encounters does not preclude one from pursuing celibacy. As the aspirant understands the experiences, they can learn to place appropriate boundaries in their management of sexual behavior in future developing relationships.

What are the Criteria for Good Management? What Signs Ought I Look For?

What signs ought I to look for when I begin the contact with an aspirant? St. Thomas Aquinas, with his dictum "grace perfects nature" (*Summa Theologiae*, I.q1.a8, ad2), provides us with some guidance in developing a holistic approach to our contact with aspirants.

We need to look at the level of personal human development before

agreeing to the person beginning a formation program. So, what does this mean? Essentially, we are looking for **signs of maturity appropriate to the age**.

Basic **interpersonal skills** and **independence in decision making** will make themselves evident in the dialogue that emerges through the exchange of letters and especially through personal visits to the young person in his/her family and village setting. This will usually be demonstrated by the level of communication, the ability to have experienced healthy relationships in the wider home and parish community, the ability to carry responsibility, and to be able to show initiative in assembling some resources in presenting himself to the religious congregations. There is a need to see that the person has the capacity to organize some resources to make her/his choice happen. Doing this is a commitment of energy.

If I am discussing the possibility with a young adult in his early twenties, I would be looking for the normal signs of maturity in a **sense of self**, of **what is wanted in life**, an ability to engage in **interpersonal relationships** with others with a degree of comfort. There would need to be a sense of **openness** and **self-awareness**. They would be able to articulate their various options, how they see themselves, their giftedness and struggle points, their life hopes and dreams, their various attempts at pastoral involvement in their Church community. Anyone who does not have this ability has not developed to the appropriate stage of young adulthood. Such a person would need to be with the vocation promoter long and often and encouraged to keep searching. There is no need to rush to an end. There is much to be gained by taking the necessary time and to do the necessary self-reflection.

Evelyn Woodward, in her chapter on formation in *Poets, Prophets, and Pragmatists: A New Challenge to Religious Life*, writes about candidates in the first world situation:

For the incoming candidate these days batteries of psychological tests have become the order of the day. In the hands of skilled and insightful practitioners, these are extremely valuable. It is my opinion that anyone who has not given evidence of minimal completion of the developmental tasks of adolescence should not yet enter religious life.

Negotiating the adolescent tasks of separation from home (personal autonomy and responsibility for one's own life), independent work (capacity to sustain and financially support oneself as well as see work as a part of adult expression) and coping with sexual relationships (love as a dynamic of adult formation) appear to me to be pre-requisites for an informed undertaking of vows of obedience, poverty and chastity.⁴

Responsibility and Family Life

What does it mean to have completed the developmental tasks in the African context? So many aspirants find the move to personal autonomy difficult because the enmeshment with the family, and the extended family, is all embracing. There are many young people, in particular, who gain employment but are unable to move for themselves because of the obligations to provide for the others in their family who are dependent on them. There are also many young people who are unable to gain employment and struggle to break the ties of attachment to the home situation, or able to see work as a part of self-expression as an adult. How else is it possible to move through this separation? Do the living conditions into which we take these aspirants provide a security before they make the choice for independence, that, in fact, disempowers them from making that very choice? As a result, is it really possible for them to become the freely choosing responsible person we want them to be in such circumstances? Is it inevitable that they become more dependent on the congregation for the provision of all needs?

Gerald Arbuckle indicates that aspirants "must be people who are not afraid of change but have the ability to use it for the sake of the kingdom."⁵ He goes on further to say that "if there is no well-founded hope that candidates can develop the skills to be pastoral catalysts for inculturation, then they must not be accepted into religious life, nor allowed to continue their

⁴ Evelyn Woodward, *Poets, Prophets and Pragmatists: A New Challenge to Religious Life* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1987), 194.

⁵ Gerald. A. Arbuckle, *From Chaos to Mission: Refounding Religious Life Formation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1996), 58.

training." He lists openness as one of the key gifts in a person seeking religious life.

Stable Family Life

All people are assisted in their growing up by the presence of a stable family setting. The absence of this stability, the presence of deviant or antisocial behaviors, and general unsettledness ought to be addressed before there would be suitability to live in a community or to engage fruitfully in a formation program. An unsettled family context would always create some pressure on the young person. He or she may be wanting to deny this or may be angry about the behaviors of others or self, or even be wanting to run away and hide rather than face their family issues. To be able to sit and be with the person as these things are talked about and explored is important. It is a big step towards developing the trust and the openness to enter into good formation.

Our family is probably the most significant shaper of our emotional stability. It is in the family context that we learn so many of our coping skills to face life and its various challenges. We develop our level of trust through dialogue in the family. So much of our identity comes from the observation of the significant people we share life with and talk with and the feedback that we receive from them. We learn to understand so much about ourselves from the responses of the people around us to what we do and say.

Any major deficiencies, or major pathologies, ought to be attended to before admission to a formation program. People who are deeply depressed, quite fearful and untrusting, with unreal expectations of self and others, or cannot deal with their emotions, are not able to gain from the normal formation program. Nor is the normal formation program geared to be a therapeutic experience for such people. It has its challenges for people with a normal psychological makeup. For the psychologically unsettled it becomes too stressful and such stress usually overflows into the group dynamics.

Often to consult with many of the significant people in the broader community, parish workers, catechists, teachers, youth workers is advantageous. Such people will often have insights which can be raised and

tested by your own observations. The wider the perspectives you can gain on the potential candidate the greater the possibility of understanding the background of the young person you are dealing with.

Experience in the Workplace

Although the situation in our world at the moment is not one of ready availability of work opportunities, there is usually some possibility for some initiatives in becoming a little self-supporting. Usually there is some land to be worked, some volunteer programs that will welcome some assistance from people with a desire to serve. Parish communities usually provide opportunities for teaching catechesis, working in youth groups on various service initiatives, becoming involved in the various parish groups, and numerous other ways of becoming useful and contributing to the development of our society. None of these should be overlooked. Generosity, productivity and initiative are three essential attributes for a committed and consecrated life.

How do I Engage Well with the Aspirant?

- 1. Spend time with the person.** This is the crucial aspect of this assessment. We need to do so to build up trust and to check out the consistency and stability of the behavior patterns.
- 2. Be observant.** We cannot fail in this regard. To note the observations, to check them out in future meetings, is critical to being able to make a reasonable assessment.
- 3. Be organized.** To keep reasonable records of observations, to keep copies of original documentation, to be able to compile a good, detailed record to present to an Admissions Committee or Provincial.
- 4. Be patient and open to exploration.** No good knowledge of another is acquired in a brief time. It is not a task to be rushed.
- 5. Learn to ask open questions.** Such questions give the person a chance to express him or herself in a free way. You can also ask for better explanations or greater depth to answers. This is particularly true when you are trying to assess the capability of the person to be aware and to be reflective.

6. **Look for understandings of the way life is.** You must be searching for the way the person is making sense of life as it is for them, not for yourself.
7. **Be prepared to challenge where necessary.** This is especially true when you are seeking the depth of exploration and when you are assisting the person to do the necessary exploration.

Concluding Remarks

I trust that this sharing has been a helpful one.

Many congregations stipulate that entrants be in contact with one or several members of the formation team for a prescribed minimum period of time before they can join the institute. Others set up pre-postulancy programs which give the candidates opportunities to work with members of a community in their usual day-to-day routines. This allows the candidate to test the flavor of the community's mode of life, and the community to see the person in relationship with them and their work and those to whom they minister.⁶

This journey with the aspirant is a way of assisting him or her in building the personal relationship with Jesus and God through prayer, reflection and understanding their religion and faith development. It also provides us with many opportunities to begin to know the individual whom we may eventually invite to begin the formal journey of life with us. The constant contact between the vocation promoter and the person and the family of the person is an essential component of this discernment.

We pray that God will bless the energy and commitment we put into this important ministry.

You may find the original posting of this essay, as well as the author's biographical and contact information, at <https://www.reviewforreligious.com/essays/known-your-aspirants/>.

⁶ Woodward, *Poets, Prophets and Pragmatists*, 195.