

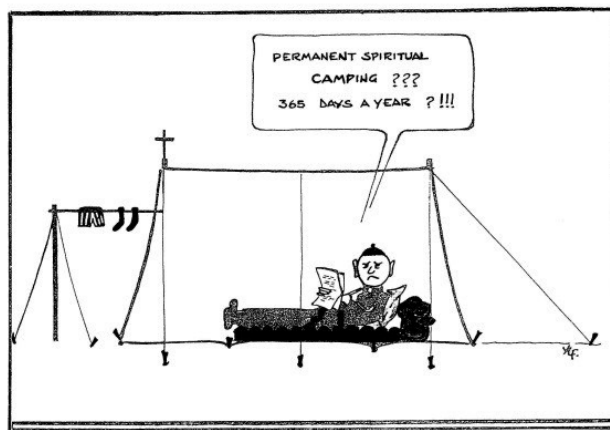
Letter to the new novices

Entry into the Novitiate • Vespers of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple
01.02.2018

Dear brothers,

As a true African, Fr. Provincial looked for an elderly confrere to share some wisdom with the youngest. But, realizing there was no crowd of such creatures in the place, he resigned himself to turn to me, reassuring himself when seeing my white hair. Right, for white hair is a glorious crown at least. Let's pray that since then the Spirit has created – made something exist out of nothing - a small eruption of wisdom under the crown.

Dear brothers who are beginning your novitiate, I thought of writing a letter to you in which I would not get lost in the jungle, but offer you a clear focus. Here it is with its list of four advices.



1. Become disciples of Christ. Once pope John XXIII goes out of the Vatican to pay a discrete visit to a friend priest at the Holy Spirit Hospital. He arrives at the door, rings the bell and Mother Superior answers, deeply moved, "Oh, oh, Holy Father! Holy Father, I am the Superior of the Holy Spirit." And the pope answers, "Oh, what a fabulous career you have made! As for me, I only succeeded to become the Vicar of Christ." Woe to you if you aspire to a position, that of successor of the Apostles or to whatever other like position or role! Religious life has nothing to do with a status.

Your only, exclusive, distinct aspiration is to become a disciple of Christ. Nothing more, nothing less, nothing else! This is the essence of your journey as a novice. Our *Constitutions* and *Formation Directory* are very clear about this.¹ You thought you were already a disciple? You are. But this is a life-long challenge, with no end of the race crowned by a golden medal. Obviously, it is the following of Christ according to the evangelical counsels and to the way of life proper to our congregation. But the goal always remains a deeper and deeper rooting of your whole being in Christ; an ever-growing conformity to him in his total self-giving.

2. Whom do I seek? And so, "the" question you ought to ask yourselves every day of your novitiate is the one the founder of western monasticism, the great Saint Benedict, expressed this way: "Quaerere Deum." "Whom do I seek?" is "the" question. So search your heart, i.e. go down to the core of your being – no quick and superficial answer - and become very clear about that.

¹ *Const.* Nos 207 and 308; *Directory*, Nos 2,1,1,b, 2.1.2, 2.1.2.2.a.

If you are normal human beings, your motives are mixed, never 100% pure. You may have come for walking in the footsteps of a known missionary you admired and wanted to imitate; to run away from the world with all its great difficulties – God knows how marriage, e.g. can be tough, excruciating even; or because you always wished to be a priest; to rise to a certain status in society; to be able to put on a habit or get a good training. Great clarity is required before you end your year.

Your motives need to be purified; otherwise you'll be playing games. In the end your only answer must be *"I seek Christ, Christ, and Christ again and again, with my whole heart, my whole soul and all my energy"* for religious life is a radical path. After 55 years of religious life I have seen too many candidates embarking in a series of stages they *"had"* to travel without making significant mistakes or, better still, concerned with complying as well as possible to what was *"required"* of them in terms of behaviour. This way they would be admitted into our community. I am simplifying a bit on purpose in order to give a clear picture. So, whom, not what, do you seek?

3. "I have seen the Lord!" Consecrated life is a privileged place for deep inner transformation. From the inside! And the novitiate is the privileged time to launch that Copernicus change. Meditate again and again the account of Mary Magdalene who, after having heard the risen Lord tell her *"whom are you seeking?"* ran to tell the disciples to tell them *"I have seen the Lord,"*² in other words, the triumph of life over death. If you are not able to say the same at the end of your novitiate your future will be shaky.

To see the Lord! To see the God of Jesus Christ is the only path to come to begin to change and to live. G.K. Chesterton said, *"When a man has found something which he prefers to life itself, he then for the first time begins to live."* This is to say that there must be a continued communication between the one sought and your personal behaviour and attitudes in concrete life. This only will make you whole and unified at the bottom level of your being.

But to see Christ, you need to *"be with him,"* and to take the means to do so, which means necessarily to sit in front of your Lord every day, *"stubbornly,"* and to learn how to become still.³ For many, let's be clear, the hardest part of the challenge is indeed to nail themselves to their chair or bench. The saints show us that clearly. They are our only guides after Christ. They would have rather lost a hand or a leg than not taken time to pray.

Secondly, you need to establish the habits of silence and authentic listening, something that can make the difference between mere survival and true flourishing. Only then will you be able to be alert enough for the unexpected visit of your Lord who comes like a thief in the night. No illusion, please, for prayer is a non-stop long-life combat.⁴

So, the very first thing to check, and properly check, is whether you have truly encountered Christ as your Savior, that is, as the Love that can turn you upside down or knock you sideways, and that can therefore prompt changes in you in a much easier way. Just like in human love!

4. Living in the presence of God. My fourth and last advice. I beg you on my two knees, begin – you only have time to begin in a year - to develop the habit of reflective living, that is, of living in the presence of God at all times and of praying unceasingly. A faith that is alive, on fire, and that deeply impacts the way we live and that will ultimately lead us to the deep meaning and happiness God wants us to experience, starts right there.

There's a very simple and well-known way of saying the same. It's *"Ora et Labora,"* *"Pray and Work."* Habitually - I stand firm on this! You only need to teach your mind and heart to

² John 20: 11-18. Do the same with John 1: 36-42.

³ Pascal said, "I have discovered that the unhappiness of human beings comes from just one thing: not knowing how to remain quietly in a room."

⁴ So say the Fathers of the desert.

be still many times during the day and particularly learn to become aware of God's presence to you. He is there. Always! He is with you, whatever you think or do, at whatever time or place of the day you are. You only need to come into his presence. But this is a matter of practice; and more and more practice. And of living less and less in the presence of your "*I, me and myself*"! Indeed, each of us is a bundle of awfully egocentric data.

But how to arrive at that living in the presence of God? By creating the habit of "*paying attention*" to God's presence in you, your life and around you. In this way you will slowly learn to "*discern in daily life*" the movements of your hearts, get more and more attuned to God's will and become ever more intimately united to your Lover. Without such reflective living you will not become people wholeheartedly consecrated to God but people who have chosen a way of life that suits them. And not real and enthusiastic lovers of Christ and of your neighbours. You will have a status but not be in love.

Furthermore, without that habitual living in God's presence you will never become through and through Mariannahillers for whom the core of their identity and proper spirituality lies in the "*Ora et Labora*." Never, ever must this saying become a pure deception or empty words we merrily only revel in. They ought to become spiritually true in our flesh. Just as they did in the life of our forefathers. This was their ideal: to become missionaries "*contemplative in action*,"⁵ witnesses who remained immersed in prayer even while grappling with urgent active commitments. It is at the heart of our heritage, even our very own charism so to say.

Finally, the tenet "*Ora et Labora*" does not only mean honest days of work diffused with the sense of God's omnipresence. It also means both common and private prayer because the early Mariannahill supported a certain balance in daily life. Hence do we pray in order to return to our missionary work, and do we leave our work to pray again – I am talking here of our strict minimum of three times a day of common prayer. Thus there is some alternating; and the equilibrium just mentioned is the result. The ideal was, and still is, the contemplative missionary, as I said. Hence, to gain and preserve this unity and equilibrium is a holy and constant struggle for a true Mariannahiller. It is something a newcomer has the sacred duty to train himself in.

Let's conclude. Lately I read something not very flattering for the Trump couple. Sorry for him! Here it is. During a pause at a White House dinner, Melania Trump leaned over to chat with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. "*I bought Donald a parrot for his birthday. That bird is so smart, Donald has already taught him to say more than 200 words*," she says. "*Very impressive, said Tillerson! But you do realize he just speaks the words. He really doesn't understand what they mean*." "*Oh, I know*," replied Melania. "*But neither does the parrot*."⁶ This is to say that sometimes we also don't find because *we don't really know* what we're looking for. We only repeat the lessons we learned.

Dear brothers, ask yourself often: what is it, the loss of which would produce in me a kind of panic? What would make me sad, very sad, extremely sad maybe, even cry if I don't have it? My cell phone, my computer, my routine? My daily distractions, my TV programs – sport or soap opera? Some of my clothes? My petty personal projects? What exactly? This will be the test to know what you truly hunger for and look for. The test to find out where your heart is. And whether you are still full of yourself or of your Beloved, God.

Your elderly brother,
Fr. Yves La Fontaine, CMM

⁵ Saint John Paul II.

⁶ *The Mercury*, 05/01/19.