

ACCOMPANYING YOUNG ADULTS TO CHOOSE AND DECIDE

PERSONAL DIMENSION AND COMMUNITY CONTEXT OF DECISION MAKING

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Introduction

The decision that concerns the important choices in life, even if matured within a significant experience of community life, can only be personal.

I live in Bologna, Italy, in a spirituality centre, where we have about 50 meetings a year, from spiritual exercises, formation gatherings, retreats for diverse categories of people. In our accompaniment role we are called upon to hold one-to-one meetings of many different people. About half of the 1,500 persons who frequent the house each year are below the age of 30 and the majority of them are, for one reason or another, in a situation of a more or less lucid and a more or less difficult search for their call in life.

The place where I live “*Villa san Giuseppe*” is a complex of four houses: one is occupied by a married couple, spiritual guides for vocation and formation; the larger house offers lodging to about 40 people in single rooms; a third house destined to lodge 8 young men for a period of their vocational discernment, and a another small house – where two religious sisters normally live–lodges three young women also for the purpose of discernment.

This geographic and human context is the **humus** in which the reflections I shall propose to you, originate. The methodological humus, instead, is represented by the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm. Its five steps (context, experience, reflection, action, evaluation) constitute the five parts of this article.

The Context

It is evident that accompanying people is a service that is offered not to the *rational animal that is to an abstract being* but to Mary, to Peter, to Elizabeth and to James, who are very concrete people, born and educated in a very specific context, which makes them different individuals from young people their age 50 years ago. It is important to keep in mind the present context, in order to understand the meaning of terms such as vocation, life project, commitment, fidelity, etc., have for the present generation. In particular, I wish to indicate two types of contexts: one more general, and one linked to the reality of Bologna.

The general context

A premise. Who should speak of youth? Young people themselves? It is often said that they do not have the necessary instruments to do so; above all, they lack the distance to be able to do so objectively. So who? Educators? Adults? We, adults, often study young people and we inevitably do it from our own condition as adults, underlining the fact that young people are no longer as they were once... We need a certain amount of humility in

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approaching this *youth planet*, conscious of the filters and interpretations we apply.

I shall try to fix in some points the principal characteristics of this *youth planet*, only those that concern our reflection. From the many sociological studies carried out in the European Union¹ emerges a certain homogeneity of situations among young people, independently of territorial background. That is to say, what distinguishes a young person from Palermo from an adult from Helsinki is not the fact that one is from the south and the other from the north, but the fact that one is a young person and the other an adult.

These young people, then, show some common characteristics:

People agree in defining this generation as the "*me first*" or the "*moi d'abord*", wanting in this way to underline the strong demand of

today's youth on the primary value of self fulfillment, of feeling good, of being well accepted;

- Young people attribute great importance to the quality of relationships and, therefore, to dialogue, to positive relations, to a comfortable human atmosphere, to the central value of friendship, which become priorities in regard to other values such as belonging or "*mission*";

- They consider it important to be able to have time for themselves; if this was once considered negatively, as time taken away from others (family, community, spouse), and made us feel guilty, it is now considered as indispensable recarging our batteries;

- They evaluate the duration of their commitment in relation to the permanent conditions that at the beginning seemed to guarantee their personal realization. If these conditions no longer exist, young person do not recognize commitment (marriage, religious or associative) as definitive or irrevocable.

The context of the experience in Bologna

In the context of the Retreat House there are, as I was saying, two smaller houses, where in the course of the last 10 years about 100 young people have passed (the majority young men), each for a period of 3 to 12 months for "vocational discernment". The house which lodges the young people is called "On the way to Damascus" and the name evokes the experience of Paul the apostle. He, a religiously committed man, at a certain moment in his life finds himself in "darkness": a house has to receive him and a brother is called to help him, so that he may return to the world, deeply renewed and totally dedicated to the service of the kingdom of God. In the same manner, our house wishes to offer a service of spiritual accompaniment to youth in search of the answer to give to God's call. Furthermore, *On the way to Damascus* means that it is not a place where one seeks to establish oneself, but a place of transit.

During their stay, a set of experiences, tools and aids are offered to the young people, which help them discern about their lives, usually with positive results:

- The young people live in community, which is always a harsh and healthy school of life. There is a Jesuit priest with them in the community, with the task of being an educator of adults;

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- They pray, together (daily celebration of the Eucharist), and in private on indications for meditation agreed upon with the priest who is in charge of the community; they are also offered the opportunity to take a course on spiritual exercises of at least 6 days;
- They work – and, I should add, hard – both to keep the park around the house tidy, and to ensure that the Retreat House is clean; it is, for all of them, a way of contributing to their own upkeep;
- They have periodical colloquies with a psychologist and the priest in charge; they stay in daily contact with the rest of the community (the other priests of the house, the married couple and the two religious sisters);
- They frequent “vocational camps” to deepen, together with other youth, the contents and methods of discernment and they may also visit various ecclesiastical **realities**, as well as those of religious and married life;
- For some of the youth who have stayed at the house, their stay was the opportunity to rethink radically their belonging to the religious institutes which they had entered, **assuming** new options of life with transparency and courage.

The Experience

In the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm, experience represents the sum of stimuli and of questions that life arouses in us. The context that we traced briefly, poses some questions to anyone who wishes to provide professional assistance to youth moving towards important decisions in their life:

- If the search for belonging is determined not by an ideological preoccupation (to celebrate the sacrament of matrimony, or to assume an anthropological model proposed by a certain religious congregation) but by the hope of the realization of personal character, how do we keep together the youth's subjective demands and the objective ones of the institutions?
- If the tendency is to explore all possible experiences, how, why and with what probable result can we propose to educate **to a unitary project**, which gives meaning to all of existence ?
- If the economical and environmental conditions lead young people to keep delaying ever more the existential definitive choices (marriage, children, religious commitment), what can we do so that this prolonging of adolescence² leads one day to the taking of responsibility?

- If we agree in affirming that personal fulfillment is a source of spiritual and psychological wellbeing for all, how do we promote in youth the legitimate and healthy search for authenticity, respect for personal identity with its richness and uniqueness, and how do we harmonize all this with the inevitable renunciations life proposes?

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- Furthermore, in this context, what do formation, accompaniment, and discernment mean?

- Does belonging to one sex or the other influence our way of approaching God? Is there a masculine and a feminine way of journeying towards God? Is there a masculine and a feminine spirituality? Up to what point is it good to bare in mind this reality in offering a journey of discernment?

Reflection

Starting from our lived experiences with young people in their vocational search, we can say that accompaniment cannot ignore, particularly, the following themes:

1. To clarify and reinforce the fundamental motivations of the choice

The starting point in accompaniment must be the point where the person is at in that moment: his life experience, the feeling that have accompanied his life, **the desires it has matured**. As such, all the original motivations are legitimate, but since we know that not all are sufficient to sustain vital decisions in the long run, we must therefore:

- know how to respond to the need of the subject and educate his demand; that is we can receive young people who present motivations that are uncertain, or too human, or too restricted, or even negative (fear of the

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world, difficulty in relations), but we must certainly help to educate their desire, to discover greater values, to “set out to the open seas”, as John Paul II proposed;

- know how to develop the stronger motivations which satisfy the greatest number possible of levels of personality. In other terms, an “ideal” decision would be the one supported by various motivations: sense of duty, philanthropic dimension, correct evaluation of data and facts, correspondence to personal tastes, sense of fidelity to commitments made. If a decision is upheld by just one of these motivations, it will not be able to last long; but if it is upheld by a larger number of these motivations, it is guaranteed to last longer.

- An example? If a young man frequents the group solely because he has met the tender gaze of a girl, he will only remain in the group as long as she remains; but if in joining the group he discovers also a taste for the reading of the Word of God, the value of friendship and of solidarity, the possibility to express his personal talents, the pleasure of service, then the question of his leaving the group will not be posed.

2. To differentiate the journey for men and women³

In *Gal 3, 27-29* Paul writes that there are no longer either men or women for those who are baptized in Christ. Is it so? All equal? All *unisex*? Is that what the Lord wants?

Jesus has manifested many times that He appreciates differences and especially the femininity of certain signs of affection in His regard. The Gospels show the diverse reactions of men and women towards Jesus. Here are some examples:

- at the annunciation of the Passion, Peter reacts proposing to fight (*Lk 22,33*); Mary of Bethany will pour the oil of the unction of kings and priests on Jesus' feet (*Jn 12,1-8*). Both express their attachment to Jesus: Peter offers his strength; Mary offers her perfume, a personal expression of her love.

- Mary of Nazareth and John the Baptist: for Mary it is a question of the slow maturation of desire, which translates itself in the interiorization of the Word and in a contemplative silence as soon as the Magnificat is

interrupted; for John it means translating it into a burning appeal for conversion.

- Mary Magdalene and John in front of the sepulcher... each reacts according to his or her own nature: in Magdalene the heart is more attentive; in John faith is more vigilant.

- But also: blessed Charles de Foucault speaks of Jesus of Nazareth the worker; Sister Magdalene speaks of the same Jesus as the Child offered by Mary to the world for its salvation...

- The Marian devotion has been particularly sung by men (Bernard, Grignon de Monfort, Pope John Paul II); the devotion to the Sacred Heart has more feminine accents, but it has been accepted and lived also by Saint Bonaventure or by Fr. Teilhard de Chardin...

It is the same love that makes itself present in the most intimate dimension of the person and transfigures his/her life. In so far as a given spirituality represents an evangelical way of living that is coherent and fertile, it goes beyond the particularities of the masculine and the feminine. Thus certain spiritualities which are said to be very masculine (e.g. that of St. Ignatius) have inspired hundreds of female institutes and other "female" spiritualities have never stopped inspiring men (cf. Theresa of Avila, or also Theresa of Lisieux). When the Word became flesh, He definitely became incarnate in a masculine humanity, but it is the whole human condition that He assumed: our male or female particularities are separated but not abolished, and are translated into just as many paths leading to Him.

3. Deciding / the method of discernment

Teaching to decide denotes, as the old Chinese proverbs remind us, teaching how to fish, that is, rendering a person autonomous and able to elaborate responsible and motivated decisions, even in the absence of the master. It also means avoiding all forms of possession or dependence as regards the person we wish to educate. It means not binding the person to oneself not even with bonds of gratitude.

A first step consists in helping youth to become aware that many times they have made decisions not through their own spontaneous will, but under the influence of various conditionings, carried by the *current*, or influenced by the evaluation of values and opportunities.

A second step consists in helping monitor some decisions to bring to light the ambiguity of certain fundamental motivations, such as, for example, fear (fear of the unknown, fear of commitment), or the “in fashion” choice (“everybody is doing that”), or the choice to please someone who is considered important, whose appreciation and approval prove to be desired and indispensable (parents, an uncle who is a priest, the parish priest...). These motivations are unable to sustain these choices for a long time, or, if they do, they do so without joy.

A third step consists in teaching a method for discernment. We privilege the method proposed by Ignatius in the Spiritual Exercises (Second Week, nn. 169-189, especially 175-188). Compared to other methods, it presents certain advantages: it creates and demands a **previous climate** of great availability or readiness, leads us to analyze with great precision the elements in favour and against each of the alternatives being examined, and introduces some different perspectives in the evaluation of opportunity (for example: imagine you have to advise somebody who comes to us with the same problem). Generally, these steps are enough to lead this person – already motivated to choose – to a conscious and joyful decision.

4. How to treat indecision in choice?⁴

Indecision is an important moment in the process of discernment: if it is not pathological, it represents the interruption of automatic behaviour (i.e. of acting without thinking, out of habit or conformism) and **access** to consciousness and responsibility. This moment of diagnosis and reflection is, therefore, to be encouraged. But in certain moments it can manifest pathological characteristics, such as:

operative paralysis in the face of the multiple decisions possible. The fact of not deciding, in these cases, permits the person to continue to dream without facing reality and avoid the **definitivity** that choice inevitably comprises.

The contrary attitude, *will be an exasperated activity on various fronts*, assuming multiple roles, living multiple biographies, almost as if refusing to make that unique decision which, through a hierarchy of values, would give unity to a whole life;

the voluntaristic sense of duty, submitting oneself to a law that says exactly what *must* be done or not be done (the Will of God, Duty, the Rules

of the Congregation;...). But an external law, which becomes the main motivation for one's actions, only generates discouragement and feelings of guilt. And even when the subject acts in conformity with the law, he/she does so without joy and without enthusiasm. Can we still speak of choice, when the intellect no longer *desires* what it is doing?

In order to come out of indecision, finding once more the source of a living dynamism capable of orienting freedom, it is necessary to recover the ideal motivations and to let oneself be questioned by the reality around them, **which urgently awaits the answer of our talents.**

Action

What operational guidelines can be imagined, from the reading of reality and the reflections just mentioned?

a. First of all, the necessity to attribute a greater value to the term *vocation*. It happens, in fact, that we accompany some people in a path that can end up in a commitment to religious life, but also in the cessation of this belonging... The commitment, then, consists in helping a person formulate a life project which will above all, be animated by the Spirit of Jesus and, therefore, open to diverse possible results.

b. Another commitment consists in deciding to end the discernment process: discernment must be permanent as a basic attitude (to seek God's will in life), but when it is activated in view of a precise decision to be made, it must have an end, a conclusion. Every educational process must have an end: permanent education, in fact, does not represent a permanent incertitude as to what is to be done, but rather a continuous monitoring of each one's motivations and an updating of one's own competence.

c. Therefore, here are some operational guidelines on which it seems opportune to direct the proposal of moments of formation and revision for those involved in helping young people:

1. to be disposed to nourish a great trust in and esteem for youth. It is necessary to abandon the lamentable critical attitude (*young people are no longer the same as in times gone by! Where will it all end with these young people who expose their navels?*) and adopt a more realistic vision,

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inspired by a confidence that communicates this message to youth: you are up to the new situations;

2. courageously offer authentic ways of living, clearly inspired by Christian faith and praxis and nourished by personal dialogue with the Lord;

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authentic ways of living*

encourage the “putting out to sea”, that “moving into deep waters” of which John Paul II frequently spoke. In the same context, it is good to insist on evangelical radicality, even if it might not seem very attractive but, on the other hand, just to please young people, to win them over, in

order to have an *audience* has never been a fertile trustful pastoral proposal;

3. to encourage youth to speak to youth, overcoming the usual barriers of pastoral action, to explore, even the most unthought-of places, where youth live, meet, elaborate their dreams and their language;

4. to help youth grow in the *sensus ecclesiae*, to avoid the formation of a youth ghetto and to explore new ways of collaboration with adults, to the point that the whole Christian community may become the subject of evangelization, formation and of the missionary spirit.

Evaluation

Accompaniment needs to have moments of verification. This means,

- having an initial project and having foreseen steps in its realization, through the acquisition of certain minimal indispensable contents...

- to have available some instruments and criteria of verification: behaviour in community and attention to others, the attention given to personal prayer, the quality of the search for one's own vocation, the acquisition of habits that are coherent with the state of life desired, the spiritual exercises,...

- a basic disposition to “tell the whole truth” (*Marco 5,33*) and therefore a habit of transparency in the dialogue with the one in charge of formation;

- the sole criterion of personal satisfaction – such as “I feel good”, or “it was a beautiful experience” – which can be deceiving, is not enough.

The great advantage of an evaluation is that of making the person aware not only of the result obtained, but also of the path traveled to obtain it: it is another way through which the subject becomes autonomous, capable of growing in the understanding and the management of his/her problems even when the person in charge of formation is absent.

Conclusion

The experience of these years has taught us that what the Apostle Paul says is true: It is Paul who sows, Apollo who waters, but it is the Lord who gives growth (*cf. 1 Cor 3,6*). But we also understood that to offer instruments of growth to those who ask to be accompanied does not mean betraying the Lord, but helping a brother (or sister) to obtain interior lucidity and to make the right decision with joy. And as with all things concerning the Kingdom, even this decision merits the best, not the things that are by far the most beautiful, but the best we can produce and imagine.

¹ In particular I would like to mention the research by the University of Tilburg, Holland, on the realm of values of the youth's world, which can be found on the site of the University.

² Tony ANATRELLA, *Les adoléscent*s. In *Etudes*, juillet-août 2003, p. 37 ss; Tony Anatrella (*cf. above*) has invented the genial and curious term "adoléscent" to indicate the hybrid state of adolescent and adult. M. LACROIX, *Le développement personnel: un nouveau culte du moi*. In: *Christus*, n° 188 (octobre 2000) 40ss; G. DELPIAZ, *Aspettative e speranze delle nuove generazioni*. In *Vita consacrata*, 38 (2002/2003) 264ss.

³ Notes from *Quand la mystique réconcilie le masculin et le féminin*. MICHEL RONDET – CHRISTUS, N. 190 (AVRIL 2001) – p. 143 ss

⁴ I am inspired in this reflection by an article by Jean CARON, *Vouloir ce que je veux*, published in *Christus* 173, January 1997.