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The personal project of life

A walk of creative fidelity to the gift of God.

Indications from our last general Chapter:

"The acquiring of new sensibilities like the value of liberty, the importance of interpersonal relationships, the communion of life and prayer centered on the Eucharist and the Word of God, make it necessary for a more continuous and decisive following, based on **the personal desire for God which is expressed in a personal project integrated in the community project**. Our presence in a world that changes and in the different cultural realities that affects us, has to be creative both in the exercise of the roles of authority and in the models of Community that we realize. This is for a true and fruitful witness of fraternity in our consecrated life. (18th GC, final summary of the second commission)

"To promote fraternal life in our communities, to give major visibility to the witness of the evangelical Counsels and offer a stable planning to our community life of consecrated persons, the Superiors of Province and Delegation mobilize in such a way that, in harmony with the general guidelines of the project of the Congregation, **each community elaborates the annual community project**, where it must be indicated with clarity, other than the commitments with regard to the mission, the moments of community sharing of the faith experiences and apostolic activities, the moments of community prayer and shared Lectio divina, the revision of community life and the necessary relaxation. **The local Superiors urge and help the confreres to elaborate and integrate the personal project of each in the community project**. The same sensibility should be expressed in the evaluation" (Motion 5th of the 18th GC)

The Founder's thoughts:

"In the works of the Providence we need to trust as if everything is done by God and nothing by us, at the same time, to labour as if everything depended on us and nothing on God"

"It's necessary that every Servant of Charity, warmly desirous to promote his religious perfection and the prosperity of the Institute, never desist from studying with love the Constitutions and the Regulations, with the willing intent piously to learn its spirit and to apply it, little by little as much as possible, the whole letters" (Norms 1915, 1 - Last writing of the Founder just before his death, during the spiritual Exercises for the priests, July 1915)

Our Constitutions:

"In accord with the Rule, each confrere, desiring to promote his own perfection, should establish for himself a personal plan of life, maturing it through prayer and dialogue" (Cost. n. 26)

Others our documents:

"The Chapter appeals to all the confreres so that, as first persons responsible for their own spiritual life, they elaborate their own personal project. Wishing that they reach the presentation of their own project to the local Superior and their own community (17th GC)

"Single communities, accompanied by their own Province or Delegation privileges.... d) the support to every confrere so that he elaborates and makes a personal project of life that helps him to grow and to mature in the gift of himself, to God and the brothers" (V General Consult of the SdC)

Every confrere, therefore, as first person responsible for his own formation, is invited to valorise the 'personal project of life.'

Since our documents insist that the Superior help the confreres to elaborate their own project of life, I want to offer here some points, in form of motivations and suggestions, addressed to the individual confrere, hoping that it can serve to sensitize us to use this important instrument of personal growth.

1. Why make a personal project of life?

Perhaps you have asked yourself the question: "Why does the Congregation ask me to make a project of life? "

I can suggest some reasons to you; you can look for others yourself, based on your own experience. Before beginning to draw up the project, it is necessary to be motivated.

Life is always in the process of being constructed. Our life is a project that continually goes realizing, and finishes only at the end of our life. God alone fully knows your walk, because you have been projected from Him: "*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you*" (Jer. 1, 5). You have not been created carelessly; God has always a plan for your life, a plan that includes the guanellian vocation and, through it, the attainment of your holiness.

Through the project you try to discern the road that God has traced for you; you discover who you are called to become and, therefore, recognizing your **identity**.

For you to be able to accept the call, he gives you the grace of this period of life in whatever stage you are living it is a time for **identification** with the guanellian vocation. "It is already a time for... holiness". Your task is to discern how God wants you to live the phase of your life in which you find yourself and how you can make of it your path to holiness. The plan helps you to do this: you are looking for the path that God has traced out for you; you discover what He wants from you; you plan your life for the future precisely as you think God wants it to be.

The plan that God has for you that you will discover through your continuous discernment gives to you the **direction** for your present and future life.

Try to compose the thousand pieces of a puzzle without having first the picture of the "final issue!"

Contrarily, when you know where you are called to arrive, it is easier to converge all the elements of your daily existence - attitudes, relationships, experiences and activity - toward the attainment of the goal.

Take the example of Don Guanella who had to wait for many years to realize his project: He had it clear in his mind that the Lord called him to be an apostle of charity, first of all in his valley and then in the whole world. If Don Guanella had not maintained and developed his project in himself, he would not have been able to wait for so much time in waiting that the Providence manifested it to him. When the Lord has opened the road for him... he was ready to realise it with generosity and decision, because his project was alive in his heart.

Three episodes are enough:

1. During his formation, Don Guanella saw that some of his seminary companions were attracted by the patriotic ideal rather than the priestly ideal, so much as to enlist themselves in the army of Garibaldi, abandoning their own vocation. Instead, he was faithful to his project of priestly life, preparing himself with appointment to his future office.
2. When Don Bosco proposed to him to remain a salesian and to go to America as missionary, Don Guanella, even appreciating a lot the proposal of Don Bosco, preferred to obey his Bishop that called him back in the Diocese, because he strongly felt the call of God to do something for the poor of his own people.
3. When Don Guanella was misunderstood by his own priest companions, who advised him to abandon his projects and to live a calmer life as the other priests, he confirmed his fundamental option to live his priesthood in the middle of the people, and in defence of his poor...

If we consider all his life, we will discover that in Don Guanella, his project made him overcome all the difficulties that he met in his life.

He had received from God many gifts of nature and grace.

- ❖ His parents educated him on faith, on generosity towards the other and towards the poor, and to the spirit of sacrifice...
- ❖ He already had from his childhood some spiritual experiences that made him foresee his future...
- ❖ He received an extraordinary sensibility to see, to understand and to assist the man in need....
- ❖ In particular moments of his life he had some premonitions about his future...

Don Guanella has known how to give unity to all these personal experiences, integrating them in his project of life and mission that we know very well. At the end of his life he wanted to write his autobiography "The ways of Providence", to thank the goodness of the Providence of God who guided him to complete his project of life.

You too are called to give unity to your personal experiences, carrying them all towards a precise goal. You too have to become able to settle the past, the present and the future in unity of meaning, according to your fundamental choices.

As soon as you get on in years and you undertake some tasks of responsibility, you will have new experiences that demands to be integrated in a new vital synthesis. For example, becoming a community Superior or responsible of a Centre of disabled persons is a new experience, that demands an afterthought and a new formulation of your life; you have to find the way in which, acquitting the new assignment, you can keep on growing in your vocation, in fraternal life, in apostolic zeal, and in holiness. The perso-

nal project is really such a tool of **unification** that makes you able to maintain yourself faithful to the main point of your vocation and not considering the new role as the most important aspect of your personal realization.

In elaborating your personal project it is very important to know your positive qualities and also your limits, to know how to found your project upon your positive potentialities and to know what you have to change, if you want to realize that identity and that vision of yourself in obedience to the call of God.

It is necessary to live the personal project in positive form, not as an imposition. Only if you feel it as a beautiful and necessary thing for you, you will feel yourself capable to make every effort to convert you, to work on yourself, to take some difficult decisions and so to really assure the realization of that identity that attracts you and promises you a true happiness and satisfaction.

In this way you take in hand your life and you take on **the responsibility** of your vocation and your growth towards holiness.

Often we ascertain that it is possible to spend a life in thousand different activities and not to be aware of the blocks that hinder your personal growth. You can live your vocation, carrying out the norms, accepting roles, leading yourself being conducted from the events, following the passing fancy of the moment, the ideas of the context or other people's values.

It is as if you had all the necessary materials to build your house, but without any plan; then you will let them pile up at random one above the others. Instead of a house (built on the rock, as the Gospel wants) you would only have a heap of materials in disorder. On the contrary, through the personal project, driven by the Spirit of God and by his grace, you become protagonist of your growth, realising your liberty, living your identity of Servant of Charity, priest or Brother in base to the vocation that you have received from God.

Then, as you have noticed, the project is not a simple declaration of intentions or desires, neither a plan of qualification to practice a profession or a role in the society or in the Congregation.

The personal project of life is the description of the **finishing line** that you want to reach and of the footsteps that you intend to do to reach the goal, trying to grow always with creative fidelity to your guanelian consecrated vocation for a mission of charity, as it is express in our Constitutions: "Consecrated apostles of charity in the Church we don't exist any longer for ourselves, but for Him." (Const. N. 61)

The main and utmost purpose of the project of life is **the holiness**, which is "the perfect love of God and brothers". On this central aspect of your identity you base your project of life.

2. What novelty does the personal project of life bring in the growth of our spiritual life?

The discourse on the personal project of life is very new in the Church and in the Congregation, at least in its terminology, but in its essence corresponds to the course of sanctification proposed by the Church, especially by the teachers of spiritual life.

It can seem new also the way of doing the project. We need to take back **the methodology of the spiritual life**, deepening it and also adjourning it with the new sensibility of our culture that privileges liberty and personal responsibility that is also using the methods of the psychology that helps us to better understanding of ourselves, our deeper motivations and also the hidden dynamisms that are acting in us.

You cannot build your spiritual life without a **method**; the project of life is a mean for the walk of growth, of vocational fidelity and of sanctification.

In our Founder we can also find important elements that help us to address our efforts to our specific project of life which, corresponds to the particular graces that the Lord grants to each of us and, at the same time, help us to assimilate the fundamental elements proper of the guanellian charism.

Our Constitutions point out the principal attitudes that are suitable for the guanellian identity and are essential part of our project of life.

- ❖ God is our Father. He knows our heart and takes care of our footsteps. So, it is fundamental that I live as a child...
- ❖ Everything is grace and Providence in my life.
- ❖ We mutually sustain with the "bond of charity". This bond is the strength of the Institute and cause of its progress and perfection...
- ❖ The spirit of family and the preventive method are the ways with which we live the relationships with our brothers and with the poor.
- ❖ "Prayer and suffering" as our program of life.
 - The fidelity to prayer (meditation, Lectio divina, spiritual reading...) and the ordinary means of sanctification (Eucharist, Confession, spiritual Retreat) assure the success of our project of life.
 - Without the spirit of sacrifice no spiritual goal can be reached!
- ❖ The Founder as model of reference: "By welcoming his example and his word we feel him actively present among us" (Const. n. 16)
- ❖ The poor, as our masters...

3. How can you formulate the personal project of life?

Here you have some elements and means that can help you to prepare your personal project of life:

- ❖ Constant evaluation of our human, spiritual and guanellian maturity, through reflection on your deeper attitudes, confrontation with the Word of God and acceptance of the brotherly correction;
- ❖ Welcoming and estimating the values offered by our own religious family and appointment in to hold them in the construction of your project of life
- ❖ Close examination of the essential elements of our charismatic identity;
- ❖ Knowledge and the practice of our spirituality and the Preventive Method in our community relationships and with the poor;
- ❖ Sharing actively and willingly in the ordinary and extraordinary meetings of our community;
- ❖ Attention to the poor that we serve, that make us to understand what God asks you to be for them.

The way of formulating the personal project of life.

I propose you a run in three footsteps.

Step I: What is God asking of me?

Since the personal project of life is a process of *discernment*, it is obvious that you need silence and concentration to do it or to make it effective in your life: for example during the recollection at the beginning of each year or during the spiritual Retreat.

S. Augustine teaches us: "*I looked for You out of me, in the things and in the creatures, while You were inside of me.*"

In a moment of prayer you set yourself in front of God and tell Him with the words of Samuel: "*Speak, my Lord and your servant will listen.*" Ask him what He wants from you, in the condition you are and with the responsibilities that you have.

In this first footstep it deals with individualizing **the call of God**.

You already know what God wants from you through the *our Constitutions and our Ratio Formationis*, which delineate the figure of the guanellien consecrated person, priest or Brother; the *community project* too offers you a more precise picture of what God is waiting from you and from the brothers, to complete the mission that has been submitted to your Community.

All these indications have to be concretized in your personal reality, *hic et nunc* (here and now):

- ❖ God speaks to your heart through his Spirit. If you maintain yourself open, you will discover what aspects of your life you need to grow up. Listen to the movements of the Spirit in you!
- ❖ God also often uses a person, like a friend, or the spiritual director or the confessor to help you in discerning your situation. Open your heart to them and speak with them about your relationships, your fears, and of your experiences!
- ❖ I suggest to you to also give a look to the appointments that your Community has committed to you, to discover what God asks you in your apostolate.
- ❖ Don't think about the things that you intend to do, but about the goals that God inspires you to reach. These goals that represent a new footstep in the walk of fidelity to your vocation and can give you a sense of plenty joy. You are formulating for yourself the vision that God has for you!
- ❖ It is important that this vision of the future could not be described as something intellectual, but as something to be loved, which attracts, stimulates you and responds to your fundamental desires. It is only if these objectives involve your entire person, that you will feel yourself courageous to do what is necessary to achieve them.

Step II: How do I proceed in my walk of personal growth?

Having identified to what God calls you, now it is the moment to consider the point in which you find yourself, that is **your actual situation**: what are the reached goals and the weaknesses, the abilities and possibilities, the limitations and the negative conditionings.

An example: "In my assignment as a formator or educator, perhaps, I make some great sacrifice to assure the good result of my job, but I realize that I am severe in the relationships with the students or with the boys.... Perhaps, I often correct them without having words of appreciation, thankfulness and encouragement for them. Perhaps I notice that I am worried more for the success than that for their growth. So I must ask myself: am I seeking myself or the true good of people?"

Normally there is the tendency to speak directly about the weaknesses or the negative points about myself and about my neighbours; it seems a best strategy, instead, to consider, first of all, my "successes" and other people's resources to build the future. In this way you create a positive climate for growth and encouragement, because you can see what is already realized or realizable. Then you can proceed to identify the difficulties or the weaknesses, the aspects that need to be improved in sight of the objectives that you want to reach.

It is important that when you look at the positive and negative aspects of your experiences, you can live them in relationship to the central point of your project of life that is the call of God to which you want to answer with generosity.

Then, also this moment in which you return yourself conscious of what you really are, it can become a moment of prayer that makes you discover the source that feeds your project of life: the Providen-

ce that guides all your footsteps and knows how to draw the good also from your weaknesses. In this sense three attitudes are important:

- ❖ to praise and thank God for what He has realized in you, recognizing as gifts from God the positive points you now find in your life;
- ❖ to ask his Grace not to discourage you in your struggle to overcome your defects,
- ❖ to trust in his presence in your life to continue in your growth.

In this context it is useful to remember that an endless list of positive or negative points do not benefit you. A good planning implies the ability to individualize two or three points that are decisive and determining the whole rest; it deals with gathering the principal aspects that ask for attention. Be convinced that the result of your planning is not so much in the application of the techniques, rather in the promptness to enter yourself with authenticity and depth and to open yourself with trust and patience to the Spirit.

Step III: "Lord, what do you want me to do?"

At the light of the knowledge of yourself, reached with the second footstep, you choose the **lines of action** that you intend to realize for reaching the objective that you have intended in the first footstep. You look with realism where you have to go and what the Spirit suggests to you. It is desirable that your lines of action should be realistic and realizable within a determined period; they have to be few and essential, regarding the important aspects of the guanellian identity as it is expressed in the Constitutions. Rather, at times, one fundamental point can be enough to inspire your whole project of life.

For example: you can discover that the Lord has given you the gift to create communion around you. Your line of action will direct you to discover those situations in which the Lord asks you to favour an environment of true fraternity in your community or among the people that you meet in your service.

Pay attention, however, not to be driven from what you like or is easier for you.

The plan of action has to contain some gradual footsteps, to concretize, month by month, week after week. Realizing these footsteps, one after the other, you create a certain trust in yourself and you become more courageous and optimistic, seeing the progress that you are doing.

Your progress is very linked with your motivations, attitudes and behaviors; so you have to enter into yourself, knowing where they are rooted. Also in the concreteness of your determinations, also this footstep can be expressed in the same climate of prayer as the precedent footsteps.

4. Some suggestions of method

The personal project of life is a tool that favours your walk of growth; it is an actual means of the spiritual life's methodology. There is no growth if there is not a serious method of walk. Behold some elements of such method; they come from the spiritual tradition, but it is interesting to see how they refer to the project and can assume new meaning.

- It is useful to take back the methodology that you have always used, since the first moments of your initial formation, that is the pedagogic practice of "**meditate writing**", to take notes, to fix in the writing what in the Spirit you have foreseen as project of your life.

It is a methodology of the spiritual life that results effectively in the carrying out the walk. You can make reference to the text that you have written at any moment, for a comparison and verification. Writing is a mean not to stop you in the surface, to help the reflection and the prayer to draw from the depths of your life.

After having formulated the project according to the three suitable footsteps above, it is necessary to choose the times or the concrete dates in which **to verify** the walk that you are doing. You have to give enough time for the evaluation, for example during the Recollection day or the spiritual Retreat.

The verification has the purpose to see how faithful you have been to all that you have intended in the project: if you have performed the selected activities and if you have realized them well, badly or discreetly. If you have not performed your objectives, it is necessary to investigate the why. In the case of scarce result, the analysis of the causes could show that you have not perhaps been constant in your appointments or you have not been moved from the stadium of the initial enthusiasm; or, perhaps, you have not analyzed well the problems and you are remained on the surface; or you have not watched out for the different aspects of the problem; or, perhaps, your lines of action were too much generic. However, through the verification you can realize if you are on the correct walk and you can draw the useful elements to introduce corrections in your project.

There are also some particular moments in which you can **watch over** on the daily footsteps. Without a vigilant conscience and being awake, there is no walk... instead, there will be superficiality. It is opportune to remember that the methodology of the spiritual life has always proposed the daily examination of conscience, not as a formal and hasty, but substantial and deepened moment. You also have the daily meditation as opportunity "to take some good resolution and to look for the way of putting it in practice", strengthening your walking. But above all you have the frequent celebration of the Reconciliation, that, together with the verification of your life, the repentance and the pardon of God, offer you the sacramental grace of the recovery and the resumption.

Finally it is useful to reflect on how **to harmonize** your personal project with that of the community. It exists in fact a relationship of interdependence among the two projects: they mutually strengthen and recall one another. On one side when you formulate your personal project, you have to consider the appointments of the community project, because it is a discernment made by you and all your brothers about the plan of God for your community and contains some indications of the wish of God in your regards. The community project is enriched when every member of the community, have elaborated his personal project. Respecting the personal intimacy, you also can share with the other brothers the aspects of your personal project that you want to communicate; in such a way it improves the mutual knowledge in community, creates stronger bonds of affiliation and helps the community to reach a deeper level in its planning.

In conclusion, with the personal project of life you have in your hands a tool that helps you to grow in the creative fidelity to the gift of your vocation. I invite you to appreciate it and to welcome it with joy. Its aim is to help you in realizing your gift and your answer to the call of God. The walk that the project offers you is the result of your free decision and the free intervention of God that has called you for this life. Welcome the invitation to live the project as an opportunity to walk in holiness!

THE PERSONAL PROJECT OF LIFE

Scheme of elaboration

GOD'S CALL

What does God want from me in the circumstances in which I am living?

1. Find a time of silence and concentration, for example during a monthly Recollection or the spiritual Retreat, and open your heart to the Lord asking for light and courage.
2. In front of the Lord ask Him what He wants from you. For concreteness, consider the essential aspects of your identity as a Servant of Charity as they are described in the Constitutions and ask yourself in what aspects the Lord asks you to engage you mostly:
 - to live more deeply your relationship with God...
 - to testify more strongly your consecration to the Lord, with the religious vows...
 - to live with satisfaction your relationships in Community...
 - to complete more faithfully your mission
 - to maintain yourself in continuous desire to grow and to spiritually and culturally form yourself.
3. Choose the two or three principal aspects of your life where you feel yourself demanded by the Lord: what does the Lord want from you in each of these aspects? These are your main objectives.

YOUR ACTUAL SITUATION

Where do you find yourself in relation to the call of God?

1. Regarding the aspects that you have chosen as objectives to reach, begin to thank God for the positive aspects you have realized till now and start from what you have already realized reaching to a greater level.
2. In a similar way, in every aspect, you have to identify two or three meaningful points that need to be strengthened or changed in your life. Ask the strength and courage from the Lord to improve them, making your continuous revision on these points.
3. Don't discourage yourself in front of difficulties and restart your walk, when you realize you have forgotten your objectives.

YOUR LINES OF ACTION

Which concrete footsteps do you intend to complete in this period of your life?

1. Remembering often the destination that you want to reach, try to apply it to your concrete life and to translate it in concrete decisions that you can evaluate through the examination of conscience.
2. Make yourself to be helped by other people and by your Community to discern your progress and to realize what you have intended.
3. If you discover that you don't progress as you would desire, do not be afraid: try to discover the causes that prevent you from progressing. Accept your difficulties or the criticisms of your brothers, without defending, because it will deceive you, and don't be discouraged, because of the fatigue you will find in the realization of your project of life.