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**CHAPTER 22**

**THE PERSONAL LIFE PROJECT**

by Giuseppe Mariano Roggia

Starting with some clarifications on the subject, which is much studied and debated today, this paper outlines the essential elements for constructing a personal life project: clear ideas – personal situation – determining the unifying centre of existence – style of approach – process and practical guidelines. Finally, by way of conclusion, it suggests the need for freedom in developing our own plan which becomes one of the significant tools in achieving a truly successful life.

1. Background information

“Life project” and “ongoing formation” are now such common terms that they are found in every official document and in the various recommendations presented for all kinds of formation. The risk is that they are reduced to a simple *pour parler.* A personal life project, which remains to all intents and purposes the backbone of every direction taken and of a life considered successful, does not come about suddenly, nor can it be just a trendy exhortation, but in all respects it is an important construction of ultimate meaning, continually found in the story and development of a person’s life journey.

* 1. From dreams, desires, to a life project

It must be said that a serious life project always has a long gestation. In fact, it starts by being rooted in our dreams about the future - dreams which everyone has been imagining and nurturing since childhood. Undoubtedly a dream is an important element in our growth, both because it gradually reveals the elements that make up our mysterious inner world, and because it activates precious energies of creativity and commitment. It is almost an anticipation on a fantasy level of our own world, to be then transferred into reality. As children, we limit ourselves through imagination to developing many horizons of life and then as adults, cultivating our dream always offers an extra gear so as not to be blocked by the abrasiveness of the events that we may encounter. From being pure fantasy, the dream comes close to some possibility of realisation when it is accompanied by the power of desire. Desire enhances the individual’s possibilities by being a strong emotional incentive, offering stimulation and motivation to the still very vague outlines of the dream. Emotionally speaking, it comes immediately before the project stage. And while the dream is mainly a case of imagination, and while desire is the tension towards the future,

the project is a bridge that links the present to the future and in turn is mainly made up of practical things. Indeed if we are to have a serious project, then we need to evaluate whether it is feasible or not and if it has what it needs to implement it with the contribution of all the tenacity and perseverance that will be required.

* 1. What does a life project consist of?

Every man and woman grows and matures with everything they are and do, with all the expressions of celebration and everyday life, euphoric and painful as they may be, that perseverance is made up of. Having a project to live for, staking everything we have at our disposal to give meaning to our existence, contains a reason that also helps to determine the “how”. The personal life project is a dynamic and constructive factor, necessary for our personality's growth to maturity as a search for direction in life, as a continuous questioning of ourselves, as a longing for a meaning to live for without allowing ourselves to be caught in the grip of immediate impulse and the multiple constraints of the social and cultural environment.

It is about seeking our identity in an independent life project, not just one modelled on people who are significant in our eyes but one that corresponds above all to the needs of our own personality, thus constructing our own role in the world through an achievement that is unique and unrepeatable. In this way the life project presides over the development and restructuring of our personality by giving it purpose and profound meaning. This way it becomes a focus for personal integration that unifies the dimensions and energies of our personality. Of course, intuiting our own project continues to be a mysterious event and a unique experience of life.

All this recalls the whole of what, in the religious sphere, is connected with the subject of vocation, a call that carries a broader and higher meaning with it than it being a mere trade and profession, with a value framework of a richer realisation. The personal life project opens out to commitment to an ideal or a cause to be realised, so that our entire existence has meaning in overcoming the exclusive pursuit of self, but is open to others and to God. Starting from our inclinations, which constitute the seed of a vocation towards an ideal of life, it becomes part of the individual’s maturing process, and develops in a human, social as well as relational context. Everyone has the opportunity to respond to this inner demand, regardless of the religious understanding that guides their life. For us believers, this request comes from the depths of the person, open simultaneously to the initiative of God, who calls for a particular life experience and for a specific mission to be carried out in history and in the world. In any case, everyone must recognise what UN Secretary-General Hammarskjold said so insightfully: “We are not permitted to choose the frame of our destiny. But what we put into it is ours. He who wills adventure will experience it – according to the measure of his courage. He who wills sacrifice will be sacrificed – according to the measure of his purity of heart.”[[[1]](#footnote-2)](#bookmark453) All of this, however, implies discernment, maturity and care.

* 1. The benefits and risks of a personal life project

In the first instance, a personal life project has the benefit of clarifying and ordering our journey through life, consolidating personal identity within the social and historical context in which we live, encouraging harmonious self-growth despite being put to the test of toil, risk and the inevitable difficulties of life. This is why it is made up of multifaceted dynamics: a creative impulse, an ideal need to be, a mission to be fulfilled, a need for change and healing to be imparted through continuous formulations and revisions. There is never a finished product. It is a work in progress.

At the same time it also has risks and limitations. Being a work that is always relative and never absolute, it does not always come to full realisation. It can be blocked or hindered by external factors. Much more frequently it can be interrupted or even frustrated because abandoned, lost or even betrayed, due to immediately more rewarding situations. For these reasons, the wide-ranging personal life project (= existential vocation) must be taken on with discernment and worked out objectively and responsibly, in the short term of the specific life situation, respecting the principle of reality, in dialogue with our own self-depth and relying on authoritative guidance.

1. Fixed points of the personal life project
	1. Clear ideas about our existence

It is clear from these reflections that the personal project is not a static fact, it does not happen once and for all in a given moment of existence, but postulates a dynamic process in constant evolution, always in the process of construction, with leaps forward, moments of stasis, backward steps, restarts, course corrections. It is important, then, to start from some clear principles, which must concretely guide the drafting of the personal life project.

* + 1. **Knowing and accepting ourselves**

First of all, it is necessary to achieve a realistic knowledge of ourselves and the world without illusions: this is the essential premise for developing a life project. Not wanting to accept ourselves and not wanting to recognise our limitations becomes the first source of conflict and tension which can trigger a fuse that would be fatal to the vocational project. Knowing ourselves is an ongoing, essential task for overcoming our fears and for looking at the present and the future with some confidence. Accepting ourselves implies:

* accepting who we are as a person with our gifts and limitations, in particular our sexual bodiliness by adequately integrating our affective history. But also accepting ourselves without distorted self-images and without the fear of being judged or not accepted by others;
* accepting our past and the history of our relationships with others, without blocks and regrets; this is of fundamental importance for the history of our emotional experience;
* accepting our limitations without frustration and without developing an inferiority complex;
* discovering the fundamental goodness of who we are in the richest range of our possibilities.
	+ 1. **Developing a framework of values**

All the values that give meaning to life, especially the ones that are needed to realise the life project, are important and become criteria for assessing orientation and choices in all circumstances. There are values of things to have, but above all values that concern our way of being, such as freedom, authenticity, the search for meaning and responsibility, the ability to give, openness to the transcendent. As part of our study, this requires a great openness to all the value richness of sexuality and affectivity. Indeed, sexuality occupies a point of relevance in the realm of gift.

* + 1. **Knowing how to plan**

Given the impact of the culture in which we live, with its constant and often unprecedented challenges, there is the risk that we just let ourselves live and endure without seriously guiding our life first hand. We need to regain the ability to organise and plan ourselves. In the inevitable *gap* between the ideal and the real, between dreams and real life, between the virtual and the real it is fundamental that we know how to plan and plan for ourselves, studying the situation and the various possibilities that present themselves, discerning the concrete steps to take, taking into account the possibilities of failure, also establishing stages of long and short term commitment.

* + 1. **Knowing how to decide**

To achieve the goals that are set in developing the personal life project, it is also important to develop a good decision-making ability. Stances must not be taken on the strength of prejudices, environmental pressures and conditioning or as a reaction to impulses of various kinds, but essentially in fidelity to our own vocational life project and looking more to the future than to the constraints arising from our past. Exercises in discernment and decision-making aid and abet the purpose.

* 1. Our personal situation

“If one does not want everything to sink into the abyss of meaningless causality, there is only one possible conclusion: wherever I come from, I am given to

myself.”[[[2]](#footnote-3)](#bookmark454) Becoming aware of this necessarily leads us to have a grateful memory of our life story. Anyone who tries to develop a serious personal life project must have previously done the demanding work of writing their autobiography, constructing their past not simply as an album of snapshots, but grasping the meaning of their existence. The golden thread that connects the happy as well as the painful fragments of our life allows us to reread them providentially in the light of an ideal, which from a small inner impulse becomes increasingly defined in terms of an explicit vocation. At this point it becomes easy to take stock of our situation, even on a daily basis, noting the relevant and most significant points corresponding to the following fields of observation:

* *This is how I am* (= a new awareness of acceptance of ourselves);
* *I am made for this* (= a new awareness of my vocation and mission);
* *My kind of relationships* (= a new kind of relationship with myself, with others and with God).

From this perspective, the discussion of our emotional-sexual history acquires particular meaning and value with all the potential of qualities at the service of love. At the same time, we take note of the hardships, traumas and failures suffered in the attempt to free ourselves from the closures of selfish exploitation.

A balanced assessment of our journey and emerges from here: my emotional and sexual situation today; the clarity or otherwise of my affective and sexual life today, in view and at the service of my vocation; the description of my affective relationships today in relation to myself, to others and to God.

* + 1. **Determining the centre that orders my life**

Reflecting on my evolving personal history from my past to the present and the future, leads me to come across a dense and dark mystery, which for many remains an absurd enigma and nonsense, but which is torn apart only in faith as an excess of light and reveals itself as life received from Someone who gave me to myself out of love: God. However, it is up to us to make this presence evident and conscious. Our lives can and must become a mine of divine presence. If this is the case, then existence is not the result of a fortuitous series of coincidences, nor of chance or destiny, but is linked to the providence of God, who wanted my existence, takes care of me and always accompanies me, as the intelligence of love. God wants to manifest himself in my life in such a way that it can become a biblical story of salvation. However, it depends on our freedom and responsibility to know how to read and interpret our life story with these keys of light which open the door of mystery, building our past on the cornerstone, Jesus Christ. It is he who gives a general meaning to the life we have lived up to now. It is he, the Lord, who gives substance to this story and leads us to live in the present and to do everything in memory of him. It is he who conforms it to himself, present with all his strength of love. It is he who fills today's experience with meaning and fullness and invites us to look to the future according to his perspectives and expectations, so as to fully realise what we are called to be and become.

In this way God becomes the organising centre of our entire life in the broad vocational spectrum and in the small pieces and shreds of daily events; he encourages us to organise our personal life project as a common thread throughout, without losing precious pieces and fragments of our life along the way, which is in all respects the sacred story of his incarnation. In this way, a path of growth and healing can be ensured around this organising centre which helps to integrate every instance of our personality, in particular the ones that concern our affective-sexual dimensions.

* + 1. **A style of approach to the personal life project**

It is not enough to have clear ideas about the life project and build it materially by default, so that it automatically works. It also requires a style of approach which allows a constructive relationship between what we plan and what we actually do. Otherwise, we end up always pursuing immediate goals and achievements, enduring any waiting and small steps strategy with difficulty, and find ourselves incapable of persevering and being constant in our journey of growth.

However, we can highlight a style of approach to the project which normally guarantees a serious path of good balance between what is planned in the long term and what we do in everyday life.

We describe it with three characteristics.

1. A first characteristic is to live well in the present moment, without retreating to or sheltering in the past, as well as without escaping into the future at the level of fantasy. It is typical of our era to be at the mercy of stress due to lack of time and our obsession with the clock. A first attitude to cultivate is therefore to slow down the pace of times and our days, to seriously enter into a relationship with what we think and do; with the people and things we are in contact with. We need to convert time, convert ourselves to the well-being of daily realism. Without this first movement we simply become overwhelmed and all our short- or long-term plans remain purely plans on paper.
2. A second attitude is to gain the ability to constantly discern, with a good ability to be able to look at things critically, to know how to ponder and evaluate the situation and to orient ourselves towards a decision. Reference points are necessary, that is, personal ideal beliefs oriented around the ordering centre of our life, together with various other things: actions, motivations, mental and affective attitudes towards reality, ourselves, others, God. A great help in all this is continuous comparison with the Word of God and with the people whom we consider to be mature, in particular our confreres in the priesthood or in religious life.
3. A third attitude consists of constant reference to a companion and guide, both in the spiritual field and in human maturity. Human beings need an experienced guide who is not limited to teaching and direction, but who also knows how to accompany them in their growth and inner healing in the depths of the heart. Especially at the beginning of our journey we experience many illusions, we are not humble and authentic and are not ready to face the trials. It is very dangerous to pretend to do things on our own without exchanging with others and without letting ourselves be guided.

 Everyone must necessarily give themselves over to someone, so they may journey safely through life. Those who do not hand themselves over like this, deluding themselves that they belong only to themselves, in fact, and in almost all cases become slaves to something that they ignore, suffering the conditioning of cultural fashions or various fears.

* 1. **A process and practical guidelines**

Every year, especially during important times such as a retreat, it is appropriate to take time to pause and review our life and take stock of our journey, in order to grasp the things that have matured, the progress of growth, the wounds that remain open and are in need of healing, such as any blockages.

In accordance with this reading and awareness, it is appropriate to draw up our life project for a year, a specific period or a particular formation phase, as a personal worksite for both spiritual life and human growth to maturity. It can be indicated in two poles of commitment: a healing pole and a growth pole. For more relevant and more concrete indications, see what is strategically laid out in Chapter 26 “Goals, Criteria and Stages in the process” of Part Four of this manual.

3. The freedom to plan for ourselves

The person who wants to achieve a successful existence in any vocation, especially in a vocation to special consecration, welcomes the inner inspiration that propels him perpetually forward and is not content with mediocrity and living a lifestyle of *routines* and habits. Doing our own planning means throwing ourselves *in* and *further* ahead, beyond oursleves, becoming, together with God, the architects of our own life, living our own original personality and becoming more and more what we are called to be. Self-realisation is not a static situation, but a direction of travel. The fullness of life increases to the extent that planning becomes one of the significant tools for managing our lives.

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