

MODERN SPIRITUALITY

By M. C. D'ARCY

FEW, whose memories can go back to the nineteenth century, would deny that a change in the form of ascetic and spiritual direction has taken place within their own lifetime. This change has been attributed by some to the Decree of St. Pius X on Frequent Communion. The effects of frequent and daily communion have been remarkable even to human sight, but the Decree was more a signal than a cause, an encouragement to already existing desires. Long before 1905 writers like Scheeben or the Ven. Francis Libermann, for example, were teaching what would be considered characteristic of the present spirit of the Church. One contributing cause has been suggested, namely, the dying down of the long dispute on the nature of actual grace. There is some truth here because the seminaries and religious houses of theology teach the priests, whose sermons and direction are the word of God for the faithful. Now the controversy on actual grace took up so much of the time meant to be given to grace in class, that the nature of sanctifying grace and the supernatural life was hurried through. In 1900 a student had learnt hardly anything of this supernatural life. His first sermon as a priest would be invariably on loving God. By contrast the first sermon now will be usually on sanctifying grace or the mystical body.

For distant causes we have to go back to the post-Reformation policy of the Church. That was determined by the successes of heretics and the general laxity of the clergy and the people. In Rome itself statues and busts of gods and goddesses stood side by side with saints. Paganism was rife amongst the rich, and the people starved of Catholic teaching listened with open ears to new doctrines. The Council of Trent held the pass and preserved the faith, and many of its laws were concerned with the restoration of discipline, self-denial and unworldliness. The challenge of the Protestant heresies, also, had to be met. Great individuals rose to carry out the desires of the Church. The list of saints is astonishing, and a number of them founded religious orders or congregations given over to the practice of the counsels of the Gospel and the features of spirituality emphasised by the Council. The stress naturally was on individual perfection. St. Ignatius of Loyola, for instance, meant his famous

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Exercises to be done by an individual for thirty days, and the exercitant was led to choose the ideal of the imitation of Christ and the following of Him in poverty and humility. This was their first purpose, but so permanently successful were they that in time they became a favourite method of prayer and asceticism, a universally recognised clear way of attaining Christian perfection for individuals and groups.

Other saints of the Counter-Reformation went afield teaching the precepts and counsels with their own special genius. But like Ignatius they inculcated individual asceticism and self-sacrifice. Even the 'douce' St. Francis of Sales was unsparing in the severity of his rules for his foundation, the Order of Visitation. Bremond in his *Histoire* brings out vividly the characters in the great religious revival stretching through the seventeenth century. He himself was biased in favour of the mystics and those who leaned to passive prayer. This mystical movement was again individual and it had a mysterious rapid rise and fall. Within its lifetime it became suspect to many religious authorities owing to the excesses of some supposed mystics, like Mme Guyon. Novices in religious orders or seminaries were discouraged from reading its authors because the habit of passivity was thought to interfere with the active practice of the hard virtues. Even in 1800 the reading of St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross was considered dangerous. A well-known book of the time, *The Practice of Perfection and Christian Virtues* by Alphonsus Rodriguez, which continued to be popular reading as late as the first world war, upheld the active life of asceticism, as if the passive life were a treacherous bog. He could claim, of course, that in St. Ignatius true mysticism was joined to these virtues and that his ideal was contemplation in action. No doubt, as so often happens in the history of the Catholic Church, a view espoused by heretics drove Catholic teachers to show its error by exclusive attention to and defence of its opposite.

The nineteenth century carried on the traditions of the Counter-Reformation and brought out some of its less lovely traits. Controversy was once more sharp, and owing to the sufferings of the Church under the Absolute Monarchs and the French Revolution, theology had been left high and dry. It was not giving life and content to practice. As a consequence spirituality was tinged with Jansenism. Moreover the bourgeois society of England, as can be seen in the novels of Dickens, had become strict and puritanical, even sanctimonious. The novels of deans and high-minded women

reveal a religion in which joy is almost a sin, and children were taught to pray to a God who would punish them for the least failing. Many religious men and women, Catholic as well as Protestant, were strong Christians, athletes for God. Catholics had their rule of life; they practised mortification, followed precise methods of prayer, reading their pet prayers even at Mass. They went rarely to communion, and had their own individual devotions and sturdy piety. They came more and more to centre their spiritual life round Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament and meditated upon the Passion.

I have said that within the lifetime of the old a noticeable change has occurred. This change is real but it must not be exaggerated. The nineteenth century was in many ways vigorous, and I have already mentioned writers who appeal to us now, Scheeben who died in 1888 and the Ven. Francis Libermann in 1852. There are others, men of genius like Newman, Rosmini, the Abbé Huvelin and Baron Friedrich von Hügel, who cannot be placed in any category. There also have always been individuals who sing outside choruses and may be more akin in spirit to a St. Augustine or Chrysostom than to a Faber or Gignac. We must never forget that the Spirit blows where It will and that within orthodoxy there are so many treasures that the householder can pick and choose.

The change is marked in philosophy by an attempt to loosen up the stiff propositions of late Scholasticism, and to bring the will and intellect together and to show how love assists knowledge. Thereby light was cast upon that mutual love of persons which the mystery of the Holy Trinity suggests. In devotion the Blessed Sacrament is attached more closely to the Eucharist, and Communion is seen to be the culmination of the Eucharistic sacrifice, which in turn shines out as the corporate act of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ. In literature the strong, but somewhat heavy, spirituality of the Benedictine Archbishop Ullathorne is exchanged for the Pauline views of Abbot Marmion.

Mgr. Robert Hugh Benson in his spiritual writings on the Church anticipated much that was to come. After him book upon book appeared dwelling on the supernatural life and sanctifying grace (Fr. Martindale's pamphlet on the *Supernatural Life* had and still has an immense sale), on incorporation and inhabitation, on the need of corporate prayer and corporate sacrifice, on the Mystical Body. The accompanying interest in the liturgical movement began with the dialogue Masses and the use of the vernacular. New translations of the Missal were made and the music purified.

This spirituality with a new look has many aspects. Perhaps the simplest way to understand its attraction and power is by fixing attention on the Eucharistic liturgy. The image of the Crucifix had made all the faithful understand one side of the Mass, that is, the suffering and death of Our Lord for man. The Resurrection, however, and the risen life of Our Lord were less well appreciated. The Catholic body learnt from books of instruction and apologetics that the point of the Resurrection consisted in its decisive evidence for the divinity of Christ. That once established, prayers and devotions remained fixed on the public life and passion of Christ. It was kept out of sight that the Victim in the Mass is the glorious Victim, Christ risen from the dead, the Lord and the Giver of supernatural life. The holocaust of the Mass should be celebrated with nuptial songs, for it is a thanksgiving act, the corporate act of the members of Christ, acting in the name and power of their Head. They re-present the one work of our Redemption in every land and at every moment of time until the consummation of all things, when Christ having formed the perfect society gives back to the Father the spoils of His victory and He 'shall be all in all'.

The Mass is now seen to be the act of the redeemed, of those whose life is 'hid in Christ'. At the Reformation reformers had charged Catholics with blasphemy in multiplying in the Mass the one sacrifice of Calvary. This would be fair, if it were not the very pith of the Revelation by God that love would so unite human beings to the Godhead in Christ, that as the Son is in the Father, so, as St. John wrote, we are in Him. This truth runs through the Mass. The congregation and the Church are the *plebs tua sancta*, those, who remembering Christ's 'blessed passion, resurrection from the dead and glorious ascension', ask that their gift may be carried by the angel to the altar on high, and thereby they may be allowed to enjoy 'every grace and heavenly blessing'. The Mass reaches its climax in the cry of assurance and exaltation, 'through Him, and with Him, and in Him be honour and glory' to the Father. The full teaching of St. Paul and St. Peter and St. John is here epitomised in the sacrificial drama of the Mass. All those in grace have been buried with Christ in baptism so as to walk in new life – the risen life of Christ. They are 'the vine-branches of the Vine'; their conduct should be marked by a serenity and *sancta laetitia*, a holy joy, because they are never alone and are free from despondency.

In such a version of the good news of Christ it is easy to see the lines which converge towards Christian perfection. There are, also

priorities – for the virtues which spring from the essence of the teaching come first. These virtues are faith, hope and charity, the theological virtues. They are the first steps in the new life. Faith, as St. Paul constantly repeats, is the condition of all the rest of our spiritual life. We see with the eyes of Christ the truth of His Revelation, and being now in Him our faith is ‘the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things unseen’. We possess, that is, eternal life in Christ already, though we cannot experience it. Hope is like the other side of the coin, for now that God has given us a share in His divine life and Christ is present in us we have the confidence that God will fulfil His promises, and as ‘He that is in us is stronger’ than those in the world who are matched against us, we rely upon God’s infinite power to defeat the devil and all who follow him – and this is hope. Lastly, charity is the very life of Christ, His body and blood which courses in us. Because of His love we are a new family, with a blood tie far closer than that of any human relationship. The name of charity has come down in the world, so that some writers have selected the word Agape to do better justice to the unique meaning and value of Christ’s gift. So many think of charity as another word for almsgiving or kindness. No reference is made to the motive even in such noble acts as forgiving enemies or loving a neighbour as oneself. That neighbour is to us Christ. ‘What you do to others you do to Me’, for Christ ‘plays in ten thousand faces’.

The supernatural life has to do with a body, the extension of Christ down time, so that no age or place will be without His presence. This doctrine of the Body corrects an excessive individualism, to which everyone is tempted. The holiness of the nineteenth century was supported by the Church and the sacraments. The individual, however, was not as conscious as he ought to be of this coincidence of his individual life with that of the whole fellowship of the faithful. Nowadays, however, it is not so difficult to appropriate into one’s thinking this idea of a society. We are surrounded by States which have been forced to take more and more control of the lives of their citizens. The problem throughout the world is of management with liberty, and it looks as if the benefits provided by the State must in a secular civilisation increasingly weaken freedom and personal initiative. Already in the Soviet system men and women have ceased to be treated as persons. In such a situation the Mystical Body shines out the more clearly as the only example of Head and members existing in a loving union, where life and

liberty are given more abundantly to each single person, closely bound as he is with every other person.

Within this same society with its foundations resting on faith and hope and the charity of Christ, the function of prayer and the purpose of self-denial are made evident. Prayer keeps the mind attached to the truth of Christ's love, and self-denial serves to overcome our inward-looking wills. If practised with wisdom, we come near to the lovely virtue of humility. We have decreased that He may increase in us. He works through the personal, unique dispositions which we have to add to the many-coloured perfections of the Kingdom of God. The Church after the Reformation, as it was forced to struggle for existence, did not insist so much on the Christian taking his part in public life and sanctifying the secular. Long before, however, after the barbarian invasions, the Christian had to salvage what was left of the Roman culture and out of the chaos make a new culture formed from the beauty of Christ and His Mother. The summit reached by these efforts is to be found in Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* and Botticelli's *Nativity*. They were the apprentices of the saints, who gave them the tools and the incentives. These saints themselves and the Church hardly took in what they were doing. They were like a mother who dreaming on other things strokes her child with love. The image is sufficiently exact because the first consuming love of a Christian is for ultimate union with Christ in glory. It may be as an afterthought that he finds temporal things can be so precious. In this care for and belief in time and nature Christianity differs from the Eastern religions. To the latter the temporal is an illusion or a misery, whereas the Church has ever a loving regard for the temporal. This is its Sparta, this will it adorn, for God the Son did not disdain the finite. He became flesh, and how could He not love the flesh and encourage the love for His Mother, seeing that He had been formed in her womb, and was born a child of her flesh alone and the Holy Spirit?

The balance between love of life and self-denial is always difficult as, our nature being what it is, we can always find excuses, justify indulgence and half-hoodwink ourselves until we become shams. This is the problem of the individual, but the Incarnation and Redemption do give us a vision of man as man keeping his troth with Christ and reaching the end of life bearing many sheaves. It has always been a help if the Cross and Resurrection are kept in their indissoluble unity, or at least if the Cross be made to stand for both the Passion and the Resurrection. At certain periods, especially of

stress, the figure of the Suffering Christ has been so rich in consolation that the suppliant has stopped there. Nevertheless, the Cross is not a sign of failure or gloom. It represents life as well as death. *Dux vitae mortuus, regnat vivus*. It is for this reason that St. Peter and St. Paul both take for granted the already existing blessed state of the baptised.

That we should bring back sheaves and transfigure ourselves and the little world given to our operations can be well seen in terms of Inhabitation and Incorporation. Inhabitation tells us that we have been reborn in Christ and wedded to the Godhead through the action and indwelling of the Holy spirit. Incorporation, on the other hand, is the action of Christ extending His own humanity so that all that is human and finite save sin will increase His stature to the plenitude of which St. Paul writes. All human experience, therefore, in some mysterious way, every good deed, thought and intention, every moment that is touched with beauty or goodness, the finite bitter-sweet experiences which live on in memory, are to be rescued from oblivion and find a place in the full life of Christ with His Father in His new body. St. Paul intimates that Christ's Headship extends to all creation, and all the variety of nature is to be influenced by Him as iron filings round a magnet. This is what is meant by the 'resuming' of all things in Christ in the second advent, when there will be 'a new heaven and a new earth'. It has been God's good pleasure 'through Him to win back all things, whether on earth or in heaven into union with Himself. . . . All things have been made subject to Him . . . and when that subjection is complete, then the Son Himself will become subject to the power which made all things His subjects, so that God may be all in all'.

Such a wide panorama is provided by the theology of sanctifying grace that it may tend to beguile the mind. Some, too, may fear lest those who are slow of understanding or of a practical turn may be left outside, a kind of *profanum vulgus* in contrast with the initiates or an *élite*. Not everyone shares the aesthetic enjoyment which goes with a pure and venerable service of God devoid of any appeal to the excitements on which the majority of people live nowadays. The radio fan, the jazz lover will have to accustom himself to a very different kind of emotion in church. As it is, those whose tastes seem little changed by their education, and all those who are without an ear for music or eye for colours and form, may find it hard to lift up their hearts to God in the austere liturgy and amid droning sounds. They have, like many a saintly soul, reached

spiritual joy by Benedictions, rosaries and the Stations of the Cross. Their spiritual pleasure is in holy medals and pictures and prayer-books. There are innumerable people of this sort, and to ask them to change would be as foolish as to ask public libraries to remove thrillers and westerns. Even priests feel the need of a sports magazine or detective story.

Only fanatics will demand complete uniformity, and the Church stands for liberty of spirit among the sons of God. If the fanatic be as scornful of old practices as the true artist of the shop products which adorn so many churches and chapels, the old conservative can retort that this exclusive love for what is liturgical is a monomania, a pleasure of the mind or taste, but of insufficient help to the will. Life is a 'Spiritual Combat' with eternal life hanging every moment on our decisions. There is too close a connection for safety between the modern taste and the reluctance to think or preach of the last things or enjoin mortifications. Those who are in peace should try to share the life of the Catholics behind the Iron Curtain and persecuted missionaries. For this reason those *Exercises* which have been disdained as 'spiritual athleticism' should not be dropped, and if private mortification be lessened, that self-sacrifice, which comes from identifying ourselves with the suffering members of the Mystical Body and with all the poor and stricken, should take its place. Always have we to love our neighbours as ourselves, and now with the new realisation of our membership with Christ in one body, the happy fusion between past individual heroism and present corporate life can be made. There is one place whence all spirituality draws its life and forms of inspiration, and that is the altar of God. The Mass is the furnace of divine love and it is the maker of sanctity. There is the memorial of what God suffered for love and there too is the new covenant with man, the covenant which gives, as St. John says, 'the power to those who believe to be sons of God'. The Mass, too, tells us that we are not alone. In it the priest speaks in the name of the Church, and the living and the dead are brought round the altar with the Mother of God and the multitude of saints who cry Holy, Holy, Lord God of Sabaoth. The ladder is fixed between heaven and earth, and all the means are there with Christ upon the altar to rise to that union of holiness with Him on earth, which anticipates the everlasting union with Him and His members in eternity.