

# THE SPIRITUAL LIFE AS HISTORY

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**A**MONG the many beneficial effects which modern biblical scholarship has had on christian spirituality, not the least has been the rediscovery of the hebraic sense of time. The concrete and personalized time of the hebrews may not be capable of solving some time problems in modern philosophy, but for the christian it has provided a framework within which he can more clearly recognize his spiritual life for the historical process it is. In contrast to the static categories of the greeks and of western thought in general, reality for the hebrews was a movement, a movement personally directed by God, who through his active intervention into human life led both individuals and community toward a specific goal. Consequently, the hebrews and early christians found it quite easy to think of their relationship with God precisely as a history, as an engagement in a series of historical events over which God was always the Lord.

Initially, therefore, the christian experience was more one of becoming than of being. Though both experiences are necessary in order to grasp reality in its wholeness, the fact is that most spiritual writers in the west, at least since the fifteenth century, have followed the scholastic theologians and avoided the dynamic element in man's relationship with God. A case in point is the biblical description of what we now call sanctifying grace. To be a 'son of God' and 'temple of the holy Spirit' meant, for many centuries, to have a living awareness through faith of a new affective orientation towards the three divine Persons as well as a participation in their sanctifying activity. The union of all christians as members of Christ's body was likewise thought of in terms of the same dynamic relationship effected through the action of the holy Spirit. It was the scholastic concern for abstract natures which led to the static concept of grace as a special participation in the divine nature through the reception of a created gift, seen now as an 'accident' inhering in the soul. Christians were united to each other because they all possessed this created gift, though the social aspect of grace

was seldom insisted upon. While preserving all that is valuable in this point of view, theologians today have returned to the concept of grace as a communion between persons. Chiefly emphasized is the indwelling and friendship of the three Persons, which constitutes a new mode of existence for the christian rather than a new nature. Members of Christ's body, the Church, prolong in their turn this divine activity within them by living sacramental lives, that is to say, by entering into the thoughts and actions of Christ and so thinking and acting as he would in their circumstances.

Now this theological stress upon human existence in the concrete, coupled with the biblical stress upon reality as movement, can have a significant influence upon our spiritual outlook. The christian vocation will present itself, from this point of view, as a call to play a specific role in the forward movement of salvation history between the first and second comings of Christ. My own point of time thus becomes extremely important, for it is at this point that I am caught up into that continual re-creation in Christ which is God's ultimate purpose in the paschal mystery, and which in fact constitutes the presence of the paschal mystery in the past, present, and future of my life. The special significance of my personal call by God is that the paschal mystery is to be re-enacted in the world through me. By reason of his birth at a certain point in time, Christ's immediate influence on earth was limited: he became a jew, to live and die in a particular cultural milieu, bounded by the geography of a land and the mentality of a people. Only through the individual christian can Christ become incarnate in other cultures, and only through me can he become incarnate in the specific area in which I make my presence felt. To be a christian, therefore, means first of all that I do not face my world unwillingly, but accept the place in time which God has allotted to me.

Yet my following of Christ also means a readiness to accept a future whose nature and circumstances I cannot now foresee. The apostles knew practically nothing of what Christ expected of them; they knew only that they wanted to be with him and they were content to leave their future in his hands. Unless I am prepared for the unforeseen and the unexpected, I may not be able to recognize the bridegroom when he comes in the middle of the night. The readiness to commit oneself to a future more or less unknown is in fact a characteristic of all love. 'He who loves', writes Karl Rahner, 'must pledge himself today in the adventure of a love which will be tomorrow what it must be tomorrow, but which is

today as it should be today . . . He who loves must commit himself today to the demands of tomorrow. Love is true love even for today only if it strives to become more than it is today, only if it is truly in movement . . . a dynamic oriented toward the future'.<sup>1</sup>

Our mode of union with Christ will thus correspond to our growing and changing awareness of the reality which is ourselves and of the reality of the historical events which give our lives their structure. Each of our experiences must be seen with the eye of faith as an experience of God's presence, revealing to us what he wishes our lives to become. Commitment to Christ does not mean following a blueprint or adhering to a timetable; it means listening to the voice of God and accepting the gift which he offers. Though God's choice is eternal, it must be ratified by a response in time, and this can be made only gradually, over the course of our lives. Hence the need on our part of vigilance. 'Be on the alert at every moment, praying to come safely through all that lies before you and for the meeting with the Son of Man'.<sup>2</sup> These words of Christ are echoed by St John: 'Here and now we are God's children; what we shall be has not yet been disclosed'.<sup>3</sup> Such disclosure will come at God's appointed time, and it is this which forbids our making beforehand any autonomous plan of our own. Our movement toward the future must always be provisional, since it is a movement into the unknown. Ultimately this movement is a mystery, for the God who governs our lives is himself a mystery.

There is, however, a light for us to follow, and it comes from a source we should least expect, our past. In the Old Testament, Yahweh made it clear that the israelites were to carry their past with them always; it was their past, the series of great divine interventions in their lives, which made them different from all other nations and peoples. So he constantly reminded them that he was their God, that he had led them out of Egypt, across the Red Sea and through the desert, and that it was he who had finally brought them to the promised land.<sup>4</sup> Only by remembering their past could the israelites be faithful when the word of God came to them again in their present. Indeed, the whole drama and tragedy of God's dealings with his people revolves around their forgetfulness. The preaching of the prophets is one long reminder that misfortunes and trials are meant to be occasions for remembering

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<sup>1</sup> Rahner, Karl, S. J., 'Das Gebot der Liebe' *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol 5 (Einsiedeln, 1962), p 509.      <sup>2</sup> Lk 21, 36.      <sup>3</sup> 1 Jn 3, 2.      <sup>4</sup> Exod 20, 2.

once more what God had already done for them. Such recollection was to become Israel's pledge of liberation and to constitute their hope of future glory.<sup>1</sup>

In the New Testament, on a somewhat deeper level, we are reminded that our recollection of God's past generosity can be transformed into an awareness of what he is accomplishing in the present. For in the person of Christ, who sums up all history in himself, we have the continual accomplishment of all God's promises to the world. 'He is the Yes pronounced upon God's promises, every one of them'.<sup>2</sup> In Christ mankind is effectively present to God and God to mankind. Through Christ we too become present to God and God to us. This is why the work of his Spirit in the life of the christian is to 'make everything plain and recall to your minds whatever I have said to you'.<sup>3</sup> Such an experience we have above all through the eucharistic liturgy, which is the re-presentation of the pasch and therefore of all that God has ever done in any human life.

This light from the past, coming to us in the present, brings with it further insight. 'To be' is now seen to mean in a very true sense 'to be receiving'. 'What do you possess that you have not received?'<sup>4</sup> We are all in danger of shutting ourselves up in the 'now' of our relationship with God, as though the past were something with no influence any more, and the future nothing but a repetition of the present. Whereas it is precisely the past which reveals the meaning of our mysterious 'now', and so nourishes our hope by bearing witness to the generosity of God. The doctrine of merit is not unrelated to this: everything good we have done in our past remains in our present and is operative both in our union with God and in our work for our neighbour. Only the evil we have done disappears. And even in the case of evil action, there are good effects on the human plane, which will persist and await their turn to be glorified. Thus what we are continually receiving from God is a redemption of time itself. What we have to look forward to is not simply the resurrection of our bodies but a resurrection as well of time into eternity.

At this point we come upon the startling paradox of the christian life. Union with God can be understood only in its past accomplishment, it can be lived only in its present reality, it can be fully

<sup>1</sup> Isai 43, 18 ff; 63, 15-64, 11; 66, 2.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Cor 1, 20.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 14, 26.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor 4, 7.

possessed only in its future achievement. This is the primary meaning of the eschatological tendency in the lives of the first christians, their preoccupation with the parousia of Christ, which many of us find strange and sometimes perplexing. Their remembrance of the past somehow tended more and more to be transformed into expectation. Hidden in this experience is the profound truth that our past has no real significance outside the future to which God has destined us; and conversely, that preoccupation with our future can become a dangerous daydream unless our movement toward it is based upon the acceptance of our present and past. Each christian, in other words, needs time not only to develop the rhythm of his life with God, but even more to discover it. To be related to Christ in faith, hope, and charity indeed means to be in a 'state' of union, but even more it means to be involved in a certain rhythm of growth. Such an understanding of christian expectation can provide a new and realistic context for the classic formula which says that in the spiritual life we either progress or fall back, but there is no standing still.

This approach to the parousia, and to christian spirituality in general, is to be found in the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard's basic supposition is that just as the first coming of Christ demanded that men should have already reached a certain anatomical and social development, so his second coming at the end of time would seem to demand that the human species as a whole should have already reached its full natural development in order to be capable of receiving from Christ its supernatural consummation. The epilogue of *Le Milieu Divin* insists upon some of the implications of this outlook and it will be worth citing at length.

Expectation – anxious, collective and operative expectation of an end of the world, that is to say of an outcome for the world – that is perhaps the supreme christian function and the most distinctive characteristic of our religion . . . the israelites were constantly expectant, and the first christians too . . . Successors to Israel we christians have been charged with keeping the flame of desire ever alive in the world. Only twenty centuries have passed since the ascension. What have we made of our expectancy? . . .

No doubt we see with greater or less distress the approach of individual death. No doubt, again, we pray and work conscientiously 'that the Kingdom of God may come'. But

in fact how many of us are genuinely moved in the depths of our hearts by the wild hope that our earth will be recast? . . . Where is the Christian whose impatient longing for Christ succeeds, I will not say in submerging (as it should), but even in counter-balancing the cares of human love and human interests? Where is the Catholic as passionately vowed (by conviction and not by convention) to spreading the hopes of the incarnation as many humanitarians are to spreading the dream of the new city? We persist in saying that we keep vigil in expectation of the Master. But in reality we should have to admit, if we were sincere, that we no longer expect anything.<sup>1</sup>

From Teilhard's point of view, then, the christian in the modern world should have a double orientation toward the future. He must be aware, first of all, that his own spiritual development as a person is an integral part of a time process involving the development of the human race as a whole. The evolutionary forces at work for millions of years did not suddenly cease to operate when man arrived on the scene. This means not simply that the evolutionary movement continues now in man; it means also, and more importantly, that the process is being carried out by man. He is indeed lord of the earth.<sup>2</sup> It is he who invents and discovers and who has, by taking into his own hands the direction of the world, gradually replaced nature in the progress of life. Upon man, therefore, falls the awful responsibility for his future on earth; but it is a future inextricably connected with the second coming of Christ. All human activity which is motivated by Christ's charity shoulders this human responsibility in a special way. It is a participation in God's own creative activity, and therefore serves to build up the whole body of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

We see, then, that a man's spiritual growth is inseparable from the growth of the universe into which he has been born. 'We may imagine perhaps that creation was finished long ago. This is not true. It continues more gloriously than ever . . . we serve to complete it, even with the humblest work of our hands . . . In action I adhere to the creative power of God; I coincide with it; I become not only its instrument but its living extension'.<sup>4</sup> As we have noted

<sup>1</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre, S.J., *Le Milieu Divin* (London, 1960), pp 148-150.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Gen 1, 28.

<sup>3</sup> Cf 1 Cor 3, 9; Eph 4, 13.

<sup>4</sup> *Le Milieu Divin* p 34.

already, the christian awaits not the future imposition of a pre-existent scheme, but rather the mysterious involvement of his own free decisions in the free decisions of God. What Teilhard insists upon is that these free decisions involved in one's personal spiritual development are actually related to those of the human race as a whole, and by this very fact related also to the second coming at the end of time.

Hence he would urge a further orientation towards the future: christian recognition of the role of the Church in human progress. The problem here is the all too facile presumption that there is no necessary or even desirable connection between personal holiness and the holiness of the Church and the great scientific, cultural, and technological upheavals of the twentieth century. These developments Teilhard sees as forward movements, based on faith in material progress and in the primacy of man. Contrasted with psychic energy responsible for this forward movement, is the psychic energy of christian faith, which has been responsible over the centuries for man's upward movement toward the transcendent and the divine. In the modern world the christian 'upward' can no longer separate itself from the human 'forward', since both energies are moving in the same direction, towards the parousia. True christian activity in the world today is primarily the effort to synthesize these two energies and direct their combined power towards building the earthly city and preparing for its eventual transformation.

This is in no sense a half measure, a compromise between heaven and earth, but rather a resultant force combining both energies and reinforcing one by the other. The christian's movement towards God is at the same time both 'upward' and 'forward', in a Christ who is Saviour and mover not only of individual men but of the whole creation in its evolutionary movement. The Church is growing and changing throughout her history: she slowly takes shape by bringing together through her influence all the spiritual energies of human progress in their most noble form and giving them new life. The future building up of the total (or what may be called the potential) body of Christ is to take place around an axis which is the actual body of the Church – God's people in union with him here and now. The christian's attitude towards the future is thus an expectation of that mysterious juncture between cosmic history and the salvation history of the people of God, which he now sees to be both ecclesial and corporate: all mankind, the whole

universe is involved with the Church.<sup>1</sup>

It would not be out of place, by way of conclusion, to underline once again the single idea which has been developed in the preceding pages, namely that if one's spiritual life is to be authentic it must be an engagement with history. This means first of all one's own history. Our relationships with God change and indeed must change. The gift which we bring to him over the years is not the same gift, nor is our mode of offering it the same. Fundamentally this is because we ourselves are different. If spiritual development means anything, it means that the seed must die before it can bring forth fruit; and, in the course of time, through God's action on our souls and the events that shape our lives, we die a little to our selfish interests and thereby allow Christ to live a little more in us. Moreover, as the years pass, we see with greater clarity what the gift of ourselves to God really means; and this new knowledge affects both the work we do for him and the whole range of our personal relationships. That our spiritual life should gradually come of age and find new forms in which to express itself is both natural and to be expected. Time is thus not an enemy but a friend. Changes taking place in us on the human level will always find their counterpart in changes on the level of grace. St Paul's words are meant to describe both types of growth: 'When I was a child my speech, my outlook, my thoughts were all childish. When I grew up, I had finished with childish things'.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, our engagement with history implies more than this. For the precise way in which we change cannot but be conditioned by the way the world is changing. Mankind as a whole is growing to maturity, and to the extent that we are involved in the mainstream of human life we shall influence and be influenced by this growth. This implies a willingness on the part of the christian to bring into greater harmony his desire to come close to Christ and modern man's desire to develop and conquer the earth. More than one observer has noted that there exists in the minds of most christians today a conceptual gap between being holy and being human, between commitment to the eternal and commitment to the temporal, between loving God and loving the world.

Bishop Robinson's *Honest to God* has given eloquent witness to the

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<sup>1</sup> These ideas are further developed in the present writer's *Teilhard de Chardin and the Mystery of Christ*, (London, 1966) ch 5.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor 13, 11.



growing inability even of sincere christians to resolve this dichotomy, or to find any relevance for their lives in religious orientations which are extra-temporal. Christian spirituality cannot stand still; it will run the risk of becoming even more irrelevant to so many if it ignores this problem. It must be faced, if not willingly, then at least honestly and with courage.

It is therefore dangerous to speak of growth in sanctity today without speaking at the same time of the contribution which such growth makes toward the great human aspirations of man. This is not in any sense to impoverish man's quest for God by presenting its goal of divine union as some materialistic utopian dream. It is simply to recognize that the most startling manifestation of the divine transcendence is precisely God's presence in the world, first in the heart of man and then in the creative impetus behind every truly human achievement. 'The glory of God is man fully alive', said Irenaeus. The sense of time and movement of which we have spoken is at its deepest level a sense of God; and to develop the one is to add depth to the other. The past, present and future of our relations with God are not in fact the idyllic dialogue which some would have us believe. No change takes place in our relationship with God without repercussions in the lives of those around us, and hence without an increasing influence upon the world at large. The comings of Christ to each of us in succeeding moments of time are indeed meant to prepare for his final coming in our resurrection at the end of time. But this final coming is also destined to crown man's efforts to shape his world and to transform the world he has shaped. The christian who looks forward to the parousia as the ultimate fulfilment of God's plan for his life must recognize, then, that in this culmination of salvation there is also to be found the ultimate fulfilment of all man's human hopes, of his obscure human faith in the triumph of life over death.