

WHAT HAPPENED TO DEVOTION?

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PRIOR TO VATICAN II there was in the Catholic Church a superabundance of devotional practices many of which inclined towards superstition or to the overly-sentimental. But the present situation also gives some people cause for concern since they do not see new devotional patterns emerging which sufficiently engage the imaginative and emotional life of the Christian. In its reforming zeal, they say, the Church has perhaps over-emphasized the importance of the word at the expense of non-verbal and more affective symbols, and it is now time to right the balance by striving to develop modes of spiritual expression that are not so dependent on words and concepts. Such comments, however, raise more fundamental and complex questions which it is important to address if we are to identify with clarity and confidence appropriate ways of fostering modern Christian devotional life.

Basically the term 'devotion' has to do with allegiance—an allegiance which involves the commitment of heart, mind and imagination—one's whole life-force. Christian devotion implies that this personal loving loyalty is directed to God in Christ Jesus, and particular 'devotions' are authentic only in so far as they promote an internal centring on God as the source of our being. Devotion, therefore, is not a negotiable or optional extra. Furthermore, it must find vigorous and engaged expression in the present, because allegiance and the outreach which this concept also implies have to do with vitality. We cannot live fully in either the past or the future, even though a sense of these dimensions makes our lives truly human; hence devotion touches the very heart of the Church today. It is within this frame of reference that it may be fruitful to discuss the significance of the rise and fall of specific devotional practices and phenomena.

It is as well to note at the outset the dangers of generalization on such a complex and vast subject. In many parts of the Church, devotional practices current before Vatican II still flourish. I began

preparation of this article during a brief study trip to England and Italy over Christmas and New Year. In the relatively poor London parish where I attended Christmas services, the lighting of votive candles, visits to the crib to which the children brought Christmas cards and gifts for the poor, together with the singing of Christmas carols and the performance of a Nativity play provided local and seasonal elaboration of the central liturgy, very much according to time-honoured traditions. In Italy ancient customs were still more in evidence. People queued to kiss a statue of the Infant Jesus as they left their offerings in the nearby poor box, and on one occasion, jumping on to a Roman bus I found myself jostling against a group of novices of Mother Teresa who recited the rosary in a low murmur as we lurched along the Via Appia Nuova. It is, nevertheless, a time of critical change for many in the Church, and particularly for certain parts of the English-speaking world the following considerations seem relevant.

Why have certain devotional practices fallen out of favour? To what extent is this a result of Vatican II and of the liturgical reforms associated with the Council, and to what degree is it a function of more fundamental sociological change? What are the lessons which we may learn as an aid towards positive growth?

Vatican II involved a focussing in new ways on certain features of the Church's engagement with Christ and its place in the contemporary world. Instead of reinforcing the image of a triumphalist institution, which took a trenchant or embattled stance on doctrinal differences with other denominations or religions, the Council presented the Church as a pilgrim people, conscious of God as Creator and Redeemer of the whole human race, and recognizing as part of its mission the need to respond to what was life-giving and good in the world at large. The reformation of the liturgy was permeated with the same spirit. The vernacular was substituted for the Latin language so that all the faithful might share more directly and intimately in the Church's official worship. Some of the inhibiting barriers between clerics and laity were also removed, particular stress being laid on the significance of baptism as the initiation of all Christians into the priesthood of Christ, while Eucharistic theology developed the theme of members of one family sharing in the sacred meal and thereby being strengthened on their pilgrim way in union with Christ.

A very significant part of this liturgical reform was its pronounced biblical emphasis, and the decrees of Vatican II were

accompanied by a renewed interest in scripture studies and a biblical interpretation of the Church. It is, of course, grossly inaccurate to state that medieval Christianity was out of touch with the scriptural tradition. Its culture, indeed, is permeated with the wide-ranging riches of biblical thought and literature. At the Reformation, however, when the Roman Church found itself in opposition to certain interpretations of scripture, a shift in emphasis took place. Increasingly, the Church Catholic concerned itself with authoritative statements in areas where debate and dissension had arisen, and the faithful were discouraged from exploring the rich treasures of the scriptures for themselves.

The teaching of the Second Vatican Council and the accompanying liturgical reforms with their renewed scriptural emphasis were, nevertheless, only partially responsible for the discontinuance of a whole range of prayers and devotional practices. True, the introduction of the vernacular and the more direct engagement of the laity in the liturgical celebration as readers of the Word, and participants in the responsorial prayers were critical in arresting the parallel development which many devotions had taken. It was no longer so easy or inviting, for example, for the individual quietly to recite the rosary as Mass progressed or to turn to long private prayers of preparation and thanksgiving for Holy Communion; but this was not enough to dislodge long-loved prayers and rituals capable of being performed both during and outside the public liturgy.

Some aspects of this change have to do with fundamental developments in our society and, while it is difficult to present an accurate world-picture or view in a few words, the following impressions may resonate with those of other readers.

Since the Second World War a revolution has occurred in communication. This is so on many levels. Large scale migration and the relocation of refugees as an aftermath of war continue to take place, while travel for both business and pleasure, often to lands hitherto difficult of access, has also increased. In addition to the physical movement of peoples through re-settlement or travel, communication on a world scale has been dramatically facilitated through technology. Many of us take it for granted that few places on the globe are beyond a day's air-flight, while knowledge of distant events can be almost instantaneous through satellite servicing of television and radio. We also exchange information by telephone, telex or 'fax' across vast distances within a matter of

minutes and the age of the computer and video means that we can at will call up information stored in great data banks and gathered from far-ranging sources.

The latter half of the twentieth century is distinguished also by the advances made in medical science, both in the battle against disease and in the probings of the mysteries associated with the beginnings of life and with old age. Characteristic too, of our age, is a pre-occupation with the environment—a concern for nature seen as under technological and nuclear threat or at risk from the wasteful actions of the world's present inhabitants.

A further deep-seated movement has to do with the place of women in society and the relationship of the sexes. Throughout history, although women have often been idealized, their role has normally been interpreted in relationship to that of men, and it is the latter in whom has been invested the fundamental significance of the human race. Language reflects this orientation, and the conscious re-assessment now taking place perforce affects both ways of communicating as well as the message itself. This revolution is of extraordinary profundity and power. It impinges on almost every aspect of human experience—not only are women confronted with a re-appraisal of themselves that goes to their very identity, but because of the relationship of the sexes, men too are challenged to new depths of self-knowledge and to a fundamental re-evaluation of their relationships both with women and with one another.

It would be strange indeed if such significant changes in our consciousness and our geographical and cultural environment—our sense of space, and of our private and public persona—did not affect our religious and cultural expression. Indeed, the human psyche always responds and develops as it interacts with the world which it has helped to produce. It is therefore not surprising that in a time of such rapid and far-reaching changes, interest in behavioural psychology and in sociology has also gained momentum, as we strive to keep pace with understanding the effects of these developments on our inner lives.

At the very simplest level, increased communication has opened up to many the very different ways that people live, while highlighting at the same time our common humanity—its vulnerability and inter-dependence. In many cases also this has given to men and women an increased sense of the value of human freedom and thus the individual conscience responds differently in many cases today. For more believing Christians than was the case a couple

of decades ago, there is a very clear distinction between what the laws or public teaching of the institution, be it Church or Government, proclaim and the personal interpretation of individual actions. Areas affected by this shift go close to the very heart of traditional religious attitudes. For example, in the Sacrament of Penance the emphasis is now on reconciliation and the expression of sorrow rather than on the meticulous categorization of sins and self-accusation. Perforce this change of attitude radiates out to private devotional practices. In place of the recitation of set prayers, guaranteed by the Church, as it were, through the system of indulgences to help lift the burden of sin and guilt, we seek to achieve self-knowledge through quiet reflection in God's presence. Meditation on our own or on more general life experiences broadened by advertence to the Judaeo-Christian tradition distilled in the psalms, or in aptly formulated prayers, poems and hymns leads us to accept our creatureliness and sinfulness; at the same time it reassures us that ours is not an isolated condition, for God as Saviour, faithful through history, is always present.

In our society it seems more difficult to make enduring decisions and commitments, while ironically, in many ways the decisions themselves have more far-reaching consequences. This makes the challenge of achieving consistency in one's life and of responding to the ideal of fidelity more exacting than it was to our forbears; and of course such heightened challenges and attitudes have a direct bearing on devotional expression. We will not, we cannot, given the world our generation inhabits, stay content with a simple set of formulae and prayer patterns throughout our lives, yet, at the same time, we hanker for a sense of continuity and tradition even when acutely conscious that some forms of expression are no longer appropriate. Thus many can no longer express their devotion and allegiance to God in repetitive prayers such as the rosary or litanies. Even priests and religious, part of whose professional responsibility is to share regularly in the public worship of the Church by praying the Liturgy of the Hours, look on this task differently, in many instances, from their predecessors. Where the Hours are not recited in choir, rather than complete systematically each day their verbal recitation, some find it more fruitful to concentrate on selected parts of the text in a more meditative approach, thus blending spoken prayer with wordless contemplation.

In the fostering of devotional life, self-discipline is as important today as ever, but there is a fresh recognition that constancy and fidelity must stem from personal conviction and inner freedom. The inner call to explore simpler and less-externally regulated forms of prayer, particularly as life progresses, is not new in the Christian tradition; but the modern cleric, religious or layperson often finds it difficult to develop a basic pattern for his or her devotional life against which such growth may take place. Involvement in the contemporary work-force sets up problems of scheduling and direction of energies, and it is hard to bring to prayer a heart and mind free of anxieties and distractions. Once, we resolutely cut ourselves off from daily concerns during stated times of prayer. Today, aware of the complex psychological demands of certain life-styles, we realize that it may be more fruitful first to relax, to read or to walk a little, perhaps, before we seek formally to pray. Though we try to let go in trust the present concerns that crowd in upon us, we are keenly aware that it is one world not two in which we move and have our being and that our prayer has to do with wholeness.

This means that we approach differently the notions of the secular and sacred. Rather than being viewed as separate spheres they seem to interpenetrate one another. At its best this involves the taking to ourselves of all the experiences of this world, aware of God's mysterious creative and loving providence, while painfully conscious at the same time that we can offer no facile solution to the suffering, injustice and threat of death which are part of every human life. Relatedly, the concept and expression of reverence have undergone a distinct change. The idea of the church building, for example, as a sacred place where profane matters are not spoken of and where silence reinforces the sense of other-worldliness, has been replaced in many cases by the notion of the church or chapel as an unpretentious multi-purpose space—still conducive to quiet reflection, but where one may also read, converse or confer if the circumstances so indicate. Conversely, the domestic or secular setting may be equally appropriate for private or public prayer. Again, Christian tradition has always provided for both these attitudes; but there is a fresh fingering of the 'mix'.

The picture sketched here, albeit with broad brush, demonstrates, I trust, that the problem of how to foster 'devotions' is bound up with how to be a devout Christian in the modern world. Specific devotional practices are dependent for their vigour, validity

and relevance, on the extent to which they express a basic and personal commitment to God in Christ Jesus, and since we are called to live out this commitment in contemporary society, devotional expression must needs take account of the changing sociological scene.

Central is the challenge of communication. Given this it is important to emphasize the continuing importance of the *word* in devotional life. The ability to think and to formulate one's ideas, yearnings or imaginings in words is the glory of the human race. Christianity subsumes this distinctive element of our being in presenting the Son of God as the creative Word, while Mary reflects on the Word in her heart. It is true that Western Christianity in renewed contacts with Eastern religions, has absorbed precious lessons about modes of contemplation that are enshrined in traditions such as Zen Buddhism. It is nevertheless alien for the Christian to resort essentially to emptiness and nothingness without hope of the personal fulfilment that is achieved in loving communication. Nor is the intellectual life, in the last analysis, in conflict with the affective or emotional part of our being; and the non-verbal languages of music and the visual arts flourish in conjunction with literary expression. They do not replace it.

One of the greatest challenges facing the Church today is to bridge the gap that has developed between itself and the thrusting restless, intellectual and imaginative energy of so many scientists, artists, philosophers, creative writers and social theorists. Certainly in Australia, the Church is conspicuous by her absence from these activities. Of course there are some great individual Christians who are caught by the life of the mind and the imagination; but all too frequently they find they speak a foreign language to that of the institutional Church. From within, some theologians and Christian philosophers seek to address this dimension but they often fall short of communicating with their 'secular' counterparts. Here lies perhaps the root of the problem as to why devotional practices, appropriate to our time and place, and which are also of a piece with the great traditions of Christianity, seem slow to develop. The arts today are in a state of self-examination and questioning: they are often experimental and designed to shock their audience. But many of the issues raised are directly relevant to us as Christians: the nature of love, life and death, for example, or the contrast between the world of technology and that of nature; the many-faceted and ambivalent quality of the mass media or the

relationship of the ceremonial and ritualistic with the informal and private. The various branches of the arts today are furthermore, in dialogue with one another. Many are pre-occupied with the theoretical aspects of their formulation, of how, for instance, visual and verbal forms function—how they impinge in different ways on the human consciousness and how they relate to each other.

Like those concerned with the forms of Christian spirituality, the arts are to do with forging new modes of expression and with preserving what is rich and precious in tradition. This latter comprises not only the artistic products themselves but the whole web of critical and imaginative response which they have generated. Increasingly, in the study of the art of the past—visual, musical or literary—there is a concern to recapture and to understand the social circumstances in which such art was generated, thereby making contact with the people who produced it.

In analogous fashion Christian spirituality is always engaged in a dialogue with tradition. The scriptures form the most fundamental and the richest source of devotions throughout the history of the Church. Contemporary experimentation and endeavour must always keep this in mind. There is, too, a basic stratum of symbols originally drawn from nature which has long been part of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Elements such as water, fire and lights, bread, wine and oil and, to a lesser extent, the fruits, flowers and plants of the earth continue to provide the sustaining imagery for Christian prayer and devotional ritual.

Christian tradition has marked, too, in a special way, the passage of time. The calendar for the liturgical year, for example, has entrenched deep into the rhythm of our lives the celebration of the saving events of Christ's life and of the history of God's people. The themes of celebration and commemoration touch the most basic human yearnings; and there will always be rich scope for the development of particular devotional emphases according to the changing liturgical seasons and sanctoral calendar whether local or universal. Devotions must also keep pace with the seasonal rhythms of individual lives. Different responses, for example, arise from youth, from the mature adult and from the old. It is with an awareness of these differing emphases set against the background of a common faith and dedication that the most healthy devotional practices have been developed in the past. Especially with our current focus on psychological differences, we need to advert also to the even more personal rhythms of temperament. One paradoxical

aspect of the history of Christianity is that the great rifts which occurred at times like the Reformation have given rise to varied and valuable devotional emphases which at a later more ecumenical period enrich the resources on which the whole Church may draw. One has only to instance the hymns of Wesley or Luther, the poetry of Donne, Vaughan or Herbert, now regularly included in handbooks for liturgical or private devotions in the Catholic Church, to register how time has distilled the artistic and creative worth of what was inaccessible to many at an earlier period.

Indeed, one may argue that our devotional life today is capable of being developed in far richer ways than ever before. In addition to the scriptures, we are able to draw on a great repertoire of prayers, hymns, poems, commentaries and homilies which have stood the test of time, together with the great traditions developed in music and the visual arts. At the same time, however, we must strive to respond to contemporary innovative thought and culture, drawing on the creative vitality which is God's gift to all. This involves putting a high premium on the development of the life of the mind and of the imagination, and of joining ranks once more with scientists, artists and questing thinkers. Then our devotional expression will encompass not only the rich traditions of the past but even those objects which we sometimes regard as either alien to religious thought or purely utilitarian—the telephone, the car, the word-processor and video for example. Artists vigorously respond to these elements without ceasing to engage with more ancient symbols of nature and tradition. Nor is there anything that Christian worship cannot transmute. What happened to devotion? Rather the question should be phrased in the exciting present 'What is happening?'; then our devotion, anchored in Christ Jesus, will continue to find rich and ever re-vitalized expression.