

SPIRITUAL MIDWIFERY

Sylvie Robert

HUMAN BIRTH needs a midwife Does something similar happen in the spiritual life where, in the Christian tradition, as in many others, help is needed from a fellow-believer—a brother, perhaps, or someone called ‘father’? We can only recognise the novel nature of such mediation after we have given some thought to the kind of ‘birth’ that occurs in the spiritual life and to the way it comes about.

We Need to Be Born from Above

Spiritual Experience as a ‘Birth’

Every human birth evokes such expressions as *newness, springing up, openness to life, bringing into the world, all through pain and joy*. Such traits are not extraneous to what is felt in the course of a spiritual experience. So, often, on finishing a retreat a person feels regenerated, as if on the threshold of a new stage in life. As we return once more to the context of our former lives, we feel we are renewing contact with their relations and activities in a new way. In one sense, nothing has changed; but in another, everything henceforth is different. This inner renewal in our way of seeing things and people introduces us into a new world. An example of such a decisive experience is given by Thomas Merton as he recounts how he felt on leaving the church where God had touched him:

Now I walked leisurely down Broadway in the sun, and my eyes looked about me at a new world. I could not understand what it was that had happened to make me so happy, why I was so much at peace, so content with life. All I know is that I walked in a new world.¹

On a more modest scale, whenever some phrase of scripture suddenly strikes us as full of life and meaning, or God knocks discreetly on our door by means of a look, a remark, an event, there is always that

¹ Thomas Merton, *Elected Silence: The Autobiography of Thomas Merton* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1949), 167.



feeling of something new. In all their diversity, these fleeting glimpses of God in our lives are like a birth and a delivery into the world, as happened, for instance, with Nicodemus.

A person who may have been living as a stranger to the Christian faith, or with a faith that has atrophied, now finds an unsuspected listening space opening within the self such as Ignatius experienced when he first became conscious of interior movements at Loyola. Or a spiritual birth may come in the form of a sense of liberation, in which the burden of suffering that has locked a person in is

lifted and he or she realises, 'God was there and I did not know it!' A new horizon appears, and sometimes even a person's scars emit a gentle but steady light. Or again, the meeting with the Lord allows us to see those shadows in our lives where we did not dare to enter and which we wanted to keep well hidden, a sinfulness that had escaped our awareness or to which over long years they had grown accustomed. The sense of being forgiven, based on a real facing up to the truth, then causes us to burst forth in 'an exclamation of wonder with intense feeling' (Exx 60), surely a birth cry! I was racing towards death, and instead I have been given the gracious gift of life.

The election process, in which a decision is taken and received in prayer, is also a birth, and is frequently lived and experienced as such. Similarly, after many years of commitment to a ministry, a marriage or a religious life, there comes a sort of 'second call',² which carries with it the ballast of a realism acquired over the years. Confirmation of the

² See René Voillaume, 'The Second Summons', in *Brothers of Men: Letters to the Petits Frères*, translated by A. Manson (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966), 29–34.

vocation chosen comes at that moment with a radical force that could never have been suspected: the ‘conversion’ of St Teresa of Ávila is a good example of such a call.

Spiritual experience is indeed a birth and it is this that guarantees its authenticity. However, it is never my only birth

Being Born to Oneself and to God

Grant that we may be born to ourselves and to you,
And may open ourselves to your promise as we murmur your law;
Your human tenderness is the fount and the call,
You, Father, speak to our hearts, grant us to be whole in you.³

As this monastic hymn makes clear, spiritual birth in the Christian tradition is always a joint event: we are born to God and to ourselves, always in partnership. Christian interiority is in dialogue, never solitary: it emerges in a meeting with God and at God’s initiative. The only way in which we can free ourselves from the weight of the past, from the suffering that has scarred us, as indeed from the sin that imprisons us, is through God’s faithfulness, God’s light which allows us to see our past lives, and the pardon that God alone can give. The ‘election’ is a choice that I make for and with God, even though it is God, Godself, who chooses me for the decision that we make together. My life recovers a second wind not because of some spontaneous urge of my own, but thanks to God’s second call. A birth can only prosper through this encounter with God.

However, more is involved. A spiritual experience is a birth of God in us. There are many important texts in our tradition that confirm this. Christ came at his incarnation; he will return on the Day of Judgment; but as St Bernard says, between these two comings there is another ‘secret and spiritual’ coming which is not obvious; ‘only the elect behold the Saviour in their own souls and are saved’.⁴ And Ruusbroec adds, ‘The second coming is daily, frequent, and often, in each loving heart, with new grace with new gifts, according to one’s receptivity to

³ An adaptation of the French text: ‘*Afin que l’homme naisse / À lui-même et à toi / Qu’il s’ouvre à ta promesse / En murmurant ta loi, / Ton humaine tendresse / Est la source et la voix, / Toi qui parles à son cœur, / Père / Unifie-le en toi.*’ Weekday hymn for Vespers in Ordinary Time, Commission Francophone Cistercienne, at http://www.cfc-liturgie.fr/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=258&Itemid=133, accessed 2 October 2012.

⁴ Saint Bernard, ‘Sermons for the Year’, Advent III, 4 and V, 1, in *The Life and Works of Saint Bernard*, translated by Samuel J. Eales (London: Burns and Oates, 1896), volume 3, 268, 279.

them'.⁵ Meister Eckhart allows us to appreciate the force of this double birth that defines spiritual experience:

As surely as the Father in His simple nature hears the Son naturally, just as surely He bears him in the inmost recesses of the spirit, and *this* is the inner world. Here God's ground is my ground and my ground is God's ground. Here I live from my own as God lives from His own The Father bears His Son in eternity like Himself ... [John 1: 1]: the same in the same nature. I say more: He has borne Him in my soul. Not only is she within Him and He equally within her, but He is in her: the Father gives birth to His Son in the soul in the very same way as He gives birth to Him in eternity, and no differently. He must do it whether He likes it or not. The Father begets His Son unceasingly, and furthermore, I say, he begets me as His Son and the same Son. I say even more: not only does He beget me as His Son, but He begets me as Himself and himself in me, and me as His being and His nature. In the inmost spring I well up in the Holy Ghost, where there is one life, one being and one work.⁶

Contemplating the birth of Christ can lead to this, and move one to say, 'It is as if Christ were being born or asking me to be born within myself'. Or again, as with Simeon, retreatants may take the child in their arms. Yet, at times, this unique being born into God and into ourselves comes without any specific image of Christ, but through the certainty of an interior presence that does not leave us and lives in us like a burning lamp, or of a rock that serves as the foundation of our lives, a spring of water that gives life. Birth in the spirit is an absolutely free gift, the work of God. It is the experience of the Christian God, the Creator who is the source of our existence, the Saviour who takes our entire life into his light, the Trinity who, in Christ, gives us a face that we can gaze upon, so as to orientate us towards the invisible Father, the One Beyond everything, who yet comes to live in us through the Spirit.

How Does This Come About?

What may serve here as a paradigm is the process of election, as it is presented by Ignatius in the *Spiritual Exercises*, and as personal experience allows it to be seen.

⁵ Jan van Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals*, translated by H. Rolfson (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1995), 41.

⁶ Meister Eckhart: *Sermons and Treatises*, translated by Maurice O'Connell Walshe, 2 volumes (London and Dulverton: Watkins, 1979–1981), volume 1, 117, and volume 2, 134–135.

The Path towards the Election

An election must be prepared well in advance. In the course of the Exercises it is preceded by one and a half weeks. These allow the retreatant—as one created by God—to face up to the vocation of recognising the Creator and properly exercising a free choice, while leaving to the compassion of God the release of those energies diverted or blocked by sin, which provokes a refusal to be born or else a desire to be born without God. And so, a birth is being prepared which cannot take place without both God and the human person. An election becomes mature thanks to a double process: the contemplation of Christ, the man born from God whose food is to do the will of the Father; and a release of the freedom needed for the choice to be made in alliance. What is at stake is that this liberty should not stop at what is being chosen, but remain directed towards its purpose, ‘to praise, respect and serve God’. Moreover, it should not be inhibited by a mistaken desire to do what God wants, as if the will of God annihilated the human capacity to choose. This liberty has to be ready to accept the concrete reality of a decision with its actual implementation. It must avoid taking over the mind of God by attributing to God what is in fact its own desire. With the guidance of Christ, a route can be found through these reefs.

One can speak of ‘birth’ in an election when such labour has taken place: the fundamental choice of Christ leads to a concrete way of living



in union with him. Then the choice is wholly both the work of the human person and the work of God. This is clear from the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* and also from the experience of retreatants. And just as any birth is but a beginning, what follows in the course of the *Exercises*—the entry into the passion and the resurrection of Christ—allows one to recognise if a spiritual birth has really occurred, that is, if what has begun earlier is continuing. This shows in a deepening of the union with Christ—by welcoming the gift that he makes of his life and by offering one's own gift, modelled on that of Christ even if on a human scale—that finds expression in the concrete decision that has been made.

The Arrival of the Election

There are three main ways in which an election can take place. Occasionally the decision arrives instantaneously, an act both of God and of the human being. This prompt response is recognised at once, and the retreatant says, 'The Lord has answered me!' while, at the same time, being perfectly conscious that he or she is the one giving the answer. At other times the arrival takes place but needs to be recognised, and the choice must be articulated in the presence of God and in dialogue with God. On such occasions, the relationship between God and the human person understandably acquires a greater strength.

The election may also take on a more secret character through the experience of consolations and desolations. A 'consolation' is, in a very minor way, the happy experience of a small spiritual birth; while a 'desolation' fights against this burgeoning of God's life in us. By identifying these mini-births over a period of time, it is possible to trace a line; and once the direction in which the line is pointing has been identified, it is enough to take the decision that it is indicating.

There may be a need to have recourse to 'ways of doing' in which the human initiative seems to be more important: certain suppositions are to be considered, or rules followed, in taking a decision or checking its validity. In reality, this putting into action of our powers of judgment is energized by God, for we want,

... to ask God our Lord to be pleased to move my will and to put into my mind what I ought to do with regard to the thing before me that will be most for his praise and glory. I should use my intellect well and faithfully to go over the matter, and I should choose in accord with his most holy will and good pleasure. (Exx 180)

And it is a motion, a movement that is felt interiorly, which leads to the decision. Indeed, the election cannot take place if this alliance between human effort and complete abandonment to God is weak. The retreatant labours to be in a fit state so that the unexpectedness of his or her own birth may arrive from God. Such preparedness is the key to the rules that Ignatius suggests: we must put ourselves at a certain distance from our choice, so as to be sure that 'the love which moves me and makes me choose something descends from above' (Exx 184), or at a certain distance from ourselves, imagining 'a person whom I have never seen or known' and considering 'what I would tell him or her to do' (Exx 185), and project ourselves forward to our end: 'if I were at the point of death' ... 'consider my situation on the Day of Judgment, and ... adopt now the rule I would then want to have observed' (Exx 186, 187).

The Election, a Prototype for Other Situations

These three ways indicate the range of forms under which a spiritual birth may take place. It may be an awakening of an inner capacity for hearing, as when we are released from suffering or from sin; or there may be the grace of a second calling. One might think that the initial discovery of a relationship with God comes more readily with the unexpected call, because of its immediacy; whereas turning things over in the mind is more in accord with a gradual progress towards liberation, the use of reflection being the most common way to make a decision. Yet experience shows that God does not reserve methods of intervening to specific situations. Nor can God be required to act in one way rather than another.

Birth in an election comes after preparation and leads to consequences. This is true of all spiritual experiences. The preparation may not necessarily be extended: it may be hidden until the day arrives for the birth to take place, and then the path that has led up to it becomes clear; or it may occur in the period of life that separates an initial call from taking up the call afresh; or the opposite may happen, and a much longer time be needed to rethink one's past life. As for the consequences: these are of such incalculable value in confirming a decision that without them there can be no true birth. Indeed, what birth is possible without an entry into time and the beginning of growth?

So, the election brings out into the open what is present in every spiritual birth: certain conditions are indispensable; birth is a burgeoning.



From Where Can I Get Help?

So far I have not mentioned the person who accompanies Does not a spiritual birth need such a person? From very early times, the Christian tradition has invoked the image of the father, by analogy with, and in dependence on, the paternity of God. One writer refers to the Holy Spirit, 'who has, in our regard, the roles of both father and mother', and he gives advice to spiritual directors as follows:

Spiritual directors should have a paternal love, forcefully encouraging souls to do their duty, crucifying them when necessary, reprimanding them for their faults, providing them according to their needs with the medicines needed, unconcerned if these are bitter. And they should also have a maternal love, astute in comforting souls with little treats after having afflicted them, carrying them, so to speak, in their arms so as to offer them to God and implore God's mercy for them.⁷

Some human mediation is necessary in this engendering by God. The characteristics proper to spiritual birth define not only the role of the

⁷ Jean-Jacques Olier, 'Avis aux directeurs spirituelles', in *Jean-Jacques Olier, directeur spirituelle*, edited by Bernard Pitaut and Gilles Chaillot (Paris: Cerf, 1998), 115–116.

person who accompanies, but also the symbolic place of such persons and the inner labour that they should undertake.

Mediation at the Service of an Immediate Relationship

When instructing the guide, ‘the one giving the Exercises’, Ignatius uses a phrase so well known that there is a risk of our not noticing the paradox it contains: ‘during these Spiritual Exercises it is more opportune ... that the giver of the Exercises ... should leave the Creator to deal with the creature, and the creature with the Creator and Lord’ (Exx 15). Thus, the relationship between the human being and God comes about without any mediation; and yet some mediation is necessary in order for that relationship to exist. It can happen that retreatants think that they ought to bring their guide into the relationship with God about which they are telling the guide, and even try to do so. But they should avoid thinking in that way, precisely because the guide knows that he or she has no access to the relationship being revealed, and that fact must be accepted.

The domain proper to the guide is that of the conditions surrounding the experience (the monastic setting, perhaps, or the Ignatian retreat) and the giving of assistance in reflecting on what is happening; but what happens in the ‘in-between’ space, which is the most important, is not the guide’s concern.

A Technical Role

The role of the guide should now be clear: to be attentive to how the retreatant consents to this birth of God within, and to collaborate with it. So the guide must listen to what is seeking to be born, must identify the obstacles—whether known or unknown—to the one being guided, and suggest ways that will allow the latter to hear the calls to be born and be freed from the restraints that hold him or her back. Finally, the guide must be on the lookout for the *kairos* of the birth and its welcome: acknowledgement and implementation.

What resources are at the guide’s disposal? With the help of scripture, the guide invites the retreatant to listen to a double conversation: with God and with what is resonating within the self. Taking into account the retreatant’s capabilities and problems, the guide offers ways of reacting that open up access to a relationship with God. Through discernment, the guide will be sensitive to the inner sounds which echo at the level of the retreatant’s soul, where God’s creativity is at

play. And just occasionally, quite impromptu and as if by inspiration, a question, a remark wells up that turns out to be the decisive word.

The role of the guide can vary according to different circumstances. When someone is in the process of discovering the spiritual life, the guide has, in general, to be very attentive to the inner call already present, perhaps, but not yet identified as such, in the life and in the longings of the retreatant. Quite frequently, a beginner has not yet seen what obstacles there may be, and it is up to the guide to recognise, without necessarily revealing, where these are located: a harmful image of God; interference that blocks the signal; an intense busyness that shies away from silence At such times, the guide might suggest very small measures which can clear the way for an encounter. When the path to spiritual birth leads through the experience of suffering, it takes more time and a long journey, with eyes turned towards God and free from preoccupation with one's wounds, to see meaning in this time of trial. What is happening in all this is a labouring for truth, one which denies neither suffering nor personal responsibility, and does not take cover under accusations or a sense of guilt.

***A healthy
rereading
of the
retreatant's
past life***

The task of the guide is to offer, in relationship with God, ways that will allow a healthy rereading of the retreatant's past life so that change becomes possible. But if the guide becomes involved in the process, the right conditions cannot be provided. On a journey of conversion, the guide's vigilance must focus on the other's true self-appraisal, while at the same time putting even greater emphasis on the love of which he or she is the object. Should a decision have to be taken, the guide is the one who must ensure that, in partnership, the conditions are there for the exercise of true freedom. This attention is especially needed when deciding whether or not to set out on the road of election. The points to bear in mind are whether there is a choice anchored in reality, a desire whose impulse is free, a readiness to enter into relationship with God.

The preliminaries to a process of election are therefore of the greatest importance. It is up to the guide to block such a process, even against the wish of the retreatant, when the conditions are not right. After that, it is the guide's task to take care that the open nature of the retreatant's desire and the relationship with God continue fresh, no matter what happens; and if it is not be the moment for a birth, the guide needs to help the retreatant to continue believing in the God who gives life.

Finally, for someone to hear a second call, an awareness of his or her own past history and readiness for a relationship with God are indispensable.

A Symbolic Position

In all these situations, neither the guide nor the retreatant is in charge of the moment or of the manner in which the birth will take place—or of the form it may take. Any guide who thinks otherwise impedes the process. On the other hand, if the guide doubts the possibility of such a birth or fails to desire it for the other, this creates an obstacle. The guide's role is not only at the technical level; he or she has a symbolic position which is just as essential.

Even should the guide have nothing to do, he or she has a purpose in providing the *other* before whom the retreatant can speak. Just by being present, the guide opens a space where the one experiencing the birth can exercise freedom. The reality is that no one can give birth for another; spiritual birth is the work of God and of the one who comes into the world. But there is no birth without encounter, without the word, without the welcome. To announce a birth is to be part of that birth.

A Guide Who Is Also in Labour

Finally, the guide has a personal obligation in relation to God just as much as towards the one who is in the process of being born. Jean-Jacques Olier insists on the prayer of the guide:

This is how we need to act: praying to God for the souls of those we are guiding. In other words, we should remain full of God and engaged completely with God, without our being tempted for one moment to win to ourselves those for whom we pray We ought to be in God's hands so that we can guide in God the souls that God entrusts to us⁸

In fact, the guide verifies that it is prayer, faith and trust which permit the retreatant to welcome—and to risk saying—the word that offers itself to be said, and which measure the demands and the love required for the completion of the task. Above all, it is the guide's own relationship with God which helps the other to be born.

⁸ Olier, 'Avis aux directeurs spirituelles', 140, 143.

Indeed, spiritual birth is a bringing into the world, but the guide is not the one who labours and the retreatant is not the only one giving birth! The active presence of the guide and the guide's competence are certainly necessary: but the birth of God in us, and our birth in God is beyond everything. It is the mystery of communion.

Sylvie Robert SA teaches courses in spirituality and religious life at Centre Sèvres in Paris and is a spiritual director at the Centre Manrèse. She published *Les chemins de Dieu avec Ignace de Loyola* in 2009.

translated by Joseph A. Munitiz SJ