

# STRIVING FOR PERFECTION OR GROWING INTO FRUITFULNESS?

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LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY have their own potency. They not only describe understanding, they also create it. Are we climbing upwards towards perfection through a series of stages, or are we growing into fruitfulness through soil, sunlight and rain? In society and Church, development is often described in terms of linear progress towards excellence. While such imagery can also be found within the Bible, it interweaves with another narrative: that of earth, seeds, shoots and harvest.

My perception is that without a grounding in this biblical imagery of growth we are prone to put too much weight on the work of human minds and hands, at the expense of cooperating with God in our own becoming and in the creative work of divine love. Soil, seed, shoot and harvest keep us down to earth, where the incarnate God chooses to be. Going further: what new perspective do we gain on the purpose and potential outcomes of the Spiritual Exercises if we see them as grounded in the rhythms of creation rather than echoing the drumbeats of man-made progress?

## ***The Ladder of Perfection***

In the Christianity of my upbringing, emphasis rested firmly on the doing of good works and the acquisition of personal holiness. The image in my mind was of a many-runged ladder. At the top of the ladder lay perfection: a state of purity where weakness was definitively overcome and goodness perpetually shone. Rung by rung I was to pull myself up towards this goal through effort, prayer and penitence.

I am not sure anyone ever gave me this picture of spiritual development in its complete form. Instead I pieced it together from my education in family, church and school. Stories of the saints emphasized the purity of their hearts and minds. Good behaviour was praised and bad behaviour was



punished. At school I gained a new, brightly coloured star for each times-table I mastered. Progress was measured competitively through grades, upper or lower ‘sets’ for classes, and prize-giving ceremonies. The path of sanctity likewise led, straight and true, along the line of obedience to external expectations. There was a threshold to be crossed dividing achievement from failure, renown from obscurity.

Where was God within this picture? The whole construction purported to be about developing closeness to God and to a degree worked within these terms. Being in church, practising good deeds or struggling with self-denial had me looking in the right direction. But for me, God was also beyond the system—sometimes uncomfortably so. For as difficult as my received understanding of the process of growth was, at least it left me believing that progress was in my own hands. But then God would break the rules, turning up at the very base of the ladder, when I was incapable of anything. How also was I to explain my experience of God as a presence within, pressing towards freedom from any oppressive self-preoccupation: inviting me into larger life, rather than driving me down the narrow corridors of perfectionism?

### ***Defining the Path towards Holiness***

My understanding of spiritual life as a self-empowered ascent towards holiness had its roots in attitudes found in the immediate surroundings of my family and school; but it was also shaped by wider influences in society and the Church. Paradoxically—for a body that had its roots in the transcendence of God—in early modern times the Roman Catholic Church grew more uncomfortable with mystery. As a preserver of orthodoxy and orthopraxis in an age of enquiry and experimentation, the Church resorted to close definition of normative patterns of Christian living.

Practices of prayer and expositions of the process of spiritual growth became increasingly regulated. It was for the Church to discern whether

experience—and the insights that came from reflection on experience—were legitimate. Manuals of spiritual growth outlined step-by-step itineraries of progress towards holiness. Higher spiritual states were for the few; for the majority the way to God lay along predetermined paths that were predictable and approved.

I exaggerate and simplify what was a far more complex picture, but the trends were there. In the early twentieth century Pierre Pourrat defined spirituality as ‘that part of theology which deals with Christian perfection and the ways that lead to it’.<sup>1</sup> And what was ‘perfection’? And who decided what manner of ‘ways’ led to it? The Church had the answers. The ‘ascetical’ path of discipline, self-denial and prescribed practice was for the many; for the few came ‘the revered and chilly reward of grace after untold ascetical struggle’.<sup>2</sup> Now and then during my ordination training, a lecture ventured into the rarefied air of ‘mystical’ experience, leaving no doubt that such spiritual heights were as remote from anyone in the class as a Himalayan high plateau was from our setting amidst the genteel comforts of the Surrey countryside. Holiness was for the holy; the higher levels of prayer were set apart for the select few.

Much has changed in recent times in the ways we talk about our life in God. Spiritual experience is commonly understood as an essential dimension of what it is to be human. In a postmodern world any system that attempts to prescribe universally applicable patterns of growth is treated with scepticism. And yet we have not lost our love of linear descriptions of development. As a society we seem addicted to performance targets, self-help manuals and grading systems. After all, these are frameworks we feel we can manage, even if we often become their victims. We worry about what level we are on. We become self-absorbed, taken up with the climbing of our individual mountain where we will one day dwell in the splendid isolation of our achievement—or, more likely, give the whole thing up in sheer frustration.

In summary, if movement towards spiritual maturity is considered in terms of linear progress towards excellence, what follows?

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality*, translated by William Henry Mitchell, S. Jacques and D. Attwater (Westminster: Newman, 1953–1955), volume 1, v.

<sup>2</sup> Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 8.

- Progress is achieved through effort, combined with innate talent.
- People will vary in their capacity to move upwards.
- Progress is measured in stages.
- Stages are successive: once one level is achieved, attention moves on to reaching the next.
- There will be a sense of hierarchy: some will be at a higher level than others.
- Focus is given to individual development, with at least the suggestion that this is an end in itself.

### ***Coming Down to Earth***

The Bible is a grounded book. It emerged from a people comfortable with their dependence on the earth. Familiarity perhaps dulls our recognition of the prevalence in it of the imagery of natural growth: fruits of the Spirit, wilderness and garden, a vine and its branches, a seed that falls to the ground and dies for the sake of a harvest to come. Jesus bade his hearers contemplate the lilies of the field so as to know their own place within the generosity of God. Growth is a mysterious cooperation with the creativity of God: seed is actively sown and nurtured by human hands, but its hidden, inner wonder unfurls by gift; seen and unseen, by day and by night.

What the Bible presents through this imagery is not a manual of growth but a parable—or better—layer upon layer of parables. Manuals provide a detailed itinerary of progress: steps that can be studied, predicted and achieved. Parables unfold meaning when approached contemplatively. Truth is not grasped from the page, but received through relationship with the object of our gaze.

### ***Four Movements of Growth***

The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow; he does not know how. The earth produces of itself: first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. (Mark 4: 26–28)

Here and elsewhere within the biblical narrative I discern four recurring movements of growth: rooting and grounding, the emergence of new shoots, the complex and mysterious development of what has begun to reveal itself, and the generous bearing of fruit. While—as the parable

expresses—there is a sense of progression between these movements, they are not linear stages where one is left behind for another to begin. For fruit to develop a plant must maintain its rootedness in the ground; and it is to the earth that the fruit will return, where new seeds will break forth, emerge and grow.

### *Rooting and Grounding*

The seed finds ground, and here its transformation begins. We, like plants, need depth: a place to belong, to know ourselves, to find rest and to grow. As the letter to the Ephesians (3:14–21) suggests, it is through rooting and grounding in love that our inner being begins to grow strong, and that Christ dwells in our hearts. When a seed falls to the earth, the mysterious process of its transformation into a fully grown tree or flower is set in motion. The soil provides an anchor: a resting place after drifting through the air. And the soil is also a means of sustenance, providing the water and nutrients that enable cells to divide, roots to be formed and the first tentative shoot to pierce its way into the sunlight.

God is the ground of our being and becoming. Our roots must go deep. Without the stability of being in relationship with one who loves us, there can be no movement. Without the sustenance of God's giving, there will be no growth. If we are not rooted we will be all over the place, unable to flourish and ignorant of who we are. So a first, but ever-present, movement of spiritual growth is the intentional grounding of our lives in God through prayer and humility.

The very term 'humility' draws us back to our origins in *humus*: earth. As with Adam, God stoops to take and form us from the dust of our ground: our personality, circumstances and history. Growth begins with accepting what 'is'—however unpromising our reality may be—in trust that the movement of God is always to take this ground and go on working it into being. God's humility invites our own. In



facing ourselves—how things are, what we feel, our discomforts and our desires—we find we are also facing God—or rather that God is with us and in us as we face these truths. God is working this ground with us, and invites our trust and cooperation as this labour of love continues.

*Emergence: A Response to An Invitation*

A shoot shall come from the stock of Jesse. And a branch shall grow out of his roots. (Isaiah 11:1)

For all that is created, to ‘be’ is to experience the desire to ‘become’. By day and by night the scattered seed sprouts and grows; a new shoot breaks from the cut-down tree. This invitation to growth often seems to come externally, but the deeper reality is the awakening of hidden life within. It is not just longer days and warmer soil that bring about transformation; growth is intrinsic to the very DNA of the plant.

Rooted in God, we experience fresh invitations to grow. Sometimes it is a stir of new energy, hope and possibility; sometimes we feel disturbed out of a previously settled set of assumptions about ourselves, the shape of our life or the reality of God. I think of the discomfort of Nicodemus, seeking out Jesus by night, unable to make sense of his talk of new birth and the hidden paths of the Spirit, but experiencing these very things through his uncertainty (John 3:1–9). We are drawn towards the ‘more’ than we now know not just by some external invitation, but through God’s Spirit in our spirit.

Our emergence into life depends on attentiveness and daring. Growth takes place through a free response to a generous and loving invitation. Our cooperation will always be wanted and needed. The beginning is to choose all means at our disposal that help us recognise the invitation. The emergence of a new shoot is not the revelation of the full-grown plant. What we sense as we listen is the draw towards a particular movement: a stepping out or a letting go. We rarely know where this movement will take us; it takes daring to respond.

*The Struggle towards Abundance*

Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold. (Mark 4:7–8)

The sower and the seed, the mustard seed that despite its size grows into a home for the birds, the weeds among the wheat: all tell of the wonder of growth, but also of obstacles that lie in its way. Perhaps we need to

rid ourselves of perspectives gained from modern models of efficient agriculture. The sower who scatters seed amidst rocks, birds and thorns is not being wasteful: this is how the field is. But the sower also knows there are pockets of good soil and so is liberal in the sowing.

As we begin to respond to God's invitation, we discover everything in us that opposes such movement. Resistance is in itself a manifestation of growth, just as we become aware of the impact of rocks and thorns because now the plants are pushing towards their maturity. We are being drawn beyond well-worn patterns of thought and behaviour that may have protected us from harm in the past but now keep us in confinement. Discernment is needed to see from where our resistance stems and what fear it expresses, and also to trust—and then go with—the larger life that is waking within us. There are rocks, birds and thorns; but some seed finds good soil and yields thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.

#### *Fruitfulness and Fall*

My Father is glorified in this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples (John 15:8).

Rather than a movement towards perfection that is individual, self-generated and has overtones of personal achievement, rooting and grounding in God moves us into fruitfulness that is generous and expressive of mutual interdependence. The soil that nurtures growth is formed through the breaking down of former generations of plant matter and the work of myriad micro-organisms and insects. Fertilisation relies on the activity of bees, butterflies and moths, attracted and fed by a flower's nectar. Birds feed on the hedgerow berries in late summer and autumn, and return the gift by distributing seed. Fruit forms, falls and gives seed for generations of life beyond itself.

We are made in the image and likeness of God, whose being is ever fruitful. God is love, and love goes beyond itself to give life to another. The common life of the Trinity—our true life, not just as individuals but in our wider relationships—rests on such generosity and self-transcendence. But we must learn to receive as well as give. We find salvation, not as individuals, but in, with and through one another. Competitive holiness has no place here.

Searching for a metaphor to describe the movement that has run through the whole of his life, and is now drawn from him in the face of death, Jesus says: 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it

remains but a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (John 12:24). The realisation of the fullness of being lies not in self-protection or self-aggrandisement but in relationship. As we let our self-absorption fall we find our true self in the giving and receiving of love. This generosity is the defining shape of God's life and our life—as individuals, as community, and in our choices.

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In summary, if we explore the source, goal and means of our movement towards spiritual maturity through biblical imagery of growth what emerges?

- Spiritual growth is a cooperative process; our engagement is necessary, but growth rests on freely responding to God's invitation to us, as we perceive this in the moment.
- There are recurring movements of growth: grounding, emergence (with all its related struggles), bearing fruit and choosing to fall. These are ongoing movements that are interdependent, rather than successive stages.
- Growth takes place within and through relationship. Instead of being the individual pursuit of excellence, the source, means and goal of growth is participation in the generous giving and receiving of the life of the Trinity, expressed in all creation. Rather than a hierarchy of relative excellence, such growth expresses itself in the formation of community.

### ***Encountering the Spiritual Exercises***

Perfection or fruitfulness? A linear and self-made progress or the experience of cooperating with different recurring movements? The imagery we choose (or receive) will shape our understanding of the source, means and goal of spiritual maturity. At a practical level it will also shape how we approach prayer and the expectations we have of ourselves and the process when we go on retreat. How does what I have explored thus far relate to Ignatius' understanding of the purpose and potential fruit of the Spiritual Exercises?

The Spiritual Exercises have structure. Ignatius asks us to pray for different graces at different moments. There is movement through the exercises of each day, and over the Weeks of the process. But rather than imposing a framework—as one might in designing a training package to



attain a new skill—Ignatius intuited the pattern of the Spirit’s working and then expressed this in the forms and rhythm of his writing. And he did so out of reflection on his own experience of inner transformation and the experiences of those he listened to and guided. Looking at the Spiritual Exercises from the outside there appears to be a linear path with regular stages: the different exercises and Weeks through which exercitants pass in turn, which they ‘master’ and then move on. But from the inside the experience is different.

I was 29 when I first experienced the Spiritual Exercises. I was a priest in my first parish, and struggling. The motivation to express the persistence and depth of God’s love was strong; but I was awash with loneliness and fear. The rector of the seminary where I had received my ordination training had singled me out to return there one day as a spiritual director. Going to St Beuno’s Spirituality Centre for a three-month programme that included participation in the Exercises was to be the first stage of my preparation. I knew next to nothing about what I was entering into, but I needed God, and so came as wide open as the stretched, bare limbs of the winter trees.

When I reflect on what took place within me during the retreat, I recognise the shape of a trajectory that was fresh to me at that time, and yet familiar. The movements I experienced then have continued to play through my life. The silence and structure allowed me space to own my longing for completeness, and gave no place to hide from the pain of my fractured life. I was in a knot of contradictions, craving acceptance and fiercely resisting it, drawn to God but also finding ways to withdraw, unsure if God wanted me.

What made movement more difficult was my belief that if anything was going to change it was down to me. If prayer was not fruitful it was because I was not able to master the techniques that would make God ‘happen’—or perhaps I was not one of those people who could do prayer. And then God was there—and by complete gift, cutting through my anxiety about worth or performance. With this presence came invitation: to begin to welcome who I was and trust who I might become through this surprising love.

Like Levi at the tax collector’s booth, I sensed Jesus calling me to ‘Come!’, and my response was both free and liberating. I could put aside my labour to meet the unattainable expectations I had of myself—or imagined that others had of me—and begin to befriend the ‘me’ who was emerging from within. As I moved outwards I was confounded by

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the deeply ingrained layers of my resistance. My guide helped me trace the patterns of my fear: where it began, where it led me and how it drove me. I learnt to welcome and go with the less familiar voice of God's Spirit in my spirit, drawing me into freedom and hope. And this movement led me beyond my self-absorption and towards more generous living. I completed the Exercises, left the retreat house and returned home. Rather than helping me climb a few more rungs of the ladder towards holiness, those weeks gave me a sense of the shape of God's working. Rather than mastering more stages of growth, I came away more familiar with the movements of growth that recur within the lifelong process of cooperation with the Spirit.

The Exercises are about a moment in our life: gaining a true perspective on that pivotal point and the choices it presents, through attentiveness to the Spirit. But, more than this, they open up awareness of those movements of our spirits and God's Spirit that continue to play throughout our years. They provide orientation by drawing us to be rooted in God, the source of our being and becoming. They support us in experiencing, in and with Christ, the direction of our existence in fruitful and generous self-expression. They help us get in touch with the means of our growth in God's life by way of cooperation with the Holy Spirit within our spirit, just as the seed experiences the inward beckoning towards shoot, stalk, flower and fruit. They enable us to explore the sources and expressions of our resistance to sharing in the freedom and joy of God. There is good soil that the sower continues to seek amidst the birds, rocks and thorns.

***Order and Freedom***

There was a time when the Spiritual Exercises were delivered in a very different way: as point-by-point meditations, given to a group rather than to an individual, and with the expectation of particular results. Perhaps that was the infection of humankind's desire for close control: a preference for predictability and uniformity over the risk of the Spirit who honours our individuality and works with our particular ground. An ordered march towards perfection is more manageable than allowing the riot of colour, form and texture that goes with the forming of fruit in all its variety.

But the biblical narratives of growth, and the recurring movements they suggest, allow both order and freedom. The 'order' does not take the form of close control; rather it is the 'ordering' of life towards relationship

with God and the generosity of fruit and fall that this awakens through the gift of God. The ‘freedom’ is not self-indulgence, but the liberty of the Spirit, free from the rocks, birds and thorns of a thousand fears. The order that exists within the Spiritual Exercises—with their Weeks and the associated methods and objects of prayer—serves the freedom of discerning and cooperating with the movement of the Spirit that goes where it wills in each person’s life. Ignatius is not given to horticultural imagery, but he is aware that everything begins with and leads to the shape of the relationship between Creator and Creation. From the Principle and Foundation to the Contemplation to Attain Love one truth is expressed: our grounding is God, whose life is ever fruitful in the giving and receiving of love.

What biblical imagery of growth provides is not a detailed itinerary of progress towards perfection but glimpses into the continuing work of the Creator and the recurring rhythms of our cooperation. We will sense afresh the call to sink our roots into rich, deep earth. Old or young, God will dare us once more to emerge into being. The Spirit will lead us beyond ourselves in fruitful generosity. This too—perhaps—is the gift of the Spiritual Exercises. We do not know where the wind comes from or where it will go but we do begin to recognise its sound.

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