

Christian Spirituality

The spiritual life is the Christian life lived with some intensity. It is the serious response of man to the revelation of God's love in Christ and consists in loving knowledge and service of God and one's fellow men in the Mystical Body of Christ. Christian spirituality begins when God's word is accepted in faith. It manifests itself in the expression and the development of the love of God in prayer and action. It is the subjective assimilation and living in charity of the objective, theological realities of revelation.

Since its object, origin and goal is God in His personal life, Christian spirituality is interpersonal; it is the life of man with God. Men are given this new relationship with the Trinity gratuitously, and they express it in acts that are at once human and transcendent. The open, free, and in some sense unlimited human spirit can express itself only in dependence on the material, the finite and particular, hence little-by-little and in time. This particularized condition of existence is reinforced in Christianity by the fact that grace is union with an historical person, Christ (Acts 2.38), and a participation in the sacred events called mysteries in His life. At the same time the new life in Christ is trans-historical and supernatural (Gal 2.20); it is nothing less than the life of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Son, in man (Rom 8.14-16).

This brief identification of Christian spirituality has three distinguishing features that will be examined separately. They are the interpersonal, the historical, and the transcendent aspects of Christian spirituality.

Interpersonal Life

The meaning of interpersonal life can best be examined by considering the encounter with which it begins and the community or fellowship of life that follows.

Encounter. Men as children of Adam are born estranged from God. Christian spirituality begins for them with their encounter with God who comes to them in Christ. This encounter is not a mere psychological construction, like an imagined visit with an absent person. The encounter is primarily ontological, founded on the real objective, superconscious union with God in grace (Gal 3.2-5). But encounter in the spiritual life is more than ontological union. It is the intellectual and affective realization of the I-thou relationship of grace as well, the conscious experience of God who calls in love and is answered in faith. This experience or consciousness is not necessarily immediate and direct, like the feeling of God's presence in the classical mystical experience of God. It takes many forms, but basically it is an awareness and conviction that God is a person, that He is real and His love is real, and that this love freely accepted makes man a friend of God sharing God's own life.

Christian spirituality is neither abstract knowledge nor mere moralism (1 Cor 13.1-3). It is not a human system of self-perfection, even in the moral or religious order, nor a program of psychological conditioning to induce certain "states of soul." Christian spiritual life involves knowledge, moral effort, and spiritual exercises, but essentially it is a person-to-person contact between God who speaks to man in His Word and man who responds in the Word in loving faith (1 Thes 2.13). It is a dialogue with God in love—life with the Father, in the Son, through the Holy Spirit. The spiritual life is eternal life and consists in knowledge and love of the Father and the Son (Jn 17.3) and in living as sons in the Son in fraternal love (1 Jn 4.7-8; Jn 15.4-10).

The personal response to God in faith and love is the "theological" life, the concrete

expression of the theological virtues. The theological life can be compared to the moral or ascetical life as later and earlier stages of spiritual growth, corresponding to the ancient distinction between contemplative and active life. Such stages describe states of soul in which either the theological or the moral elements are more obvious, but both elements are part of every degree of spirituality. Otherwise there would be the error of psychologism or moralism, both of which are counterfeit spirituality. The first consists in a superficial consciousness of God independently of the orientation of faith, hope, and charity, which may or may not be present. This is more akin to aesthetic feeling than to true religion. Moralism is moral effort without relation to God. In authentic Christian spirituality, the theological virtues unite the soul with God, while moral virtues dispose for this union by removing obstacles and by executing the commands of love. Moral virtues purify spiritual vision by allowing the light of faith to enlighten and manifest the Mystery of Christ (Eph 4.17-24); at the same time they strengthen the capacity for personal commitment and love by removing voluntary self-centered attachments that close the soul to God.

For the Christian there is no value in pure asceticism, unrelated to friendship with God, or in a self-redemptive, external observance of the law. The law in fact is a shackle if it is performed for its own sake (Rom 7.13-23). Christian law supplies guidelines only and exists because of the imperfect spiritualization of the faithful. The local dynamism of the Christian life is found not in particular forms or laws, but in charity and the Holy Spirit, who leads the sons of God in perfect freedom (Rom 8.14-16). But virtuous works are the good fruit produced by the Holy Spirit and a Witness to His presence (Gal 5.22-26). The Church today wisely interprets heroic virtue to be proved by the constant and faithful fulfillment of duty. It

reasons that given the weakness and instability of fallen man, only the gifts of the Holy Spirit are a sufficient explanation of perfect perseverance in good works [Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, "Present Norms of Holiness," in *Conflict and Light* (New York 1952) 154-169].

Community. Man encounters God in the Word of God (1 Thes 2.13). The Word is not only the saving actions of God, apostolic preaching, or the inspired accounts in Sacred Scripture; it is especially and above all Christ Himself, the Substantial Word of the Father (Jn 1.14; 6.35, 54). He is the living Word that vivifies and brings to fulfillment the words and acts of the past and in Whom in the economy of his redemption man makes his personal response to God's love. Concretely the Word comes to us through the Church; the Church is the fundamental sacrament revealing and communicating the Word to men.

The consequences of this truth in the spiritual life are manifold, as will be seen in the next section. Here one central implication is singled out, the fact that encounter with God occurs in community, in the fellowship of Christ's Body, the Church.

The Christ in whom men meet the Father is not the Christ of memory alone, but one who lives on mystically and sacramentally in His followers (Acts 9.5; 1 Cor 8.11-13). The Church is Christ acting now, sanctifying men and offering men access to the Father (Eph 2.18). The Church is constantly reliving the life of Christ, especially the paschal mystery of "passing over" to the Father (cf. Jn 13.1; 1 Cor 5.7). Liturgically it makes present this passage, and historically its members recapitulate in their own lives the journey from sin to grace.

Life with the Father is life in the Son; life in the Son is a communal existence with other sons in the Son, hence with one's brothers. An individualistic God-and-I relationship is foreign to an informed

Christian consciousness. Liturgical life, the source and summit of Christian life, is communal by nature, since the liturgy is the Mystical Body, Head and members together, worshipping the Father and sanctifying men. Private prayer likewise demands fraternal unity (Mt 5.23-24). Charity itself is necessarily social, since the same one virtue is exercised toward God and toward one's fellowmen (Mt 25.35-40). The Christian cannot afford to seek the transcendent God in contemplation and avoid Him in those who share His life. God dwells among men (Jn 1.14) as well as in inaccessible light (1 Tm 6.16), and neither presence can be neglected without compromising Christian life. This does not automatically spell out the forms the engagement to one's fellowmen will take. The call may be to silence and solitude in canonical contemplative life, which according to Pope Pius XII is "intrinsically apostolic" [ActApS 43 (1951) 32]. Or it may be a vocation to social action in the world. Whatever the vocation there is no sanctification independently of the visible community and no love of God without a genuine, personal love of neighbor, for "if anyone says he loves God and hates his brother, he is a liar" (1 Jn 4.20).

Historical Nature

Christianity is a historical religion; it is a Person (Christ) and His saving deeds (Acts 10.37-42), especially His death and Resurrection, the paschal mystery, before it is a philosophy or a theology. Only by union with that Person through faith and Sacrament, only by reliving and assimilating the sacred events of His life, does the Christian make contact with God, undergo the transforming influence of grace, and achieve perfect friendship with God. From this point of view Christian spirituality is the living of the mystery of Christ.

The Mystery of Christ. St. Paul calls the full divine plan revealed in the New

Testament the mystery of Christ (Col 1.25-27; Eph 1.8-10; Rom 16.25-27). This mystery is Christ in His personal identity and in saving acts, especially the paschal mystery of His death and Resurrection. Salvation history culminates in the paschal mystery. Its final act will be the Parousia, the unveiling of the mystery. In the present time, between the Ascension and the Second Coming, the mystery of Christ consists in the subjective application of Christ's work to men. The mystery now is the Risen Christ, who having been lifted up on the cross draws all men and all creation to Himself (Jn 12.32). It is "Christ in you, your hope of glory" (Col 1.27).

In a certain trans-historical sense Christians are already redeemed (Rom 8.24-25; 31-39). The baptized have gone down into the tomb with Christ and died to sin; they have risen with Christ to newness of life (Rom 6.2-11). Union with Christ glorified is so vivid in Paul's mind that he sees his fellow Christians already enjoying their risen status and seated at the right hand of God (Eph 2.5-6). This has been called the constitutive aspect of redemption in Christ. It is salvation in mystery, in signs that witness though they do not fully reveal the reality; it is mystical identification with Christ. See Albert Plé, *Mystery and Mysticism* (London 1956) 1-17, and other essays in this volume.

But in point of historical fact there is also a progressive assimilation of the paschal mystery. Mystical identity must be translated into moral action. "Therefore," says Paul, "if you have risen with Christ, seek the things that are above" (Col 3.1). Liturgical reliving of the death and Resurrection must be complemented by the actual crucifixion of one's sins and vices (Gal 5.24) and the effort to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit. Because it is the Cross, the process involves suffering; because it is the Resurrection, there is joy. The sacrifice of self expressed symbolically in the Mass of the liturgy becomes the self-surrender to God's will in the free choices of daily life; the Mass

and life together achieve the sanctification of the Christian and the worship of God.

In liturgical celebration and daily life Christians make their passage from flesh to spirit, from separation from the Father to communion with Him. This progressive transformation, which is the Christian's pasch or passage to the Father (Jn 14.4), takes place in company with Christ and the people of God. The Christian goes out of this world to the Father not in the sense that he leaves this world materially (Jn 15.18-19), but insofar as he rejects the isolated, independent world at enmity with God and embraces the redeemed world that takes its meaning from the Spirit. In other words the pasch is not a movement away from people or terrestrial realities to abstraction and immateriality, but a commitment to God's people and the abandonment only of selfishness and egoism. This process is the work of the Spirit; the Christian cooperates by discerning, approving, and implementing the movements of grace. In this way the whole Body of Christ is brought "to perfect manhood, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4.13) and the kingdom of Christ is established in the cosmos (Eph 1.10).

Application of the Mystery. The mystery of Christ is mediated to men through the visible structures of Christian life, all of which are found in the Church. The Church is the Bride of Christ and in this capacity sees Mary as its perfect archetype and mother of all who answer the call of the Bridegroom. The Church looks to Mary as model because of her "fiat," which was a total surrender to God's will, and it goes to her as the Mother of grace who forms men in the image of the Son (Jn 19.25-27). In its ministry of word and Sacrament the Church presents the Word to men and conveys the response of her children back to the Father (Eph 5.25-27). Christian spirituality is stamped by all these characteristics. Christocentric through and through, it is ecclesial, Marian, Biblical, and

liturgical. Each note is necessary, though the forms and their coordination in a given synthesis of Christian life will vary. Different spiritualities are possible in the Church, precisely because there are different ways of applying and interrelating the dogmas of the faith.

The living of these dogmas is not achieved completely and perfectly in the first act of acceptance. Modern authors (e.g., P. Fransen, M. Flick, Z. Alszeghy, and K. Truhlar) present a dynamic picture of man's personal growth in grace by appealing to the two kinds of will acts suggested by S. Kierkegaard. The fundamental option is made in favor of God revealed in Christ by faith and Baptism, but it is deepened by the daily choices of Christian life. Free choices are ineluctable for man, and every choice strengthens or weakens his ultimate orientation toward God or self, toward freedom or servitude. The "person" emerges from his experience; he is the product of the infinite ways he has chosen to direct his energies and consent to or dissent from grace. In this way the Christian gradually "puts on Christ" (Rom 13.14), builds himself as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6.20), and grows in the likeness of Christ (2 Cor 3.18). The most important element is the constant in the process, the fundamental option the Bible calls it the heart of man (Rom 5.5; 6.17; 8.27); it is the person who is evolving. Yet the particular choices are likewise important since they are building up or tearing down this basic option and no choice goes uncounted. The present choice builds on past ones and prepares for future ones. Only the last choice of man's life, the final option which takes place in the moment of death, is believed to express fully the heart of man because it sums up and recapitulates his whole life.

The contrary of the love of God is selfishness, which is voluntary opposition to the movements of grace. This willful selfishness diminishes with growth in grace

because the love of God brings the virtues in its train. The virtues bring reason and order into the faculty, of the soul, at once humanizing and spiritualizing psychophysical structure. They place the whole man at the service of charity. The sign of perfect transformation is perfect conformity of will with God, even to the point where the first movements of the soul are directed toward God (St. John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle* B, 28.5). Such persons are completely possessed by the Holy Spirit.

Does the presence of contrary movements in the psyche of man even though they are non-voluntary argue to less than complete spiritualization and perfection? This question, one aspect of the relationship between the psychic and the spiritual, is not adequately answered as yet. Non-voluntary movements as such are not opposed to virtue, since virtue is a voluntary condition, a *habitus*. But how is one to gauge the voluntary and non-voluntary in these psychic factors? Moreover, they at least occasion disordered choices by drawing the will after them. In the practical order psychic weaknesses can make striving after perfection very difficult; extreme instability or imbalance may even make sanctity impossible not because of an intrinsic but only an extrinsic connection. Psychic health, on the other hand, while negative in sanctifying power, places fewer obstacles in the way and supplies a good natural base for the reception of grace. Emotional maturity easily becomes natural virtue, and natural virtues, such as authenticity, honesty, courage, and community spirit, clear the underbrush for the freer growth of grace. But one must proceed cautiously in theorizing about these areas. Above all, the psychic (or the “natural” generally) must not be confused with the spiritual. But the two areas touch at many points. The relationships between the soul and the psyche, between maturity and sanctity, between neurosis and sin, are at present subject to different opinions among the

experts and need further research and reflection.

The regime of the spirit extends into all the areas of human life. Growth does not automatically mean a reduction of human commitments or withdrawal from human engagements. The spiritual man enters within himself in the sense that he possesses himself at the core of his being and can dispose of himself in greater liberty toward God and men and the cosmos. The journey within is the journey into reality.

The interior life, meaning the life of prayer, is not the whole spiritual life. For contemplatives it is the principal part of their vocation and it is an element in every Christian life. But the spiritual life is service as well as knowledge and love of God. It is human life metamorphized, the body-soul composite animated by the Holy Spirit; the spiritual life is not the natural life of the immaterial soul. Spiritual has this meaning in Sacred Scripture (e.g., 1 Cor 2.13-14) and it is contrasted to carnal, which describes fallen man who lacks grace, the un-regenerated man considered on any level of his life, whether of instinct, emotion, intellect, or will. Pride of intellect is carnal, whereas Christian marriage is spiritual. The temporal order, social action, the apostolate in all its forms are part of Christian spirituality. The whole of life ideally comes to be looked at as a function of charity and each act a response of the new creature to the Word of God.

Supernatural Quality

Everything human is to be renewed and integrated into the new creation by the power of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 5.17; Gal 6.15), yet no created form, effect, or manifestation exhausts or confines or even adequately expresses the life of the Spirit. God acts in and affects the particular and the finite: this is the ongoing, incarnational aspect of salvation history. The apostle John alludes to this aspect when he writes: “Behold what

manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God; and such we are” (1 Jn. 3.1). But just as God is beyond any of His acts or effects in history, so the life of grace is a supernatural relationship that places it beyond any of its particular expressions. This is its transcendent “eschatological” aspect that will be fully revealed in the Parousia: “Beloved, now we are the children of God, and it has not appeared what we shall be. We know that, when he appears, we shall be like to him, for we shall see him just as he is” (1 Jn 3.2).

The spiritual life is Trinitarian life, essentially supernatural, hence beyond any creature’s abilities or demands. It is a spiritual life of knowledge and love that belongs to God’s own level of existence. Because it is God’s life, its every expression in man—the moral act, the religious experience, the apostolic service—falls short of the divine reality, even though these individual acts are the workings of the Spirit. God is greater than any finite knowledge of Him, more lovable than any created love can envisage. There is no perfect correlation, therefore, between grace and human behavior or grace and any human experience. A Christian’s knowledge, love, and service of God are incarnations of the Trinitarian life he shares; but God is greater than the incarnations, and union with Him is what is sought. A description of this supernatural quality and an indication of its implications in the matter of prayer and self-denial in Christian spirituality now follows.

Life of Grace. Scripture uses many analogies to convey the meaning of this mystery. The life of grace is a participation in divine life (2 Pt 1.4; Gal 2.20), sonship (Rom 8.14-16, 23), friendship (Jn 15.14-15), and possession by the Spirit (Rom 8.9; Eph 1.13) or by the indwelling God (Jn 14.23; 1 Jn 4.12-13; 1 Cor 3.16). The Scriptural as well as the patristic perspective centers on Uncreated Grace, an approach that serves to bring out the transcendent quality of Christian spirituality.

So the spiritual life is the Spirit received, and sanctifying grace, the effect of this Presence, a “being possessed” (Latin *habitus*) by God, who first possesses the soul. Possession by God is the same as the divine indwelling, according to the Scriptures (cf. 3 Kgs 8.27-30; 9.3). When God fully possesses the person, the spiritual activity is closest to God’s own. He is attained in ever-purer faith and love with the accompanying, proportionate affective detachment and poverty of spirit. To move toward God is to move out of a world measured by the created and finite and into God’s world where He Himself is the measure (1 Cor 3.22).

Just as the transcendent God was “truly in Christ, reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor 5.19), so He is in the world of men in the continued mediations of Christ’s presence. Men will find Him in proportion as they are transformed in God by grace, i.e., in proportion as they rise above themselves. Thus the spiritual life is fully achieved when the Christian attains God, while remaining himself with his own knowledge and love, his own intimacy and conscious friendship with God; this occurs when he is lost, transformed, and identified with God, without losing his own identity. A profound exposition of this is to be found in the transforming union of St. John of the Cross (e.g., *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2.5), which we follow here, in the conviction that this is the universal goal of Christian life. St. John attributes the transformation to love. Perfect love produces perfect likeness, indeed it produces identification in the intentional order. Thus perfect love makes one know and love not only like the Beloved but as one with Him. When a man is no longer a prisoner in the closed universe of the merely human, and his life is open and transparent to the influence of God, God can communicate Himself to him like the sun that pours through a clear windowpane, and he can truly live by God’s own light. God is the sun and man the

windowpane. The cleaner the glass, the more illumination it receives; if it is perfectly clear, it seems dissolved in the light. In a similar way the purified and illuminated soul is transformed in God. "All the things of God and the soul are one in participant transformation; and the soul seems to be God rather than a soul, and is indeed God by participation; although it is true that its natural being, though thus transformed, is as distinct from the Being of God as it was before" (op. cit. 2.5, 7).

This transformation is not an abandonment of one's creature status or use of the world, but a rising above the limitations of the created. It is divinization by grace and implies the removal of all selfishness, that is, any inordinate activity or attachment to what is less than God. Affective detachment is required here, since the deified man in no way rejects or neglects the finite and particular forms that are part of his vocation. Creatures as such are no obstacles to divine union; only those human activities that are opposed to the work of the Holy Spirit--the "carnal" activities mentioned by St. Paul (Gal 5.16-26)--are incompatible. With growth in sanctity there is a deepening, an interiorization in one's human activity. This is a shift in awareness and concern from exterior aspects to the interior, from the moral to the theological, from the letter to the spirit. The first term is not canceled in favor of the second; rather there is a penetration of the finite to the divine meaning, a communion with God and His world together (1 Cor 10.31).

Prayer and Self-denial.

Transformation is the goal toward which all spiritual activity tends and the root from which such activity flows. This contemplative union with God is the soul of all Christian life. It corresponds to the Christian's "heart," the fundamental orientation discussed above.

The concrete expressions are multiple and varied. There are prayer and action, penance and apostolate, internal and external

acts, liturgical and non-liturgical functions. This activity is arranged and structured into the various "mysticisms" of Christian life, each of which emphasizes a particular incarnation of the transcendent goal and lays down appropriate means to attain that goal. So there is a mysticism of prayer, of action, of suffering. There are schools of spirituality that systematize a particular synthesis. But even within the schools there will be the splendor of variety, because ultimately spirituality is a personalized and particularized relationship. This very variety is a sign that grace is only partially incarnated in given acts of men, not only because it is man's fundamental option, but also and especially because it is supernatural. Each Christian is a witness to his all-holy Master, but no witness, not even all the witnesses together, can fully express Him.

Two forms deserve special stress as implementations of the supernatural union of grace. These are prayer and self-denial. Both are immediate applications of the contemplative union of knowledge and love. Prayer expresses that knowledge and love by conversation; self-denial is a rejection of a selfish preference in favor of God's will.

Manuals of piety in the past tended to reduce the spiritual life to these two operations. This was in line with the eschatological rather than incarnational emphasis that characterized spiritual writing until recent years. The liturgy and the apostolate, especially action in the temporal order, which Pius XII called the "consecration of the world," were not sufficiently integrated into this picture. The transcendent emphasis presented the world only as a hazard and not as already partially redeemed and on its way to fuller redemption (Rom 8.18-22); the apostolate was a distracting duty, in a sense a necessary evil, in which "one left God for God."

Today the apostolate is not conceived as leaving God at all. There is, instead, a growing literature on the spirituality of action,

of involvement in the world of responsibility for the tasks of men. This modern stress, which is inspired by the realism of the Incarnation and expressed in response to the appeals of the popes and the needs of the times, takes as its point of departure the community rather than the individual, the liturgy rather than private prayer, holiness “in” as well as “not of” this world. These are valid additions that do not deny the necessity of prayer and self-denial.

Both the incarnational and the eschatological elements of Catholic dogma must be translated into action and a balance struck between the antinomies of withdrawal and engagement, renouncement and use. The incarnational emphasis promotes action, the eschatological favors contemplation. But both action and contemplation are necessary according to one’s vocation; in the saint they interpenetrate. But for the journey to the goal different articulations and coordinations of the two activities are possible. Traditionally, contemplation comes first and leads to action and to the apostolate. But there seems to be no good reason why the process could not be inverted, as some modern writers suggest. In such a case, engagement in the world of men would be the first act, in which and through which one would contact God in contemplation. Action and contemplation would thus have a different place and role in the Christian’s life.

In a similar way self-denial is as necessary as the cross, the negative term of the paschal mystery. Both the transcendent nature

of Christian life and the fallen condition of man demand this effort if man is to avoid the hazards and rise above the limitations of a closed universe. But whether the purification is sought by material renouncement and withdrawal to the desert or by the self-forgetfulness demanded in the spending of oneself and being spent for others (2 Cor 12.15) is a secondary question.

Conclusion. Christian spirituality is complex because it is both human and supernatural. It is the highest activity of man, the life of his spirit, but it is rooted in his historical existence. While the life is his own vital activity, it is above and beyond him, because it is supernatural. This second factor, more than the body-soul dimensions of human existence, is the reason for the antinomies, the paradoxes, and the dialectical nature of Christian life. Christian spirituality cannot be reduced to one simple category, both because it is life and especially because it is the life of God lived by men in the Body of Christ.

Bibliography: H. U. von Balthasar in *Geist und Leben* 31 (1958) 340- 352 summarized in *TheolDig* 10 (1962) 189-195. L. Bouyer, *Introduction to Spirituality*, tr. A P. Ryan (New York 1961). P. Fransen, *Divine Grace and Man*, tr. G. Dupont (rev. ed. New York, 1965); “Toward a Psychology of Divine Grace,” *Cross Currents* 8 (1958) 211-232. F. Roustang, *Une Initiation á la vie spirituelle* (Paris 1963). G. Thils, *Christian Holiness*, tr. J. L. Farrand (Tielt, Bel. 1961).