

GROWTH IN CHRIST

By C. C. MARTINDALE

FR. FABER once wrote a book called *Growth in Holiness*. Both words are significant. Growth certainly implies increase of some kind, but not necessarily in size - a house can be enlarged, but it does not grow; nor just in complication, as a pattern may be made to do. Growth implies an interior principle which causes the object in question to move, to change, and to do so in a way that should be proper to it, so that it is possible to speak of something being over- or under-grown, or well-grown. The Universe is certainly 'in motion', but we must also take into account a 'lessening'; *nullaque res oritur nisi morte adiuta aliena*, said Lucretius.¹ Many kinds of animals have died off without help of man; other kinds have to be killed by us lest they prove too destructive (like stags or foxes), and then protected, lest we should allow our appetite for killing to overrun itself. Along with man's invention of cures for diseases goes his discovery of ways of poisoning whole masses of mankind, if not the human race itself; and Shakespeare's Prospero quite rightly saw that no mere imaginary world but the 'great globe itself' might melt into a dream except that a dream requires a dreamer. So I do not see the universe or its contents as *growing*. Forms appear at the expense of other forms destined to dissolve for the sake of others, perhaps; and 'units', men included, are dissoluble, tossed about for a while in an agitated but tideless sea.

Faber's second significant word is, however, holiness. For this, the title of this article has substituted 'Christ' - a concrete for an abstract; for a quality, a Person. Faber's doctrine of course holds good, though it is not at once obvious what holiness may mean. It is no doubt taken for granted that the idea of 'being very good' is included in it; yet there are those who find this idea vaguely distasteful, as if it necessarily meant something, if not puritanical and pharisaic, at any rate beyond the reach of the ordinary man. But these two words already are seen to have their origin in religion; and we maintain that the human race has *always* craved for something beyond the obvious, beyond use and want, food, sexual pleasure,

¹ 'Nothing is born except through the death of something else'.

money. We even maintain that man is by nature a mystic, and wants something 'hidden'. The question is, can he get it? And if he can, what is it?

We do not despise 'primitive' religions, elaborate though they may become, and even if they include for example, the transmission of the 'family spirit' into someone or something else (but the idea of 'growth' does not enter here). In practice, three great religions challenge our attention - Christianity, Oriental Religion (we think we are justified in grouping under this general name Hinduism, Buddhism and even some aspects of Chinese cult) and Islam. In the inverse order, we respect the tremendous monotheism of Islam; and anyone who has seen an unsophisticated Mohammedan praying must feel put to shame. But there does not seem any *ideal of growth* within Mohammedanism. Such mystical systems as have grown up within it do not seem to have found their roots in anything that Mohammed himself bequeathed. As for the East, we are everywhere confronted with the extreme difficulty of finding words, or even thoughts, which correspond with the Oriental ones. Certainly there is everywhere a method of achieving what mostly is called Nirvana, a de-spiration, or 'puffing-out'. That which makes each of us a person is exhaled; though it will not be admitted that 'no-thing' is the same as 'nothing'. The person is like a ripple or an eddy in a flood. Any separate reality that the person seems to possess is an illusion. There is change, there is 'progress' - but it is all in the direction of stripping oneself of the illusion of selfhood. Even those 'descents' (*avatars*) of the god Vishnu into human (or other) forms are *not* 'incarnations', but forms as illusory and passing as any other, even though it be claimed that they include Christ - or Gandhi; and the pity which brought about their apparition displays itself in teaching men the path towards individual extinction.

For the average Catholic, really to grow means, first, seeing deeper into his Faith rather than learning new facts about it. Of course, the basic fact is *God*, the One, True (*i. e.*, Real) God, always and everywhere present and active in all that is. It is marvellous to read of how this *fact* struggled its way through, in Israel as nowhere else, despite the obstinate and sensual temperament of the people. Utterly destroyed, you would have thought, by internal schism and foreign invasions and wholesale deportation, Isreal was held together by that firm belief in the one God, a belief growing ever more pure and ever more intense. It was this belief that kept the Jews in one compact nation, unique in the world, and destined to be

finally liberated by Him whom God would send.

But we know the second tragedy of human history, following upon the sin of Adam: the Jews rejected their Messiah. But even as God had appointed a Redeemer for that first Sin which had despoiled our race of the supernatural life we should have inherited, so now it was made clear that God did not go back upon His promises, but the Christ whom the Jews had crucified was to rise and become Lord of all mankind.

God has definitely *entered history*. There is no question here of 'illusion', of getting rid of human personality. Life is to be wholly Christocentric (the very fact that this word contains the syllables 'centric' proves that there is reality surrounding Christ, real persons dependent on a Person. You cannot have a 'centre' without radii reaching out to some circumference, however mysterious it may be). Christ, while saying that He is not come to 'dissolve' the past, the religion proclaimed by Moses, continues: 'but *I* say to you . . .': 'He who loves father or mother more than *Me* is not worthy of *Me*; you must take up your cross daily and follow *Me*'. And at the end, it is *He* who will come again, with *His* angels, and judge the world, uttering the final verdict: 'Come . . .', or, 'Depart from *Me*'. So we cannot soak ourselves too deeply into the life that Christ lived during His years on earth and learn the details of His environment, the customs of His time, the tiny touches by which the Evangelists reveal to us a whole way of life. The strange thing is that though so much that we read is alien to our modern world, the gospels somehow communicate their message, indeed *Himself*, to us, and it should be impossible to be much 'with Jesus' without becoming in some measure like Him.

But we must go further. A hint is given in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. Our Lord says that inasmuch as you succoured the sick, the prisoner . . . 'you did it unto *Me*'. One could take this as meaning that He would regard our kind act *as though* it had been done to Himself, but also that, in some real sense, He intends us for a union closer than mere companionship. We cannot, surely, read the Discourse at the Last Supper¹ and have any doubt about that. And who can forget His great allegory of the Vine: we, the branches, He, the vine-stock, living by one sap, and giving the fruit of Christ to all whom we meet.

When speaking of any Mystery, of a Truth which essentially

¹ Cf. Jn 17,30ff.

transcends humanity, we humans (even a St. John or a St. Paul) can but use inadequate words: doubly so, because they cannot state exactly what we know. This need not worry us! Who can say what exactly he means by a colour, a scent, a form like the curves of a cyclamen or an iris? And again, how should our human thought fully understand the heroism maybe latent in our human neighbour, perhaps a vulgar and unpleasant man. Still less then, can human thought, or intuition, equate itself with what is Divine. But we need not be afraid even when we see what we are told. We remember the words of St. Paul to the Corinthians, where he reminds us that, at best, in God's creation, we see Him but 'dimly, as in a mirror': a poor reflection of what I shall know when I know 'even as I am known': when our sort of knowledge, and even our inspired way of proclaiming God, shall cease.¹ Even 'if I give all I have to feed the poor, but have not charity, it profiteth me nothing'.² How difficult to suppose that a man could, out of mere philanthropy, 'give all he has' without an infiltration of charity! No man exists without grace tugging at him, coaxing him, trying to transform him! Theology tells us that no man can consistently practise the 'natural' virtues without the help of grace. How very many one has known who could not accept Christianity, but who were manifestly being fostered by Christ! They

'fondly thought to err from God,
Nor knew the circle that they trod . . .
Death dawned; Heaven lay in prospect wide:
Lo! they were standing by His side!'³

What then, is this mysterious thing, charity, which makes all the difference? We shall see that it is, first, the fact of our incorporation *in* Christ; and then, our ever-increasing incorporation *into* Christ.

We have to confront this tremendous paradox: Jesus Christ our Lord is certainly complete, and yet He considers Himself *incomplete*. In Him it has pleased the Father to make the whole Fullness to dwell: In Him He makes to dwell the whole Fullness of the Divinity corporally;⁴ and yet, St. Paul speaks of the Church which is His Body, 'the fulfilling of Him who is thus fulfilling Himself in all'.⁵ In the Epistles to the Colossians and to the Ephesians, Paul loves to

¹ 1 Cor 13,9-10.

² *Ibid.* 3.

³ Francis Thompson: Epilogue to 'A Judgement in Heaven'.

⁴ Col 1,19; 2,9.

⁵ Eph 1,23.

use, from the outset, the word *epi-gnosis* – the *full*¹ knowledge of what Christ is; and of what we, each of us and the Church as a unity, are meant to be, are becoming, and in essence *are*. He is not concentrating on what we are not, though he cannot be unaware of it, but on what we must know in order to be fully what we *are*. The Church is not simply a 'denomination': a set of people who say and do certain things that others don't.

Thus he begins his letter to the Colossians:

Christ is
 The image of God the Invisible,
 Coming - into - existence² before all Creation.
 Yes, *in Him* were created all things
 Things in heaven, or on earth,
 Things visible, or invisible . . .
 By means of Him, and unto Him, they all of them are
 created,
 And Himself is prior to all,
 And in Himself do all things hold together.

Let us not be shy of comparisons which in no case can be anything but puerile. Here are innumerable chips of marble, grains of sand, flecks of dust; each meaningless by itself, but all such that some cohesive substance can bring them together into a shape, give them a meaning, each being in its proper place and yet, together, forming a *whole*, a consistency, with an explanation of why they so much as separately existed. Much more so, we, an incoherent multitude of men – in fact, not even adequately *men* – do not become coherent until we find our proper place *in* Christ. 'Him we proclaim . . . that we may present every man perfected in Christ. Yes, for *this* I strain and struggle in the measure of that energy of *His* that energizes so mightily in me'.³ 'In Christ it is that God makes to dwell the plenitude of the Godhead bodily, and it is in Him that you reach your own fulfilment, in Him, who is the Head of every principality or power'.⁴ Again Paul prays that we may be 'formed into a perfect

¹ The Pauline word *pleroma* certainly means 'fullness', or 'filledness'; but since it alludes in a unique way to Christ, one seeks for a unique word, and I can think only of 'plenitude'. But since in English one cannot say 'to plenitudinize', we seem forced to use 'full', 'fulfilment', losing the verbal connection, and endangering the intimate connection in thought.

² No exact word corresponds with Paul's 'being-become', itself, strictly, inexact!

³ An audacious accumulation of words, recognizing a spiritual interior *fact*! Col 1,28,29.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2,9,10.

man, having for measure, or standard, the Plenitude (the maturity!) of Christ';¹ we fill Christ up to the measure that He still looks forward to – 'the Church, that is His Body, the fulfilling of Him who is thus fully fulfilling Himself in all things'.² God, in fact, 'has willed to bring all things to a head in Christ – things heavenly and things earthly, seeing that in Him we have our lot assigned to us'.³ This is enough without my dwelling on Paul's great metaphor: the building that is 'being closely fitted together, growing into a Temple holy to the Lord, wherein you too are being built together into a spiritual dwelling-place for God'.⁴

Throughout, then, we watch *growth* – of the individual, the community, the Church; growth in, and into, Christ. What, then, is this *Christus totus*?⁵ No wonder if the answer is to be found in a world of mystery; for St. Paul ends this ecstatic part of his letter to the Ephesians with a cry of praise to Him, 'who can accomplish more, far, far more, than what we ask or think, according to His power that is at work within us'.⁶ He insists that Christ is set above not only this our own world, but above 'things in heaven as on earth, things visible *and* invisible', above all those created existences to which he gives grand vague names, like 'principalities', 'powers': in Him and *towards Him* they all of them are created.⁷ But what exactly is Christ's work 'upwards', so to say, towards and among super-human spirits, nothing has been revealed, nor can we really guess; but we know that they too are to form part of the *Christus totus*.

We said that while it is evident that there is movement within our 'universe', and indeed that many items, 'units', within it coalesce at least temporarily and form 'systems', no continuous *growth* can yet be discerned in it such as to form a perfect whole. Yet everything that has existed, every force liberated, affects by attraction or repulsion everything that now exists. My body would not be what it is had those of my parents and their parentage been different; yet it can go sick and die. My history would have been different if Julius Caesar or Napoleon had not lived. Had there been no Isaiah, Plato, Voltaire, Leo XIII, how different the current of my thoughts! Yet my mind too can go sick. But this sickness was not according to God's plan. He did not create a world meaning it to be dislocated and in pain and achieving no unity nor purpose. We

¹ Eph 4,13. ² *Ibid.* 1,23. ³ *Ibid.*, 1,10. ⁴ Eph 2;22-23.

⁵ Augustine's phrase: e.g., *In Joannis Evangelium*. Tract. 28, PL 35,1622.

⁶ Eph 3,20-21. ⁷ Col 1,16.

have not to think that St. Paul has fallen victim to the pathetic fallacy when he says that 'the whole of Nature, as we know, joins throughout herself in groaning, is in travail within herself and along with us; *with* us, for we too groan within ourselves in our yearning for our adoption, the ransom of our humanity'.¹ That there is here no 'fallacy' is clear if only because God is present *and active* in every particle of His creation; and active not idly, but towards a goal. But what is that goal? Christ. 'By means of Him, and unto Him, *all* these things were created, and in Him, who is prior to all, they all of them subsist'.

We are not forbidden to think that the Son of God would have taken up our flesh even had man not sinned, and the first chapter of Colossians (to my mind) encourages us positively to do so.² In God's plan, then, for creation, Christ would have been not only the Omega but the Alpha, and indeed in the Apocalypse both God and His Christ so name themselves.³ But does the world seem to be growing in that direction? Well, from the first the Church has sighed: 'How long . . . ? The Lord delayeth His coming!' But not only we are inclined to think that the *tempo* of affairs as arranged by men is usually much too quick, but too easily we think of the triumph of the Lord as a finish to created developments rather than as a consummation. We ourselves experience that we cannot advance faster than grace permits. Thus, here are we, who can make the Sign of the Cross and pronounce the due formula with scarcely any attention, but would be almost paralysed if we realised that it was the Redemption and the Blessed Trinity that we were invoking. This must neither cause anxiety, nor condone apathy. In a retreat we may hope to gain more of that deep insight which Paul so much prayed to find in his converts.

Much of what has been written above may seem to be over the heads of the honourable loyal 'everyday' Catholic. He knows his 'catechism-creed': that certain doctrines are taught which he must

¹ Rom 8,20-22.

² The fact of Sin's having entered the world would not therefore have affected the fact of the Incarnation, but the role of the Incarnate who now is among men as their Redeemer. The only 'reason' for God's having created at all, was Love - Love showing itself in every imaginable way, one would have thought, and supremely by the unifying Incarnation. But now we do know more! That Love could not be defeated even by man's rebellion, and He who freely willed to be born and live a man among men, was willing also to suffer and die for man.

³ Apoc 1,8; 22,13.

not deny, little as he may understand them or see their practical import, like that of the Blessed Trinity, or especially what is meant by the 'Holy Ghost' and His activity in the personal life of the Christian. He knows that a 'code' exists; if he violates it and does wrong, he is sorry, confesses it and resolves that, God helping, he will do better. Such a 'home-spun' Catholic must be esteemed, and often viewed with humiliation by others more learned, perhaps, than he, and not only less exposed to temptation but very likely less charitable than he.

But it is not to be expected that the Catholic who does not profess to be anything 'special' will remain all his life through just the same, spiritually, as he used to be. After all, he is not and never has been exactly what he used to be. Physically, he has developed; he has accumulated experiences; his perspectives are bound to have shifted; if he has passed middle-age, he will begin to grow tired; the colours fade, the taste goes out of life; nothing is now new. And even in youth, owing to the very multiplicity of new ingredients in life, religion may seem to thin out till it becomes a mere outline in the sky. But none of this need happen, if only the Faith be given its change. It is most unlikely that religion will be healthy if it has not developed in a soul between the years of fourteen and twenty-four; indeed, between forty-five and sixty-five.

But by this development I repeat that I do not mean the mere acquisition of new facts, information; even though a constant 're-education' of the religious mind is certainly desirable. I mean an ever deeper seeing *into* what is already known. This cannot, normally, come about save by means of reflection, which takes time and usually implies solitude and silence. These are provided in a 'retreat'; and while a retreatant will normally have a guide during the time spent in retreat, it is essential that the real work be done by the retreatant himself, enlightened by the Holy Spirit. St. Ignatius, in his book known as the *Exercises*, insists that the spiritual guide must never *intrude* himself upon the souls whom he wishes to help. His aim must be to assist the soul to grow – an essentially individual activity – till it becomes just what God its Creator meant it to become.

Many have found the introduction to the *Exercises* rather bleak. It speaks of God, and of man's being created for no other ultimate reason than to praise and serve Him and by so doing to save his soul; and that consequently we ought to 'stand neutral' to all created things lest any of them be preferred by us to God.

But we cannot praise God unless we know something about Him,

and we are not asked to pretend that we are Theists only; we are Christians. And so we can and must draw on our Christian knowledge of God, that God is love, and love is always active. And while we cannot be of any use to God in Himself by serving Him, we *can* be of use by co-operating with His loving work throughout creation. And 'to stand neutral' to created things does not mean that we are not to love them; we can never love them as much as God does. Only if we use them in ways contrary to God's known will, we obviously are not serving Him, and indeed not even loving them; we are loving and serving self.

So, even into the most bleak-seeming preface to the *Exercises* love enters; for the Christian cannot think of God otherwise than as loving, or as inactive; and in that activity we are all invited to share. And this is reinforced by the *Contemplatio ad Amorem* – 'Thoughts that make for Love' – printed no doubt at the end of the *Exercises* proper, but such (as many have said) as to be usable at whatever stage of the *Exercises* we have reached. It insists upon the Presence of God in all things, for, were He absent, the things would simply not exist. And where He is at all, He is powerfully so, willing them to exist, and to exist not purposelessly, but in view of *us* and therefore of love, since He cannot will that we, or anything else, should exist for His own profit. We are not to cart anything away, but to catch everything up and incorporate all things into His total manifold Universe.

'Incorporation!' Ignatius now turns to Christ, and we do not deny that he writes rather of our life with and for Christ than of our life 'in' Him: the explicit doctrine of the Mystical Body, our incorporation into Christ, is developed more in our day than it was in his own, though it could hardly be more clearly stated in the teaching of St. Catherine of Siena, for example, well before his time, or in the doctrine of those other great Spaniards, St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross, or in the apostles of the devotion to the Sacred Heart.

We need not be surprised if St. Ignatius now demands from the retreatant an intensive study of the Life and Passion of Our Lord, if only because *at first* he clearly expected men to come to a retreat not knowing very much about these events, and foresaw their making a retreat once only; and that during it they should make a decisive *choice* about their whole way of life: whether, for example, they should become a soldier or a priest, or, if a priest, accept some honorific and remunerative post. But later on, he admitted that a

retreat might be made more than once, either to enable a man to confirm his choice, or because the Life of Christ is inexhaustible, and we cannot expect that our mind and heart will all at once become perfectly assimilated to our Lord's. To the end of our life we must go on praying: 'Make my heart like unto Thy Heart!', implying that the likeness is not perfect yet. Priests say daily in the hymn at Prime: *Sint pura cordis intima*; and in the *Veni Sancte Spiritus* at Pentecost we ask that most blessed Light to 'fill to the full the inmost of our hearts'. We want that poisoned source within us, which sends up even the most minute drop of evil fancy, to be wholly dried; in the *Adoro Te* we ask that Christ may become the very food of our life – *praesta meae menti de Te vivere*.

Whereupon the Saint asks us to renounce Satan enthroned amid murky clouds and to join with Christ moving through the humble fields and flowers; and then to go further, and share in His work of *Christianizing* the world; whatever be the wounds and humiliations this may involve; in fact, to be glad of them, since He, our Captain and Head, would have endured them first. Anything else in the *Exercises* does not do more than implement this; and certainly the notion of the Christian Crusade does away with any idea that they are meant to lead merely to the salvation of our private soul.

It seems to me, then, that St. Ignatius reached, in his way, just what we have seen to be the doctrine of 'Growth', even though he did not use those more 'mystical' terms to which meditation on the Letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians give rise – I doubt if there are signs of his having even read them. But the Basque who had been both soldier and courtier could hardly have conceived *not* offering himself 'totally' to the service of his Captain and his King, and have asked nothing in return but love and Grace.