


THE NEED FOR DIRECTION

By JAMES WALSH

NE of the most succinct expressions of the Christian life and purpose is contained in the Church's petition to God the Father: that he will give us, through his Son, 'the spirit of thinking and doing what is right', in such a way that our lives are patterned according to the life of the Trinity.¹ Because he is 'gifted with the Spirit', the Christian is able to see what he has to do, and can put his vision into practice.² In the light of the Spirit he is able to judge the worth of everything, to evaluate rightly every situation, and to make his decisions accordingly. The Christian who accepts the fact of his baptism and acknowledges its significance, is aware that he has received a share of Christ's Spirit; the secret of the divine wisdom is revealed to him, and the mind of Christ is his. To accept the full implications of our baptism is to realise that, because we have made our decision, once and for all, with Christ, the Father has chosen and preferred us, and has endowed us with the Son's power of judgement – of choosing always according to the will of the Father. In theory, at least, the Christian is a man of firm and unhesitating decision; for he perceives, in every choice which is presented to him, the direction given him by the Spirit. And he is assured that 'he whose power is at work in us, is powerful enough, and more than powerful enough, to fulfil his purpose in us'. Further, he has the guidance, from without, of the Hierarchical direction, pastoral and sacramental, of the Church which is imbued with the Spirit of Truth. He lives in a community which is being built up, through charity, to reach the fullness of Christ's perfection.

On the face of it, the direction given by the Spirit to the Community as a whole, and to each member individually, should be sufficient to make any other form of spiritual direction superfluous. Each of us should be able to distinguish the true Spirit from the false without making a frequent and detailed manifestation of our thoughts and impulses to a director. The difficulty is that most of us remain for so long as 'children in Christ's nursery'.³ We

¹ Collect for the eighth Sunday after Pentecost.

² Cf. Collect for the Sunday within the Octave of the Epiphany.

³ 1 Cor 3, 2.

treat the fact of our baptism rather as a child treats an inoculation against smallpox or polio – it does something beneficial to us, but we don't quite know what. Peter was ready to accept that the Lord's words were words of eternal life,¹ but he refused to accept the prophecy of the Crucifixion and Resurrection.² Similarly we do not really believe that our baptism means that 'we have been buried with Christ in death, our former selves crucified with him'.³ We may believe with St. Paul that we are alive only so far as Christ lives in us, but we will not accept that this involves being nailed with Christ to the Cross. We are fair-weather followers of Christ, frightened off, as were the Apostles in the Garden, by the imminence of suffering and humiliation. The first task of the spiritual director is to open our eyes to the facts of the spiritual life.

Again, in theory, our eyes have long been opened: as children we repeated, with a child's glibness, the catechism answer that the Spirit comes to us in Confirmation 'in order to make us strong and perfect Christians and soldiers of Jesus Christ'. It is no accident that the traditional terminology of spiritual direction is the terminology of the battle-field. We need to be taught the strength of the opposing spirits – world, devil and old self, and their tactics and strategy. The early Fathers considered that a man living in the world was beleaguered; unless he broke away from it and went into the desert, where he could choose his battleground, it was impossible to begin living the full Christian life. Direction was considered necessary not only to make progress against the enemy, but because it was taken for granted that the monk would be constantly tempted. It was for this reason that Christian perfection (and with it the need of spiritual direction) sometimes came to be looked upon, erroneously, as the perquisite of the cloistered religious.

Ignatius Loyola was by no means the first to recognise that the perfect following of Christ must be feasible in the world as well as in the cloister. His *Spiritual Exercises* have the great merit of showing how the traditional teaching on direction can be applied to help any soul, with an efficacious desire to serve God fully, to co-operate with the Spirit and make its decisions according to Christ. The *Exercises* are first directed to the awakening of the soul to the facts of life – the implications of baptism. Before ever the question of the crucial choice with Christ is put before the retreatant, he is directed to make this offering: 'it is my wish and my desire and my

¹ Jn 6, 69.

² Mt 16, 22.

³ Gal 2, 19–20.

considered determination . . . to imitate you in enduring every outrage and all contempt and utter poverty . . .'¹ But it is to be noted that only 'those who wish to distinguish themselves in the total service of their eternal king' and are ready to 'go against their own lower nature and wordly love',² can make such an offering.

Priests and religious, layfolk sometimes feel that it is hardly possible to receive regular spiritual direction, because of the apparent lack of directors with the necessary time and competence. We ought to recall that all religious formation is directed towards enabling us to stand on our own spiritual feet: to discern our own spirits in the normal day-to-day living with Christ. Every religious rule incorporates much of the traditional advice of the 'Spiritual Fathers', the founders of Monasticism; and, as Charles de Foucauld points out, very often the main work of a spiritual director of lay-folk will be to guide the *reading* of his spiritual children.³ Every Christian is called upon to keep 'the rule of St. James', 'to offer service pure and unblemished in the sight of God our Father means to take care of orphans and widows in their need and to keep oneself untainted by the world'.⁴ Spiritual direction aims at giving us a knowledge of our own weaknesses and disorderly inclinations, a knowledge of the attractions that the spirit of the world has for us,⁵ and a knowledge of the deceits of our enemy.⁶ Normally speaking, a confessor can come to know his penitent well enough to guide him in the acquisition of this self-knowledge. And the more intensified direction which the annual retreat should offer will help us to re-assess the motives for our regular choices. On the positive side, the Church is directing us towards a living understanding of the liturgy, which cannot but bring home to every Christian alike 'what it means to share his sufferings, moulded into the pattern of his death, in the hope of achieving resurrection from the dead'.⁷ For the rest, it belongs to our faith to believe that our Mother the Church always responds to the desires and aspirations of her children for the holiness of Christ. If we are earnestly and sincerely seeking the Lord's perfection, if we really need more direction than is normally available to us, the Lord will provide it.

¹ *Spiritual Exercises* (Exx) 98.

⁴ Jas 1, 27.

⁵ Exx 63.

² Exx 97.

⁶ Exx 139.

³ Cf. *infra*, p. 222.

⁷ Phil 3, 10.