

# THE GROWTH OF EXPECTATION

By JOHN L. McKENZIE

MAY it not be that the development of eschatological expectation in the life of the Church is recapitulated, in some manner, in the spiritual development of every individual – that is, an initial burst of apocalyptic enthusiasm of first fervour, followed by a long pull of fidelity in the spirit of the Epistle to the Hebrews, maturing gradually into a johannine awareness of the Trinity within us?<sup>1</sup> Fr John Bligh's three stages of the spiritual growth of the individual perversely reminded me of a witticism I once heard in Boston; and for the benefit of readers who are unacquainted with New England I should notice that the Boston ecclesiastical area has long been celebrated for wise sayings which play on biblical and liturgical latin. This was long before the vernacular movement. The saying described the three stages in the life of a bishop or an ecclesiastical superior in the opening words of terce, sext and none for Sunday according to the old latin psalter: the beginning of the exercise of authority, *Legem pone*, lay down the law; the middle phase, *Defecit spiritus*, the spirit grew weak; the final phase, *Mirabilia*, everything is wonderful. This summary of the ecclesiastical career is not entirely fanciful; and I think it is a kind of counterpart to the three phases described by Fr Bligh. The critical point obviously lies in the middle phase. At this point one either settles down to 'a long pull of fidelity', or one loses heart and begins the long decline into contentment with mediocrity.

When one looks at the apostolic Church, one is impressed by just those features which are missing or less prominent in the contemporary Church. The activity of the spirit took different and startling forms. There is only a sketchy structure of authority. There is an utter simplicity of doctrine and of practice. Yet when one looks at this Church closely, one sees that the Church could not retain permanently its apostolic form. When we consider what the apostolic Church did, we should also consider some of the things which it did

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<sup>1</sup> THE WAY, Vol 1 (Oct 1961), p. 279.

not do. One should not think that only in the apostolic period did the Church realize her full potentiality, and that everything since the apostolic period represents a deterioration. The development of the post-apostolic Church represents neither a net gain nor net loss. Change had to come.

It may be over-simplification to say that the eschatological thrust of the apostolic Church delayed the development of form and structure; but it appears altogether probable that the two factors are related. If the parousia was imminent, then there was no need to think of a durable structure for the Church. Faith, repentance and baptism would create a community of love which would endure until Jesus returned. Why should any more than this be necessary? When Paul can spend some time reassuring the thessalonians that those who have died before the parousia shall suffer no disadvantage compared to those whom he addresses, we can see in what direction the thought of the apostolic Church was running.<sup>1</sup> Such thinking would not lead the Church to plan for an indefinite future.

But the time did come when a decision had to be made, and the Church made it. It is impossible to trace the steps by which this decision was made; but by the end of the first century the Church had prepared herself to face a future to which no definite end could be assigned. The mission of the Church was not to be realized briefly and quickly by a few brilliant strokes. The structure of the apostolic Church could not endure for a period of indefinite length; and some of the qualities of the apostolic Church had to yield for the sake of permanence and stability. The Church recognized that she possessed the resources of permanence and stability for an indefinite future. The spirit would operate in new ways adapted to the conditions of such a mission. The works of the spirit, suited to her mission, would endow the Church with an inner strength great enough for her to maintain her character against the erosion of time and the experiences of cultural change. Her expansive power would not be diminished, but would be combined with qualities of endurance through which she would not be distorted by rapid expansion. All this adds up in the practical order to a more rigid structure; and this is what the post-apostolic Church began to acquire.

There were risks in this development; and while it would be interesting to recite these risks, they need not be recited here. We in the modern Church know them well enough anyway. That risk which

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Thess 3, 13-18.

is pertinent to our reflections here is the risk of weakening hope by deferring it. The later Church undoubtedly does not have that type of strength which rises from a lively eschatological consciousness; and it should be noticed that I say 'that type of strength'. The growth of the Church in permanence and stability implies the risk of tacit acceptance of existing conditions as the permanent and terminal reality in which the Church and her members shall find their fulfilment. A parallel may be ventured between the Church in the world and judaism in the world. For the survival of judaism it may not have been necessary that judaism should submerge its own native eschatologism; but the fact is that judaism did reach a form so weak in its eschatological awareness that eschatology may be called simply unimportant in the ideas of recent judaism. The Church has not abandoned her eschatological teaching; but the question of how meaningful this teaching is can be raised. The Church is secularized to that degree to which she is eschatologically insensitive.

Together with this risk we can consider two other risks involved in hope deferred. The first of these is the risk of diminishing confidence in the Spirit as the agent of God's saving work. The works of the Spirit in the post-apostolic age are no less marvellous than those of the gifts of miracles and tongues, indeed they are more marvellous; but they do not excite the attention and admiration which were given to the phenomena of miracles and tongues. The more subtle workings of the Spirit can be easily mistaken for the works of something else than the Spirit. The post-apostolic Church can think of its ends as achieved by quite human methods adapted to the holy purposes of the Church. Secular means do at times appear to achieve the ends of the Church; what does not appear is the price which the Church pays for this type of success. The price can be, quite simply, her integrity; and this is, of course, a dreadful price to pay. When the Church becomes aware of this price, she may withdraw in horror but also in discouragement, thinking that what cannot be achieved through secular means cannot be achieved at all. She may not look to the Spirit for power.

Another risk involved in this attitude is the risk of engagement with the world. The Church is engaged with the world by her constitution and her mission. She is Christ living in the world, and she is the agent through which God transforms the world. But she cannot live in the world and proclaim the gospel to the world without close association with the world. She lives in constant danger that the transformation process will be reversed; and her history

shows that the danger of secularization is never remote. What happens to the Church when she does not resist secularization need not occupy our attention here; but we can notice that she may resist the world by flight from the world, by refusing to be engaged with the world. Effectively this is to deny her mission to the world. The withdrawal may take many forms; the most recent form is that of the beleaguered fortress. In this way or in another, the Church ceases to be the transforming agent which she ought to be; she ceases to be the presence of Christ among men.

Can one say that the third stage of mature awareness of the Trinity within us is ever reached by the Church in the world? No doubt there is an eschatological consummation which is not attained by the Church in the world; but we have remarked that the Church is an eschatological reality. If we distinguish these three stages with Fr Bligh, then we shall have to say that the Church attains the third stage by achieving the second. When she recognizes her true self and her true mission, then she is aware of her identity with Christ and of the indwelling spirit. She recognizes the Trinity of persons within her by the dynamic of love; for love and love alone is the active presence of God, Father, Son and holy Spirit in the world. She knows that men must encounter God in her; and she realizes the terrible responsibility she has of not interposing her fleshly reality between them and God. She recognizes the presence of God within her not by contemplating her own grandeur, but by contemplating her own poverty; and I do not mean poverty in the literal sense of the word. I mean her poverty of spirit, her lack of spirit, her insignificant works compared with the abundance of her resources, the many ways in which she fails to mirror the God who is love.

The Church never completes the task of defining herself to her members and to the world. She never attains a stage of development in which she is granted contemplation in repose. She must always work out the reality of the presence of Christ; that she has responded to challenges in her past does not assure her that she is meeting challenges in the present. The late Pope John XXIII brought the word *aggiornamento* into common use. He meant that the Church can never grow old. She is endowed with a permanent youth in the sense that she always remains flexible, possessed of reserves of strength, able to change and to adapt, not hobbled by custom and habit, not weary with prolonged toil, never without a future full of promise. She will never see the days of which she will say, I take no pleasure in them.

These are some reflections on the development of the Church suggested by the remarks of Fr John Bligh; and it is time that we refer these reflections to the personal life of the individual christian. Fr Bligh alluded to the phenomenon known as 'first fervour', a phenomenon noted by all spiritual writers and experienced by every one who seriously attempts to realize the christian ideal. Generally those who write of first fervour write with a tone of warning against it. They believe that first fervour is like the seed in the parable of the sower, which takes root quickly and just as quickly withers in the sun or is choked by thorns or carried away by birds. First fervour is certainly an initial stage, it is open to excess of some kind almost by definition, and it must yield to something else. The locomotive, the automobile and the aeroplane are accelerated from a standing stop by opening the throttle full. The vehicle cannot be operated at full throttle for its entire course without burning out. But unless the throttle is opened wide when the movement begins, the vehicle will never move at all. And if one is to carry this figure of the early phase of the spiritual life any further, one cannot help remarking that the engine makes most noise when it is being accelerated. At the same time, every air traveller knows that the blast of the open throttle at take-off is a very comforting sound. And the noise of first fervour is also comforting.

The analogy should not be pressed too far, but it seems that the pentecostal fervour of the primitive Church must find its correspondence in the pentecostal fervour of the individual christian if the christian is to reach a more mature stage. The growth during first fervour, as far as it can be observed, seems to be incredibly rapid. The growth is manifested by external signs not as marvellous as the works of the spirit in the apostolic Church, but which do cause wonder in those who behold them. The reign of God does seem to be just around the corner, and all one need do is to put one's soul in shape to receive it. Difficult deeds are accomplished with ease and even with joy. One is carried by a spiritual exaltation which is no less delightful for being more than slightly dangerous. For the beginner has not reached cruising speed, to carry on our metaphor, and he is really not very far off the ground. He is more aware of the distance he has traversed than he is of the distance which remains to be traversed; and because he has gone so far with relative ease, he does not know why he should not continue his course at the same pace and with the same ease.

He is generating power. Most christians live on the convictions

which they formed in their first fervour, as the Church lives on the spirit of the apostolic age. These convictions may indeed lack depth, and the christian life in the initial phase is usually without plan and structure. In spite of the fact that this problem has been treated so many times in spiritual literature, it seems worth while to ask again what happens at that point where plan and structure should come, but do not; where something prevents the convictions generated during the first fervour from bearing fruit. There is a moment of decision, or rather a series of decisions, which issues either in the long pull of fidelity or the slow decline into mediocrity. The spirit fails – not the holy Spirit, but the human spirit which does not respond to the holy Spirit. The christian remains spiritually immature; he falls into the ‘tepidity’ of classical spiritual literature.

The analysis of this decline can be found in any of the classical works from Francis de Sales and Rodriguez to Thomas Merton. This writer has no intention of reading a lesson to these masters. But I suggest that they tend to conceive of this development of the christian as occurring in solitude, and it does not; it occurs within the Church, within a community – religious or secular – and the decision of the person is not entirely his own. It may in his own mind meet the ideals of the community and the possibilities which the community opens to him. The reasons for his failure of spirit need not lie entirely within himself. That part of the Church in which he lives may have done all it could to inhibit the action of the spirit on its members. The individual may form his own decision in spite of his involvement in the community, but it is the exceptional person who does this.

The critical decision, then, is made within the community and not in isolation, and it is made under the influence of the community. Consequently it reflects the spirit of the community in which it is made. The Church as a whole has accepted, of course, the long hard pull of fidelity rather than the slow decline into mediocrity; but this is not true of the entire Church, and there have been times when the Church as a whole reflected tepidity rather than courage and perseverance in its mission. Some of the factors which influence the individual decision adversely deserve our attention, especially if we are in a position to do anything about these factors.

Poor direction receives full treatment in standard spiritual literature. In modern times incompetent direction probably does less harm than incompetent government in ecclesiastical offices and in religious communities, and we may take the two together. Failure to

meet the spiritual crisis successfully may come from the fact that those who have the government or direction of the person refuse to allow him to make the decision. He may have been drilled to believe that he has no decisions of his own, that some one who stands in the place of God will make these decisions for him. He may have been taught to think that the Spirit will not move him except through the will of his superiors and directors. If he has learned his lessons well, he will await instructions on how to give form and structure to his christian life. When the instructions never come, he will believe that he has done his own duty by not giving his life form and structure. He remains a perpetual adolescent in the spiritual life, never recognizing his mature powers and responsibilities. In this unnatural state it is scarcely possible for him to reach anything but mediocrity, for apparently this is what his directors wish him to achieve.

The power of personal decision may be inhibited by a rule of life which is too narrow and too antiquated for the situation in which the person must live. In the Church in general and in religious communities there is a veneration for tradition which at times approaches the pathological. Certainly tradition has its place, but we often have difficulty in defining its place. Excessive respect for the traditions of the elders caused problems long before the 'new breed' appeared in seminaries and religious houses. Kindness forbids the citation of concrete examples. But all of us are acquainted with rules and customs which are so far out of touch with the contemporary scene as to be ridiculous, did they not sometimes have unfortunate effects in the lives of individual persons. One example which is fairly common and can be cited without offending any one in particular is the refusal of religious communities to adjust their *horarium* to the customary hours of the world in which they are engaged. The *horarium* of most communities is based on the working day of the medieval european peasant. When this schedule is introduced into a large modern city, it usually means that the religious are awake when everyone else is asleep and asleep when everyone else is awake. Effectively it means that religious may habitually deprive themselves of necessary sleep. Superiors who notice an unusual number of coronary occlusions among men in their fifties could give some attention to certain features of their customary life. Martyrdom for the sake of a traditional hour of rising does seem to be an unnecessary spilling of christian blood, which ought to be saved for more worthy causes like righteousness and bearing witness to the name of Jesus.

The example may seem trivial, but the principle at stake is of

utmost importance. Religious communities and seminaries should have noticed, if they have not yet done so, a larger number of young men who leave at the point of maturity than formerly. These communities have never had any trouble rationalizing defections; the very word defection illustrates rationalization at work. When these defectors say that they wish to do the work of God, but cannot do it in a narrowly rigid and antiquated routine, the communities put this down as a mask of discontent and an excuse for personal failure. Honesty demands that the question be examined from all sides, not merely from the side of the community. In the terms used in this article, these candidates see no future in the priesthood or the religious life other than the slow decline into mediocrity, and they refuse this. They seek elsewhere the life in which they can undertake the long pull of fidelity. They no longer accept the view that observance of the rule is a full time job worthy of the energy of a grown man.

Growth is a form of change, and the personal decision by which one accepts the life of fidelity is a high point of growth. We do not know how many people refuse the decision because they have been trained to resist change. Since the opening of the second Vatican Council we have re-discovered the inner resources of the Church which enable it to adapt its form and structure to meet new demands, and we have all marvelled at the manifest power of the Spirit. We have also rediscovered the tremendous immobility of much of the membership of the Church, which dislikes change in any area: liturgical practice, biblical studies, the relation of the bible to tradition, the idea of the Church, the structure of the Church, the attitude of the Church towards the world, in particular towards protestants and jews – every matter which has come up for discussion in the Council. In this school of thought there is never any reason for doing something which is not already being done, or for doing anything in a way different from the way in which it has always been done. The christian who has been trained in this school thinks of his personal life as he thinks of the life of the Church, and it is difficult to put his ideas in form. We may attempt to do so by saying that his ideal is not to live his own life, but to re-enact the life of others. For all that he must do he seeks precedent, and when he does not find it he is sure that it should not be done.

First fervour, we have remarked, generates power; and the power often rots because it is not exercised. At the point of mature decision the person may be denied legitimate outlets for the power which he feels within him. Here perhaps more than any other place the



government of the Church sins against the spirit and against the members of the Church. This is not new in the Church. One need not be widely read in the lives of the saints and the history of the Church to know that every creative and imaginative step has been taken against opposition which at times seemed insuperable.

I seem to have proposed with more rhetoric than necessary the obstacles to the decision to settle down into the long pull of fidelity. One should not forget that there is a power greater than these obstacles, and that is the power of the Spirit. The pentecostal Spirit of the first fervour matures into the spirit of courage and patience by which one finds the fulfilment of the christian life in spite of the factors which interfere with fulfilment. In speaking of the Church we outlined what seems to be the process of development, and we spoke of it as the finding of form and structure suited to the mission of the Church. We mentioned the risks involved in this transformation, and these risks can be transferred to the life of the individual christian. He too may lose confidence in the Spirit; he may become secularized by accepting the condition of the Church and himself in the world as terminal, or he may flee engagement with the world in eschatological terror. The form and structure by which he is enabled to overcome these risks must be, like the form and structure of the Church, a form imposed by the Spirit and not by secular ends and means, even when secular ends and means are accepted by the Church in which he lives. He must recognize that the mission of the Church is his mission: to be the living presence of Christ in the world and the agent by which God transforms the world. In him men will encounter the God who is love. This mission cannot be frustrated even by members of the Church.

Like the Church as a whole, the christian never finishes the task of defining himself as a christian. The long pull of fidelity does not mean that he settles into a rut. He may bewail his lack of opportunities while at the same time he does not see the opportunities which the Spirit opens for him. Like the Church as a whole, he passes into the third stage of awareness of the Trinity by meeting the demands of the second stage. When he is moved by the dynamic of love, the Father, Son and holy Spirit come to him and dwell with him. God has in him created a new presence of himself in the world. And in this creation the eschatological reality has received a new dimension. The individual christian as well as his fellow members of the Church must never forget that this dimension can be achieved only in this person. If it is not achieved in him, it will not be achieved at all.