

# LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

By HUGH KAY

**N**O SUBJECT could be more perennial yet more acutely topical than life in the Spirit, for there is risk today of a new quietism, and the only physic for that is the holy Spirit, who is the Church's dynamic. The malaise has nothing to do with doctrines of grace. It is just a state of inaction deriving from the headiness of the Church's renewal, the salvific confusion it engenders, and a profound lack of self-confidence. For some it takes the form of a querulous inversion, for others it is simply a temporary loss of focus. The diagnostic sciences have weaned us from proffering slick solutions to the human and social problem. We have passed through a generation of radical self-questioning. The net result is a certain humility; partly authentic, but tending to overspill into culpable helplessness. There is plenty of incarnational theology, but a remarkable dearth of incarnation. In the field of the physical sciences there is an abiding optimism. The scientist can cope. If human greed and folly would allow him, he knows he could feed the earth. But when research turns from laboratory and cybernetics to the nature of man, his habits and the social effects of technological change, we find ourselves barely on the threshold of understanding, and shrink from doing anything at all until we know much more. Answers and syntheses are suspect, let alone attempts to use the sociologist's findings in designing a blueprint for social action. Sciences that ought to be applied remain disconcertingly pure!

The christian has rightly been recalled to a sense of the secular values, containing as they do their own news of God; but, if only because it is hard for a human mind to attend to more than one thing at a time, the result has been to remove the supernatural from the realms of respectability, even within the Church. The christian's imperative efforts to extract the most from secularity have illumined and strengthened him, almost apocalyptically. But his discoveries still remain inadequate to solve the human crisis. He is reminded that the order of creation has still to be fertilized by the order of redemption and revelation; that the gospel has still to be preached to every creature; that the Church is still the leaven in the mass. But what does this mean in practice? What are the mechanics of the

process? There are no detailed blueprints in Vatican II's decrees, nor could there be. Unused to walking alone, the christian turns sorrowing away – and into a pillar of salt. It is the holy Spirit who has the answers, but these are not to be discerned in terms of simplified codes. To see where he is leading us, we shall have to begin a long way off.

When Old Testament writers wanted to speak of a holy man, they said he was filled with the Spirit of God. The new law tells us that the holy Spirit is the divine initiator and the driving force for the christian and the Church. He is the Spirit of light who indicates the path, the Spirit of strength who urges us along it, the Spirit of peace who guarantees order. He is the Spirit of unity, universality and holiness who consecrates human activity, gives men access to God, teaches them that Jesus is Lord, and leads them through Jesus to the Father. As Christ reveals the Father, the Spirit reveals Christ, and the presence of the Spirit reveals the Church, Christ's body. As St Paul reminds us incessantly, the Spirit is essentially a principle of action. He inhabits us, attests the truth of Christ, intercedes for us, joins himself to our spirit, and cries in our hearts.<sup>1</sup> The gift of the holy Spirit is the active presence in us of the glory of the Lord, who transforms us into his image, and to be in Jesus Christ is to live in the Spirit. Life in the Spirit is the experience, therefore, of an activating presence made manifest in man's conduct and conditions. Its keynote is newness of life, the conversion notably absent from secular philosophies. The law yields to the blessing of Abraham in the spirit of the promise, the law of the flesh to the law of the spirit and justice, the works of the flesh to the fruits of the Spirit, the divine anger to the reign of joy and peace. Little children become spiritual men.

Life in the Spirit is an organic principle, showing us how to imitate Christ and giving us the power to do so, for the Spirit is the origin of christian conduct and the absolute author of its holiness.<sup>2</sup> But how is life in the Spirit to be attained and manifested? It is neither a question of pious practices nor simply of a moral code; the former may be unrelated to interior dispositions and the needs of current history, while the latter could be constructed from motives unconnected with the supernatural. Life in the Spirit has for its first requisite a willingness to be led by the Spirit, the initiator. It is a life hidden with Christ in God in the sense that life is judged

<sup>1</sup> Rom 8, 11, 16, 26; Gal 4, 6.

<sup>2</sup> Gal 5, 13–26.

in terms of the mystery of God, communicated by the Spirit who manifests the truth of Jesus. But the Spirit who brooded over chaos and out of it brought order, who poured himself out first on the prophets and now on the Church, whose title of Paraclete means befriender, is essentially an 'organising' Spirit concerned with men's spiritual relationships, with community, with oneness in worship and service. Through him, Jesus is there in the midst of us. He is a spirit with a mission, infinitely committed to establishing a new order of men who are neither bondmen nor free; or, putting it another way, establishing an open Church and an open society whose bond is peace. He was involved in creation from the beginning, he is the author of the individual's life and growth, and finally he is the source of that common fellowship in the Spirit which, as Paul told the ephesians, is the bond of charity, with soul knit to soul in a common unity of thought. So life in the Spirit becomes above all a matter of dedicating one's life to manifesting the presence of the Spirit in the Church to the wider world, co-operating with him as he leads all things united in Christ to the Father. And the moral order is simply a state consistent with the christian's role as a temple of the Spirit's holiness, his eternal gift to man. For the Spirit 'yields a harvest of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, forbearance, gentleness, faith, courtesy, temperateness, purity. No law can touch lives such as these; those who belong to Christ have crucified nature, with all its passions, all its impulses. Since we live by the Spirit, let the Spirit be our rule of life'.<sup>1</sup>

The picture thus begins to clarify a little. Secularity throbs with its own, unfulfilled vitality, hungering for the urgent breath of the Spirit as he gives it the kiss of life, and penetrates its womb. But, as Maritain told us well in advance of the Vatican Council, 'for a christian civilization no longer naive, the common aim is no longer that of realizing a divine work here on earth by the hands of men, but rather the realization on earth of a human task by the passage of something divine, that which we call love, through human operations and even through human work'. The dynamic principle of the common life and task of such a civilization will not be the medieval concept of building God's empire in this world, still less the myth of a class, a race, a nation or a state. It will rather be the concept, according to the gospel, of the dignity of human personality and its spiritual vocation, of the fraternal love which is its due. The task of

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<sup>1</sup> Gal 5, 22-26.

the commonwealth will be to realize a common life on earth, a temporal system conforming to that dignity, vocation and love. It was a created world with this kind of potential which Christ caught up in the act of redemption and to which he gave an eternal destiny, a fellowship with him in the Trinity. In such a world there is no room for quietism, for that purely passive inwardness and resignation, from which all activity and all concern for growth is eliminated.

Getting down to cases, however, we have to establish a balance between the proper sense of inadequacy, which paradoxically grows in our hearts the more we learn about creation, and the strength and confidence which is our spiritual birthright. Our steps may be tentative, but take them we must, albeit in the near-dark. The establishment of a new earth has two aspects, the personal and the social, which inter-relate yet call for different approaches forged simultaneously. First, on the personal level, an over-emphasis on juridical moral codes has deflected the christian's mind from the risks of living in a state of unloving, and the remedy for this is on his doorstep. Michel Quoist reminds us of the woman in our street whose children are hungry as the neighbour throws the remnants of a party dinner into the dustbin; of the father of a family in a single room; of the ugly girl neglected at a dance; of the adolescent whose bewilderment is mocked at by his elders, the troubled soul without a confidant, the man who dies alone. So often, our concern for the deprived and the outcast is peripheral. This is something beyond us, we say, a matter for specialist organizations. Yet, while organized help is surely required, it will be like planting trees in shifting sand, unless the handicapped and the outcast man and woman can find fulfilment in a personal relationship. There are many whom organizations cannot help: the boring, eccentric, unattractive bachelor sitting on a park bench and watching the women avert their eyes from him, the christian homosexual called to a life of heroic abnegation and service without hope of temporal consolation, the enuretic ex-prisoner whom landladies reject, whom society would like to trust but feels it dare not. I know of a man, recently freed after a prison sentence for offences against young children; suffering from a heart affliction that makes it unsafe for him to work near machinery; living on national assistance in a single, very seedy room. He is unlovely and unlovable, and Christ died for him. Somehow, in him, we have to see the Spirit of Christ struggling for self-assertion and recognition. Every day there are suicides, people who lacked neither money nor even position; they simply lacked other people. Admit

the unbalanced or the grievously erring to your fireside? Bring him within the orbit of your innocent children? Put up with his everlasting harping on his own feelings? Forgive him repeatedly when he steals from you and insults you and asks to be taken back? Someone, somewhere, seems to answer with another question: are these things, or are they not, the concern of the life of the Spirit? And where do we stand when, having swept these uncomfortable reflections under the carpet, we approach the sacrificial altar of the mass, with the bond of peace between brethren shattered? Time and again one meets disturbed personalities who need a three-pronged attack: psychological medicine (the doctor), spiritual direction (the priest), and love (you, or it might be me).

Then there is the problem of fixing priorities between personal rights and social needs. A seamen's strike threatens the nation's economy. Yet a seaman works fifty-six hours a week for £15, well below the national average. Who lays down his life for the people in that situation? One thinks of the hasty, angry judgments passed on bewildered, non-subversive strikers in other industries; of a social system where the state has to drive rather than lead the citizen to make the sacrifices he owes to the commonweal, and the law dispassionately tramples on the hard cases hit by regulations designed to serve the common good; the judgments in courts of law which may differ by far from the judgments passed in heaven, yet which have to be passed to save the social structure from disaster. The victims of misunderstanding and of bad communications, the odd men out whom the rules cannot cater for, the untutored mind and character overborne by social competition in the affluent society: they are all destined for the life of the Spirit, yet their stunted growth dams up the flow of grace within them and denies the glory owing to God in his creatures.

But the person-to-person fellowship requires a scaffolding. It is the whole human race that is meant to become the liturgical society. The Church has no concern with the field of politics in the sense of dominion or seeking for sectional advantage. But the kingship of God's royal people in the Church does extend to politics in terms of service, leavening, illuminating and orienting. It is not for the Church, for us, to usurp the functions of secular rulers and planners. It is her task and ours to be inventive, to pioneer social experiments within a pluralist society and as far as may be in partnership with men of all creeds and none: experiments which in the end we should be glad to relinquish to take-over bids by statutory and voluntary

bodies able to extend their effect to the whole corpus of society. It is also her task and ours to do some hard thinking aloud: to join, for instance, with the thinkers of left, right and centre in Europe today who, finally disillusioned by a revolutionary socialism that eased penury but failed to foster growth, are groping for what they call the new socialism. At a time when it has become quite fashionable to dismiss the social encyclicals as unpractical and outmoded, it is interesting to watch such thinkers starting to converge on a concept of society dominated by something very like the subsidiarity principle taught by Pius XI; and the extension of the partnership between state and private initiative as largely pioneered by the british radical parties and given explicit christian form by John XXIII. It is sometimes said that a christian revolution of society is needed. This is all very well for people in ivory towers, but there are those of all political shades who, faced with having to do the job, recoil with impatience from words like revolution. They know, only too well, what its more disruptive implications could do to the terribly delicate, infinitely complex structures of modern economic and political life. They know society simply could not stand the shock, and that the last state, for many millions of people, would be very much worse than the first. Thus many european socialists now, like the group of thirty-five young economists writing under the name of Claude Bruclain in *Le Socialisme et L'Europe*, avert their gaze from the hopelessly outmoded revolutionary concepts now being abandoned even by communist countries because they simply do not correspond to man's real needs, and search instead for what is sometimes called a 'reforming' socialism. Perhaps the best example of the Church's contribution here, actual up to a point but still deplorably embryonic, comes from the Coady Institute in the University of St Francis Xavier at Antigonish in Nova Scotia. This institute annually trains actionists of differing creeds from over fifty countries in the principles and practice of co-operatives and credit unions: not an exclusively Catholic concept, of course, but given shape and practical expression at Antigonish for many years, and strangely unsung in this country. This movement now affects the lives of several million people, mainly in developing countries. But it is still a drop in the ocean, and the proliferation of such centres would seem to have a prior claim to the Church's energies and financial resources. True co-operative set-ups, producer and consumer alike, including insurance schemes and voluntary housing bodies, preserve the notion of private property, personal dignity and responsibility, but exercise

them in a system of common control. It is a curious blend of the virtues of the capitalist and socialist systems, and discards the errors of both. It spells sheer survival in a country like Peru. It could apply to the grievous social problems, notably housing, still affecting sophisticated societies. It could save the scottish Highlands or Appalachia and lead the 'affluent' english worker or the californian fruit-grower to an active participation in community life and direction, snatching him from the politically passive animality his affluence has led him to: an almost total abdication of his kingship. It is revolutionary enough in a sense, and could be applied even to complex industries, but it honours competitive, human variety and outlaws the stereotype. It is in this kind of activity that the presence of the Spirit in the Church becomes visibly incarnate. It can be operated without reference to the supernatural; Yugoslavia's tentative workers' democracy is one criterion. The dutch corporative system is another, the swedish a third. Rooted, however, in the life of Christ and the Spirit, a mere salvage operation or system of equity becomes a regeneration, transforming character, making men truly human by impregnating them with the Christ life. It is not for nothing that the President of Senegal has worked out his philosophy as a blend of Marx, Teilhard de Chardin, and the quality he calls *négritude*. For this reconciliation of man and society is precisely what love is about. And love is the greatest revolution of all.