OLD AND NEW

By MICHAEL IVENS

WHAT IS REALLY happening when the Church sets about putting her house in order and invites the co-operation of the faithful in the process? Today we speak of 'renewal', in the past one spoke of 'reform' – two words with markedly different overtones. Few, perhaps, would want to go back to the older word with its austere, slightly authoritarian associations. Examples of reform which come to mind suggest the battening down of hatches rather than the upsurge of new life. Again, the word lends itself to a voluntarist interpretation, with an emphasis on moral overhaul which obscures the deeper transformation worked by God in the depths of man's being.

On the other hand, it would be naive to suppose that this deeper process is always implicit in our cheerful bandying about of the word renewal. Renewal has an ambivalence which the older term lacked – and here lies its danger as well as its usefulness. Its import extends from the trite to the profound. From the notion of modernization (relevant to such issues as rubrical change and the hemline question) to the biblical idea of conversion, with its double aspect of death and new life, there are many gradations. In itself, this range is no bad thing. It reminds us that the more peripheral processes have something to do with the deeper, that the clamps we associate with the past, the cosmetic operations that too often pass for renewal today, even the deep surgery demanded by the radicals, have somehow to be related to a process of dying to self in order to be made new by Christ. What matters is that the surface meanings retain their connection with the roots, even if we do not – as is obviously out of the question – always make the connection explicit.

Renewal today

The attitude that simply ignores the deeper reality need not detain us. To take christianity seriously is to realize that renewal has something to do with the mysterious categories of death and rebirth and adherence to Christ. It is clear today that at this stage the difficulties really begin, since widely diverse religious attitudes in the Church lay equal claim to be the authentic contemporary

embodiment of such notions. The tension aroused when serious christians from different sides of the divide come to grips over first principles suggests that the opposing views are not easily reconciled.

These attitudes may be reduced, for illustration's sake, to two. Suitable terms are not easy to find, but let us call them the 'spiritual' attitude and the attitude which Maritain in a recent book has dubbed 'worldly holiness'.[1] No attempt will be made here to distinguish on this basis among the many groups and movements within the Church. The distinction is grounded rather in the attitudes, often unreflective, which people betray in the way they talk. It is common to hear certain people insisting on the importance of 'spirituality'; others make a point of avoiding such language. The term 'worldly holiness' may sound a little outlandish to designate the viewpoint of the latter. But if it is remembered that the word holiness, while possessing an exclusively religious connotation, has its semantic roots in the word 'whole' (hence 'complete' or 'fulfilled'), 'worldly holiness' seems an admissible label for a common trend among christians today. While including the doctrinaire secularist, it also covers the less reflective person who would repudiate the suggestion that he is not in a serious sense christian, but seeks his fulfilment in down-to-earth practical realism, leaving the more mysterious dimension of christian living to look after itself.

Each of these attitudes is grounded in the awareness of an essential truth. Equally, each contains a awareness that something essential does not seem to receive its due on the other side. One reason why the spiritual man so consistently exasperates his critic lies in his apparent nervelessness. The note of caution and half-heartedness is too frequently apparent in the language in which spiritual considerations are urged upon the man of action. The situation is worse still when the spiritual man pours scorn on the motivation of those who take politics or sociology seriously, as though such concern somehow proved that the light of christianity had gone out of their lives. In short, a certain spirituality is open to the charge of minimizing the point which worldly holiness sees so clearly – the need for the christian to be wholly in earnest about his confrontation with here and now reality. Take away this reference, and devotion becomes an evasion, the worship of a god who is always comfortable and accomodating because his qualities are in the main, a projection of the worshipper's own.

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[1] Maritain, Jacques, *The Peasant of the Garonne* (London, 1968).

But the reaction against such spirituality is liable to be undiscriminating, too little concerned with the pearl of great price that can lie concealed in the eroded soil of an obsolete unworldliness. The spiritual man knows that renewed life is more than re-furbished morality. He would endorse the remark made some years ago by Gerald Vann: 'Augustine said not "Too late have I found the clue to right action", but "Too late have I loved thee, O beauty ever old and ever new".'[1] In more recent writing he would find an echo of his basic conviction in the words of Urs von Balthasar:

> 'Let him remain what he is, the God man, the man for other men, but let him allow us to remain what we are, simple men together with other men. Let him reconcile us to the Father with his immediate relationship, but let him allow us to find God where it fits in with the situation of created persons: in the dialogue with our fellow men'. To speak like this means that the threshold which leads to the reality of christianity has not yet been crossed.[2]

The richness of christian living consists in actually realizing that one is established in a relationship with Christ, a union of life into which the christian enters more deeply in so far as he dies to what is unregenerate in himself.

A spate of recent literature about the decline of spirituality underlines the persistent fear of one type of christian that in the opposite camp such realization is growing dim. Much of this writing, it is true, is shrill and fiercely nostalgic. But its more measured forms testify to a serious concern which might be put as follows. Under the influence of secularism and amid an overwhelming preoccupation with changing the world, the ideas of death, new life, adherence to Christ are acquiring a new centre of gravity. They refer, in their true sense, to a life that cannot be simply identified with its manifestations: they are coming to be understood exclusively in terms of action. As a french student scrawled on a Paris wall: 'God is a political figure: he sits on the right'. (A scrawler of the opposite view could have said that he sits on the left). Adherence to Christ becomes an emotive synonym for a particular form of commitment. The death process which is the obverse of renewal is taken to mean in practice the break with habits of thought and action inconsistent with a certain programme. Thus God is losing his

[1] Vann, Gerald, O.P., *The Seven Swords* (London, 1952), p 13.
[2] 'Closeness to God', in *Concilium*, Vol 9, No 3 (November, 1967), p 25.

transcendence to become a faceless supporter of our groups, only significant for what he represents. In so far as the spiritual man detects such tendencies in the opposite camp, it is not surprising that he prefers to stay put.

If, then, we confine ourselves to the extreme forms, it is easy to show that each of these attitudes, while grounded in an incontestable truth, also contains an attempt to accommodate God to human specifications. Each is in some way evasive. Each side is in a position to point out in the other a tendency to disparage an essential aspect of christian living.

If we were less blinded by the dust of our recurrent collisions, we might see that it is just this situation that is a call to a deeper renewal all round. In the past, when a relatively undisturbed Church enjoyed a measure of unanimity that seems to us astonishing, there existed the obvious danger of widely held assumptions passing unchallenged. In such conditions a fairly crass insensitivity to the demands of reality might easily co-exist with the appearances of a deep personal relationship with God under the guise of devotion: a compromise made possible by turning both to God and to reality with half-closed eyes. Today, the disturbing presence of the opposite camp – provided we allow ourselves to be disturbed – renders such compromise precarious. Our very divisions bring home to us the need to go deeper.

The goal is not, of course, a tedious uniformity in which diversity of charism and outlook will have vanished. Our response is more richly personal to the extent to which new life informs it. But the man who tries to live his vocation to die and to be re-born is one who knows that the search for God in personal union and the arduous and demanding confrontation with reality are not alternative options. He knows, though he may never articulate his knowledge, that he is living out the inherent tension of a paradox. He responds to God – and finds life – in responding to reality. But the God he encounters is always the mysterious other, other than himself, other than the situation that confronts him, identical with no finite thing, never letting him settle or rest content with what he has achieved. Only in the service of such a God is realism to be attained. Only in realism is there a dying and a growth of new life.

A death as total as calvary, a new life as transforming as the resurrection: this is the horizon of authentic christian living. Our protection against it is the barricade. We persuade ourselves that the holiness, the qualities of character, the self-discipline we have

already achieved come as near to complete death and fulness of life as to leave us with no real grounds for dissatisfaction. This may be illustrated in terms of two categories: meaning and justification. Life behind the barricade is conducted against a background of meaning which looks impeccably christian. In its details it appears basically conformed to christian principles. We are conscious of our virtue and not worried by our feet of clay. True renewal starts with the probing of these easy certitudes. It supposes willingness to be exposed to new meaning and new justification, an exposure which we fear, because we know that in the end, as the price of fulness of life, the substitutes will not survive.

New meaning

The christian will always pay lip-service to the principle that the ultimate meaning of life somehow lies in God. In practice we adopt an easier alternative and deck it out in religious dress. To seek God is to live in self-renouncing openness to reality. Other meanings permit us to confine our view to a selective range. Within this range, effort and decision make sense: beyond they are unthinkable.

The unthinkable, like a zone of insensitivity, is a symptom of our true state of vitality. Examples of the unthinkable are legion. It is a tragic platitude that conscientious christians can find it unthinkable to forgive an enemy, find time for a bore, care about strangers or withstand race prejudice. Numbers of christian radicals and conservatives find it apparently unthinkable to extend some measure of respect to the deeply held convictions of the other side. The thinkable may terminate at the limits of the comfortably familiar: an existing class structure, an existing liturgy or an existing adventitious mode of christian living. Its confines may be determined by our job, status or circle of friends, or more simply by innate inclination. To go on generalizing would be easy, but the unthinkable is ultimately, of course, intimately personal. To trace the pattern of one's own sticking points is to cast into relief against an exterior darkness of one's own making the particular parcel of reality to which we are prepared to respond with some semblance of commitment, self-renouncement and love.

False meaning is most easily described in this negative way. The sources of the unthinkable remain elusive. Its origins lie in the dark places where we probe, if at all, only in moments of rare courage and insight, in time of retreat or in general confession. For most of the time we cover up our meaning pretty well. If our attitude is

'spiritual', we do so under the guise of a concern for the specifically christian values, which we decline to compromise by taking too seriously the values we share with the worldling and the unbeliever. The worldly man, be he radical, conservative or just unreflectively clannish, may shroud his meaning under a concern for well-being: the well-being of the generation that will build where he now undermines; or of the generation today, allegedly well-served by the established order; or of those of his own circle, class or race.

Whatever our approach to reality, the canker of false meaning is always present. In referring just now to the ways in which we evade the truth about ourselves, it was impossible to avoid oblique mention of political attitudes; but it is not suggested that true or false christian meaning can easily be discerned in the choice of a certain political or theological stance, or of a certain style of christian living. It is often argued that among the tendencies that divide christians today some are aberrations fostered by the confusion of our age, others mere survivals sustained by the remnants of a theology that has exhausted its resources. Probably we shall only know the answers when such claims have been tested in the experience of christian living and open exchange.

Meanwhile, what is certain is that true christian meaning, the seeking of God's will, can only be realized in a commitment, and this commitment must be an honest, personal, intelligent response to the demands conveyed to us by reality. There must be no ducking the mental discipline of assessing situations and thinking out our response. There must be no trace of the evasion that Karl Rahner has identified as the characteristic of the ideology: the wilful slamming of the door on an area of reality.[1] Commitment must reflect the quality of the man committed: dead and re-born, open and free. In this way our action, whatever its style or theoretical sub-structure, will be increasingly informed by christian meaning, changed in the process and perhaps – as an ultimate possibility – be abandoned for another, more in accord with a clearer vision.

Justification

False meaning is never fully present to our awareness. It remains slightly out of focus, always in the background. If this were not so, we would be less tempted to feel that all was well with ourselves. In our response to reality – the way we cope with everyday situations,

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[1] 'Christianity and Ideology', in *Concilium*, Vol 6, no 1 (June, 1965), pp 56–67.

the entire pattern of our personal relationships – the meaning that governs our life is implicit. The unthinkable is never thought. But we manage to justify ourselves because our meaning does not become explicit. In fact, we make little pretence of referring to ultimates at all. We measure ouselves against particular norms or principles and in this (to give us our due) we may make a fair showing.

An example of the man of principle is the pharisee whose prayer becomes a confession of his own rectitude. 'I am not grasping, unjust, adulterous. I fast twice a week. I pay tithes on all I get'.[1] Such sentiments are embarassingly familiar to us. It is the humble prayer of the publican that we find hard to invest with meaning. 'Lord, I am not worthy', 'I have sinned exceedingly' – phrases like these, however frequently we repeat them, fail to find in us the same echo as the grateful self-assurance of the upright man. Where does the pharisee go wrong? Clearly, his mistake is somehow connected with the store he sets by his principles. Equally clearly, it would be absurd to suppose that the christian has embarked on a road completely without maps: to seek justification in the principle of having no principles would be sheer illuminism. The question that needs to be asked, then, concerns the way we *use* principles.

In so far as our principles come to us ready-made in the shape of law, it must suffice to say that the christian will take them with the utmost seriousness. He will not consider himself above law. To discuss what this statement implies is out of the question here, but one point is relevant. Somehow, law can and must show the way to a response beyond codification, the loving response to the living God and to living persons. On the other hand, legalism, to which the christian is a stranger by vocation, is an easier subject to handle. Its object is a simple one: to evade the ultimate surrender, the leap into life, as far as is consistent with feeling virtuous. The legalist abhors the road whose end is never in sight, and surrender to God and self-giving openness to persons is such a road. There is no possibility here of full marks: no one can honestly proclaim himself a perfect lover.

Yet to award himself full marks is what the legalist sets out to do. The going, he fully realizes, will not be easy: the majority of human beings give up the struggle around the sixty percent mark. But if the goal is to be possible at all, there is a heavy price the legalist has to pay. To a greater or lesser extent, he is obliged to burke real issues, to use the law to conceal from view areas of reality that impose

[1] Lk 18, 9–14.

immeasurable demands. The pointer thus becomes a screen, and justification a matter of meeting such requirements as the screen filters through. An official takes refuge in regulations from a human situation that calls for initiative and concern. A religious wears his rule like a carapace and knows nothing of the joy or heartbreak of real relationships. A husband who keeps clear of adultery finds his conscience blameless as far as the duties of his state are concerned. The letter is conscientiously fulfilled and the upright man is able to thank God that he is not as others.

But in addition to law, there exists another sort of principle. Its central place in daily living is clear from the frequency with which we declare that we are doing something, or – more commonly – not doing something 'on principle'. When challenged to frame our principle in words, we are usually at a loss. As a rule we are not conscious of referring to the explicit norms of christianity or to those of our society or group. Yet we imply that the norm or limitation which we impose on ourselves is reasonable, realistic and at least consistent with the christian values by which we claim to live. For these reasons, such principles also play a part in the process of self-justification, and the man who is open to God and reality will be alive to the danger.

Of course, there is a contrary danger of naive *un*realism. It needs to be emphasized that there is no true commitment without a certain rigidity of thought and attitude: a provisional narrowing of the attention to a certain range. As Chesterton remarked, the purpose of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to close it again on something solid. There is a dialectic about realism: the mind opens and receives, then partly closes to consolidate, to ingest, to translate into terms of possible action the demand it has perceived. Without the first process there is no true reference to reality: without the second no true commitment. To cope with reality, we have sometimes to protect ourselves, though without completely shutting off the reference to reality as a whole, against something we honestly believe will impede our response.

But a distinction needs to be drawn between the protection that helps us to cope and the protection which does the opposite. We refuse assistance that with a little effort we could easily provide. We shield ourselves by a score of accepted conventions against the unscheduled intrusion of people who in some way need us. The attribution of unworthy motives becomes almost second nature and we always play safe by refusing another chance to the man who has let us

down. Concerning the needs and suffering of people we never meet, we make a point of not wanting to know. If we are honest, we will acknowledge the hybrid meaning that governs such attitudes. More frequently, we attach them to principles and thus avoid both exposure to guilt and exposure to the ultimate mystery that lies in reality. We stick within our limits and feel justified.

A little hard reflection will provide personal instances of this subterfuge. For examples from history, the eminently principled nineteenth century is a valuable source. Take the reason for which a victorian statesman refused to read *Oliver Twist:* 'It is all among workhouses, pickpockets and coffin-makers. I dislike such things. I wish to avoid them. I dislike them in reality, and therefore do not wish to see them represented'.[1] Or the complaint of a mid-century periodical that the current concern over the lot of women and children in coal-mines was the result of an 'extreme refinement of feeling which will ultimately be the ruin of England'.[2] These examples are not intended to cast a favourable light on ourselves. They are useful as particularly blatant stereotypes of something in us all, the instinct to ward off disagreeable facts by adopting a stance of sensible rectitude. Clear signs hedge off the limits of the thinkable and warn us that moderation, sense and reasonableness cease beyond this point. Virtue, we assure ourselves, is in the mean: religion has to do with peace, security, being justified. And beyond the limit there lies insecurity, disturbance and risk – and another justification than that which reposes on the meaning which is our own unregenerate reading of existence, backed up by the *nihil obstat* of a society which, like ourselves, is not yet transformed.

Conclusion

The general burden of what has been said here makes no claim to be, in the narrow sense, 'practical', though deeper considerations are necessary if the more practical ones are really to be the working out of new life in surrender to Christ and openness to reality. We are dealing not with this detail or that of christian living but with the question of what the entire process is ultimately about. In a word, the whole thing comes down to conversion – the painful, joyous, piecemeal process of death and re-birth which will never be complete in this life.

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[1] Lord Melbourne. Cf Cecil ,David, *Lord M* (London, 1954).

[2] *Ladies Magazine* (1843). Cf Laver, James, *Victorian Vista* (London, 1954).

St Augustine, in a famous passage in the *Confessions*, describes a conversion experience which, although completed in a brief space of time and involving the break with sin in its grosser form, stands as a paradigm for the longer and more subtle process:

> I almost began to do it and yet I did it not. Neither yet did I slide back into my former customs, but stood close by and took another breath. And again I endeavoured, and I was even arrived almost near enough to touch and lay hold of it, yet I was not there, niether did I attain to embrace it, but I was suspended between dying to death and living to life.[1]

We live suspended between dying to death and living to life. The important thing is never to delude ourselves into thinking that we have arrived, to take our ideas, our programmes, the changes we effect, for arrival points whilst forgetting that they are also fresh starting-points. Mere reflection, of course, will not diminish the distance that separates us from the horizon. But in knowing where the horizon is lies the very condition of christian striving. 'I have not yet won, but I am still running, trying to capture the prize for which Jesus Christ captured me'.[2]

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[1] Book 8, ch xi.

[2] Phil 3, 12.