TEMPTATIONS AGAINST FAITH

By MICHAEL IVENS

IT WAS ONCE common for the word 'faith' to be accompanied by the definite article. What the catholic professed and upheld, what the apostate renounced and the heretic took arms against was *the* faith. ('This is the faith that I have held and hold, and this is that in which I mean to die'.) It is perfectly legitimate to use the word 'faith' in this way, to mean adherence to the Church and to the *credal* formulas through which God's self-disclosure is mediated to man. To assent to the doctrines – to the 'what' of revelation – is not only to assent to truths, it is to acknowledge the claims on one's being of Truth itself.

Nevertheless, our habit of placing the main emphasis on *the* faith has been unfortunate in many ways. It is a case – one among many – of a tendency to over-emphasize the 'thing' aspect of what are primarily personal relationships with God. Faith in its essence consists in the living, personal response of man to the Father who reveals himself in his Son; it is believing as a way of being. No one of course denies this; but whether our language or even our attitudes reflect what we really hold is another matter.

One result of this emphasis on *the* faith is that temptation against faith has come to refer almost exclusively to those forms in which many christians have never known it. In traditional catholic usage, to be tempted against faith means to have fallen prey to doubts about doctrine (doubts which might extend from specific points of teaching to the existence of God), and to have seriously entertained the possibility of leaving the Church. Of course, it would be unrealistic to deny that doubts and misgivings of this sort are a common form in which temptations against faith assert themselves, and to make light of them would be to disparage the dispensation by which God has revealed himself. To be torn between retaining and renouncing one's beliefs is to enter a crisis whose anguish and possible consequences make it a case apart. Nevertheless, other temptations against faith are not only possible; they belong to the combat of all christian life, including the lives of those whom the very idea of 'lapsing' would appal.

An attempt to survey the forms that these may take would itself require an article. In ages where a more rigorous moral theology held sway, christians were subject to searing temptations against faith in the shape of scrupulosity. Romano Guardini, in his book *The Life of Faith*, has shown that the experience of faith varies according to whether the believer is a man of the heart, a cerebral man, or a man with a passion for order; and that different temperaments are exposed to their own temptations. In this article I want to look at temptations against faith from the standpoint of christian commitment, understanding the term in its ordinary connotation of commitment to action. These assume two complementary forms, which may be defined as the temptation to make commitment an end in itself and the temptation to avoid commitment as far as possible.

At first sight these two tendencies might seem to have little to do with faith at all. To see why they bear closely on the relationship to God which constitutes the essence of faith, it will be helpful to consider three implications of this relationship.

First, faith is decision. It is true that man's decision is preceded by God's decision for man: 'You have not chosen me, I have chosen you'.[1] It is equally true that the decision whereby man accepts to enter the relationship that God offers him is itself a gift. No one can come to the Father unless he is drawn.[2] But our decision, for all that, is truly our own; it is as real, to use a much quoted analogy, as the decision of one human being to accept the love of another. To put it another way, faith is not just hearing the word, it is personal surrender to it.

Secondly, the decision of faith, its 'yes', is directed to a transcendent God whom man cannot, without idolatry, domesticate into a patron deity of his human affairs. To believe is to be receptive to a presence manifest to us, certainly, in the heart of the world, yet completely other than any created thing, any human institution, even if these are the objects of wholehearted commitment. The pharisee refused belief because for him the mosaic tradition, familiar, clear-cut and without mystery, was preferable to the new and mysterious word uttered by God in Christ; so for the christian, the constant temptation against faith is to rest content with the tangible and immediate.

But faith is *man's* creaturely response to God. It therefore possesses

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[1] Jn 15, 16. [2] Cf Jn 6, 65.

the qualities characteristic of a creature who touches the divine transcendence not directly, but through the mediations in which God discloses himself, and whose response to God takes place in the unfolding of time. Because man does not attain directly to the divine transcendence, he needs to take seriously the mediation of finite realities. One consequence of this is that faith requires adherence to the word offered to man in the Church *tangibly*, and in forms accommodated to his understanding.

Yet a full account of faith must include other mediations than those of the Church's teaching. Faith does not operate in a sealed-off 'religious' compartment of life, but in the pattern of situations, responsibilities, decisions and relationships which make up the fabric of every day existence. And because man is called to be faithful in time, the surrender and spontaneity of faith will somehow be embodied not only in his involvement in the world but in the virtues that belong to man's temporality. Man responds to the ever fresh encounter with God in ways that exhibit the qualities of steadfastness, endurance, and long-suffering: qualities so central to man's response to God's unchanging love that it is a necessary anthropomorphism to attribute them to God himself.

The decision of faith, then, reaches beyond the temporal and material in a way that makes commitment to these a possible temptation; and, equally, it involves man in the temporal and material in a way that makes non-commitment an evasion of faith itself.

The temptations of the committed

Religious commitment is a terrifying force; it can literally kill, torture, imprison, reduce to misery. Furthermore, it is the very fervour of commitment that produces such evils. The moderately committed do not persecute. With commitment it is as with love; the sins committed in the name of love derive from really strong love. As C. S. Lewis observes: 'The love which leads to cruel and perjured unions, even to suicide pacts and murder, is not likely to be wandering lust or idle sentiment. It may well be Eros in all its splendour: heart breakingly sincere; ready for every sacrifice except renunciation'.[3] So with religious commitment: even when this is narrow and selfish and patently unchristian, it is always fervent and often obsessively sincere.

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[3] *The Four Loves* (London, 1969), p 100.

It is well to start with the extreme situation, because it makes clear that enthusiasm is not enough. There is a mechanism in the commitment of religious people that left to itself may produce the same sort of results which are so obviously wrong when we see them in other forms of commitment. And if episodes like persecution reveal this mechanism at work to a dramatic degree, the mechanism itself is latent in all religious commitment. The reason is that every commitment of faith supposes a 'what'; and this, if it mediates God's will, may also obscure it. The 'what' may become opaque, cease to mediate the transcendent God, and be sought for itself. It then becomes a possession and serves the same function as other possessions.

The temptations of commitment are therefore inherent in every committed attitude. They are not confined to those who might, rightly or wrongly, be accused of standing lightly to authority and doctrine. They are to be found in the most fundamental commitment of all, the dedication to the Church and to her doctrine of those christians whose view of themselves as champions of orthodoxy is beyond question.

Orthodoxy itself contains temptations against faith because all truth (including doctrinal truth) like any institution (including the Church itself) is liable to become a possession. There is something in all of us of the small boy, for whom knowledge is the power to impress and membership of a good school a source of status. Certainly, there are dangers in applying this analogy too closely to loyalty to the Church, since it is fatally easy to be disdainful towards an imperfect or immature attitude to the Church, to the extent of forgetting that it is better to love her imperfectly than not to love her at all. But it is no less dangerous to overlook the fact that commitment to the Church itself may contain the temptation inherent in every commitment which entails loyalty to an institution and fidelity to a body of formulated principles or doctrines: that is, the temptation to give the body of faith precedence over its soul, to detach the 'what' of faith from the relationship in which its life consists.

We yield to this temptation whenever in our attitudes we allow the Church to loom too large as an institution or establishment, as a means of dividing the world into the outsiders and the insiders, into them and us. We yield to it, again, insofar as we regard the truths of the Church as our possessions. Truth as a possession shields us like four walls and a roof from the uncertainties of the outside world, and helps to confer on life the desirable qualities of cosiness,

comfort and assurance. It provides us, at least if our religion coincides with our profession, with our means of livelihood; we hand it across the retreat-master's desk and get paid in return. Or for the righteous it serves as a weapon to prove other people wrong. One can use one's convictions to hurt and humiliate, and enjoy doing so.

If orthodoxy itself, then, is no guarantee against the temptation to possessiveness, neither is any other form of chosen commitment within the Church. Religious can become possessive about their rule, about all that makes them different from others; they can be obstructively possessive towards their work. Personal relationships are possessive when based on the inability, as the chinese proverb puts it, to forgive the other person his otherness. And perhaps nowhere is the outcome of this sort of possessiveness more tragic than in marriage itself, where refusal to accept others, whether husband, wife or children, in the end destroys the love which is the foundation of marriage and frustrates the development of mature independence in children which is its fruit. Another area of christian commitment that easily slides into possessiveness is commitment to work. The gospel of work into which christianity has sometimes fallen, notably in the nineteenth century, contains more evasion of the gospel than has sometimes been realized; for here particularly – to come back to the analogy of love – we show our readiness for any sacrifice except renunciation. Work is not the least of the idols of our age.

With regard to other committed groups, whether to left or right, political or unworldly, whether concerned with the renewal of the Church or the restructuring of the world, one has to tread carefully. Nothing could be more facile than to stand outside such movements and to sit sagaciously in judgment on them; facile because in our untidy human affairs all real striving exhibits ambivalent features. Nevertheless, it is no service to genuine christian commitment to make light of the temptations. One of these is to prefer one's cause to persons. If it is true that catholic charity has sometimes been one-sidedly personalist, it is no less true that concern for the individual is so testing a commitment that the christian must always be on guard against shirking it. The sad truth of things is bluntly put by Dostoievsky's Ivan Karamazov: 'I have never been able to understand how one can love one's neighbour. To my mind, it is just one's neighbour one can't love, though one might love those at a distance'. Another way in which this sort of commitment feeds our possessiveness is when loyalty to the group and its principles – and commitment requires this – degenerates into the qualities that make ortho-

doxy and institutionalism in the Church at large so unattractive: hatred of the outsider, resistance to change, the undiscrimatingly absolute quality conferred on the group doctrine.

The temptation to non-commitment

It is not disparaging to talk about christian commitment in these terms, because commitment is so integral to the life of faith that the only admissible alternative to the attitudes discussed above is a more genuine commitment. Non-commitment, the attitude that would attempt to lead the life of faith while standing lightly to those intermediate objectives which alone give substance to the response of faith, represents a temptation comparable to that of making commitment an end in itself. As one theologian has put it: 'Commitment is one of the most important contemporary religious concepts, at once in the field of evangelical proclamation and in that of theological definition'.[4]

How far does the commitment of faith extend? Clearly, the christian is committed to the Church. He is equally committed in general terms to the love of his neighbour and to the pursuit of basic christian attitudes in his every day affairs. But all this can be understood in minimal terms. There is a spaciousness about the Church that makes it possible to remain 'in' it (as opposed to leaving it), while successfully avoiding anything that might give consistence and definition to one's life as a worshipper and believer. Christian attitudes remain vaguely humanitarian until they are worked into the relationships, work and responsibilities of daily secular existence. It is the exercise of choice, effort and understanding that makes the difference between the love of man as the attitude of diffused benevolence and the fire of christian charity. This is why the forms of commitment considered above may never be brushed aside as optional extras. Faith would lack intensity were it not embodied in things that the christian freely takes upon himself or freely accepts.

First among these must be cited the two major and lifelong commitments of marriage and religious life. Though, for several reasons, these belong to a category apart, they also serve to illuminate the christian meaning of more contingent commitments. They embody the general christian dedication to the love of God and man in a life style which imposes – as commitment always imposes – the limitations inherent in a set course, and in the definitive relinquish-

[4] McIntyre, John: *On the Love of God* (London, 1967), p. 63.

ment of what might have been. In this they are not only ways of faith for those who embark on them; they stand in the Church as an assurance that the essential limitation of commitment, so far from concluding, actually promotes the surrender and spontaneity of faith.

Other examples of freely chosen commitments include fidelity to one's resolutions or to a self-imposed programme, for instance of prayer. They include specific ways of being committed to the Church. They include involvements which would be without particular spiritual or religious significance were it not that christian life in its entirety unfolds within the embrace of the holy Spirit: commitments such as loyalty to one's friends, or to the cause or group which one has chosen to espouse for generous motives or under the promptings of true insight. The spirit of faith is also embodied in the willingness with which one embraces what is not in itself unavoidable. Thus, when the roman slave is bidden to work not for men but for Christ,[5] the comfort he is being offered is no mere fantasy. He is being assured that his work, which he cannot avoid, is the raw material of another relationship than that between slave and master. His work, undertaken in a christian spirit, actually goes into the forging of the filial relationship between the adopted son and his Father.

Admittedly all this calls for a number of qualifications. General principles about the value of steadfastness in freely chosen commitments do not close the debate on whether the Church could or should adopt a more accommodating stance with regard to particular marriage situations. Nor do they provide the immediate answer to religious, who ask with growing urgency whether the recognition of a past mistake, the weight of an overwhelming burden, or the persistent attraction of another form of commitment do not constitute providential cause to start afresh – as opposed to merely reasonable excuses for doing so. As regards lesser commitments, to look upon the provisional, the experimental, the impermanent or the possibly mistaken as other than what they are, would lead to the steadfastness not of faith but of obstinacy. Most important of all, any discussion of christian commitment must take as read that the christian has access to principles of choice which enable him to make decisions, if not without risk, at least not blindly.

The point, then, is that while one may often need to back-track

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[5] Cf Eph 6, 5–8.

from one's commitments, to do this is only really a virtue in those who know how to give themselves to a person or to a cause – and to do so heart and soul. When all the necessary provisos have been made, it remains true that, in many christian lives, the qualities of decision and perseverance are most manifest in persistent fidelity to past decision, even in the face of boredom, disenchantment and difficulty. It is the glory of such commitment to give substance to faith itself.

The limited, sometimes arbitrary, commitments to persons, to work and to causes, which so easily degenerate into obstacles to faith are far from being obstacles in themselves. On the contrary, they are necessary conditions for the openness of faith, which is openness to God's will as manifest in the situations of human existence. And it is in the precise, defined commitment that one comes to grips with situations in which self is really transcended. Those who meander through life avoid such situations almost by reflex, stepping out of their way since there is no reason to do otherwise. One does not enter the desert unless one is led there. But to follow the path of christian commitment is to be led into the desert, as surely as Christ was led into the desert immediately after receiving his life's mission. And it is there that one undergoes the mysterious tests of faith, without which faith must remain immature. These tests may take the form of private doubts that only faith can surmount, or they may come in the pedestrian and secular shape of a job to be done, a person to be coped with, a responsibility to be shouldered, a decision to be taken. Every married person and every religious knows this; but other commitments, too, if chosen with that discernment that all christian commitment presupposes, leads to the same discovery.

Conclusion

Of the many styles in which faith finds expression none are immune from temptation. Christian style, in almost every instance, is ambivalent, whether as availability, as dogged persistence on the beaten track of tradition, as commitment to fresh insights, or as the sagacious holding to the centre of the road. There is nothing cynical in this conclusion. Its implications are entirely healthy.

On one level, these are obvious, even common-sensical. To be aware of the defectiveness of our faith is to know the need to go on growing in faith, and to realize, too, that we are all helped in this process by the example of others: the support we all derive from

the believing community comes partly from the fact that – mercifully – our strengths and weaknesses do not coincide.

But if growth is considered only on this level, the essential will still be missing. For the remedy to temptations against faith does not consist in simply cultivating those aspects of faith one tends to play down. That we tend to rationalize our temptations by means of over-simplification does not mean that the temptations themselves can be banished by putting in the nuances. This might promote balance of outlook. It would not lead to the ardent, personal, uncompromising quality of faith exhibited by the saints. The awareness that every 'style' of faith has its own inherent defects needs to bring us to a more fundamental truth, that faith and style cannot be simply equiparated. The tendency to equiparate them is perhaps the most subtle way of reifying faith.

To be sure, faith is in 'doing the truth',[6] the truth which is 'in', while also 'beyond' our commitments. But the full implications of this are easily overlooked. To discern this truth in the real demands of life, to purify our style, by slow degrees (and never completely) of the self-deception which vitiates our commitment itself, needs more than techniques and correctives. It needs crucifying honesty (crucifying in the full theological sense of working into our lives the pattern of Christ's death[7]). Faith cannot be shored up by *things*, it can only feed on what it assimilates to itself. And hence all that is indispensable for growth in faith – realism, the acceptance of human limitation, the reference to the Church, the example of others – only promote faith in fact if they are already acts of faith, possessing the quality of prayer at all times, opening us to the realism and truth that come from Light and Truth itself.

[6] Cf Eph 4, 15.

[7] Cf Phil 3, 10.