

THE SEARCH FOR EXPERIENCE

By ERNEST E. LARKIN

THE SEARCH FOR experience is an evident, contemporary fact. On the religious scene it manifests itself in such phenomena as a demand for a meaningful liturgy, interest in charismatic prayer groups, and insistence on participating in decision-making processes in the Church. The reasons for this current thrust are probably to be found in such factors as the pervasive alienation of our times, massive credibility gaps, and the dead weight of outmoded structures. Today's generation wants to cut through the accretions of the centuries and start all over. Young adults especially are rejecting an authoritarian style of religion and life in favour of what they see, feel, and experience.

Their approach to life is existential: there are few absolutes, fewer *a-prioris*. The values are personalist and immediate. Honesty, for example, is more prized than loyalty to the system, a fact which disturbs some older clerics and religious who not only give the benefit of the doubt to the institution but have tended to deify authority. Self-expression and creativity are more important today than conformity and tradition. Openly anti-intellectual in reaction to the long standing neglect of the feelings, this movement eschews abstractions and abhors dichotomies. It prefers to deal with persons and human situations. It prides itself in being hard-headed and down-to-earth, human and secular.

The trend is romantic, at least insofar as it invests a great trust in the individual over against society and in intuitive feeling as opposed to cerebral theorizing. But it is also pragmatic: its test is what works. On both its romantic and pragmatic counts, this philosophy is set on a collision course with cut and dried norms set down by the establishment and with a style of life unconsciously dictated by hyper-active *super-egos*, both of which systems fairly characterize recent Catholic culture. The search for experience, therefore, tends to write off or attack or live in anxious discomfort with the establishment. It suffers the lot of every liberation movement which attempts to provide a new evaluation of the human experience.

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The experiential approach to life, however, is at home with contemporary man. His world is brand new and he suffers few hang-ups from the past. His world is not at all settled; it is in the making. Margaret Mead describes the culture of our era as 'pre-figurative', that is, as one in which the young are more at home and, for the first time in history, one which they know more about than their elders, precisely because they are the natives in the bright new world, whilst their elders are immigrants.

Serious christians share the enthusiasm of contemporary man for the experiential approach, because christianity is experiential. They recognize that adult christians have been kept in a state of infancy, or at best adolescence, for too long. Catholics have been nourished on the pabulum of formulas and patented nostrums, whereas the mature christian lives on the word of God. Christian spirituality begins with the experience of God in Christ Jesus, and until there is real encounter with Christ, until he is a person to us and we are persons to him, we are still on the level of Old Testament religion, the religion of law and ritual. Creeds and codes and rituals have their place. But they are preambles or corollaries, conceptualizations and theologizing about the christian fact rather than the life itself. Neophytes have to be taught how to *live up to* the demands of faith; but they should be led as quickly as possible to *live* the faith. Too often the christian has not arrived at this experience of faith.

Let me emphasize that I am not saying that laws and structure, formulas and discipline have no place in an adult christianity. They will always have a role this side of eternity, precisely because 'utopia' is *ou*-topia (no place) and not just *eu*-topia (the ideal place). We live 'between the times', in the 'not yet' before the parousia and full redemption in Christ. In this period institutions are necessary, but they should serve and not smother persons. Today their role is more secondary than ever, at least if we are contemporary in our thinking. Institutions do not 'experience'; persons do. This is why the approach to christian life in our time must be personalist and person-centred, not only at an advanced point in the spiritual life, say, at the entrance to the illuminative way or 'second conversion', but right away, at the moment of first conversion and surrender to Christ, as is described so frequently in the New Testament.

Vatican II has pointed out the double element in the Church, the outer and the inner, the categorical and the transcendent. The Church, it says, is

both human and divine, visible and yet devoted to contemplation, present in the world and yet not at home in it. She is all these things in such a way that in her the human is directed and subordinated to the divine, the visible likewise to the invisible, action to contemplation and this present world to that city yet to come.¹

The stress on the experiential provides a new insight into the primacy of the inner, contemplative, transcendent dimension of life and thus supplies the impetus to move out of a pedestrian, lifeless, 'ho-hum' style of religion that bores people to death. The christian life is a thrilling adventure, a call out of the living death many people endure into the exuberant life of freedom and love that is thoroughly personal. The christian life is God's answer to man's search for transcendence; it responds to man's desire and hope to live for something bigger than himself, to move out of and beyond the limitations and imprisonment of his own body and psyche. Every man is embarked on that search; most take the road of experiences. This is the road of the empirical rather than the experiential. The two are by no means the same. The empirical is the observable, the tangible and measurable aspect of human life. It is feelings as opposed to prayer, feeling sorry rather than being sorry, kind acts compared to charity, experiences rather than experience. The first member of each of these doublets ideally contains and is a manifestation of the second. But is it not always so. And to confuse the two can be disastrous in religious thinking. For those who fail to make the distinction, a 'meaningful liturgy' has to be a 'happening' every time, deeply moving, imaginatively enriching and emotionally rewarding. This is to ask too much from a daily liturgy. It is to want something approaching a mystical experience wherein there is an immediate touching and sensing of transcendent realities. Empirical experience of this kind is an overflow and a bonus if it is genuine. When it occurs, it is an integral and rewarding part of a religious experience. But it is by no means as important as the experiential experience, which is a depth reality and consists in insight and personal commitment. This experience may be present in the worshipper without any observable sign other than the peace and desire of the person to be there in the presence of the Lord. There may be indeed, as is well known, positive aridity and repugnance on the level of the feelings.

Empirical experiences are ambiguous. The instant mysticism of

¹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2.

the drug culture is a bogus experience of God. So also is 'transcendental meditation' when there is no personal *metanoia*. People today often make an over-facile identification between a human encounter in a sensitivity session and the encounter with God; though it is not to be denied that God can be experienced at such times as an 'afflux of being', to use Marcel's phrase, as Someone present there where two or three are gathered, consciously or not, in Christ's name. Empirical experiences always need to be discerned and evaluated; they are either human symbolizations of an ineffable encounter or they are projections of one's own fantasy. The ultimate test of their religious value is their effect on the person or community in terms of faith, hope and charity. The gospel way of self-transcendence (or to use the more popular modern equivalent, self-fulfilment) is Christ. He is the way, calling men from death to life. Neither an abstraction, a symbol nor a projection of our unconscious, but a living person, he calls other persons to personal commitment to himself. The way he operates in our life, however, is thoroughly incarnational. He calls in manifold human experiences, through people, through his word in the bible, through the sacraments, through events. He offers himself in human experiences.

In the complex reality that is human life, one must guard against over-simplification or unilateral stress. The search for experience thus far exposed seems to underplay the role of sound philosophy and theology and to minimize the heritage of tradition. But the individual's experience is not an isolated function unrelated to the community. Human experience is communal as well as individual. One's own experience is always to be collated with the experience of the community, past and present. In a sense, the individual offers the communally funded human experience only one small 'input', and this is empirical compared with the tradition of the community itself. With due allowance for the prophet, it is the community that measures the individual, not the individual the community. Given the ramifications of 'experience' in the human condition, it is clear that it alone touches the roots of life. An institutional, non-experiential approach to life tends to emasculate life, to neutralize its power and substitute shadow for substance, because it refuses to let people take hold of their own existence and live in touch with the roots of life, which, for the christian, is the Spirit who dwells in God's people.

Kierkegaard defines man in his totality as a body reaching through the whole gamut of reality all the way to God. Man thus includes in

himself history and community and the cosmos itself. No single act expresses him, yet he cannot function at all except through bodily categorical expressions of himself. He can be measured and tested by the scientist, but he is limitless and undefinable person for the theologian. He is flesh and spirit, human and divine. He is all of these things together and none of them by itself. This is why he is by nature both institutional and personal, patterned and free, object and subject. He is not well served by an exclusive attention to only one side of these dyads. That is why we are not suggesting the rejection of institutions in favour of personal autonomy. We are talking about approaches, emphases, stresses. And we are saying, among other things, that the primary antidote for what is deficient or irrelevant (that is, obsolete) in our institutions is personal *metanoia*. *Metanoia* is not enough, but it will lead to individual or community action toward institutional or organizational reforms.

An authoritarian, non-experiential programme of prayers and practices, sacraments and duties of state easily falls into an impersonal, dehumanizing routine. This is the hazard of institutional living. Ideology takes the alienation a step further from real life, because it tries to justify the status quo. Since real life for the christian is always the person of Christ, the erosion that institutional living and ideology can cause in the spiritual life is obvious. Institutional existence easily becomes forms without substance, liturgy without life, adaptation without renewal. Ideology is worse: it tends to become head without heart, doctrine without reality, rectitude without commitment. Evangelical poverty may serve as an example. In the Gospels and Acts it is real life, a beautiful detachment, trust and sharing such as we witness in the primitive Jerusalem community. It becomes institutionalized both there and more evidently in the later monastic forms of renunciation, of private ownership and living out of community goods. Finally, poverty becomes ideological when it is identified with 'dependent use' and legalistic permissions become the essence of its practice. One can see the progressive deterioration of a gospel reality. The renewal effort in the Church today is the attempt to cut through the ideology and so purify the institutions of religious poverty that they are in fact life-giving expressions of trust in God and sharing with one's neighbour.

How will this be accomplished? On the individual level at least, and even on the societal level, since appropriate changes in structures will come out of authentic personal reform, the answer of our

times is personal living. Living on a personal level is to live in a pre-eminently experiential way. It is to begin with life and to grow ever richer in life. You cannot pour new wine into old wine-skins. Reform, therefore, begins from within; life creates order, but order does not create life (Saint-Exupéry). Commitment to Christ and the Church, in whatever life-form a man finds himself, whether in marriage or religion, in the lay or clerical state, must be a personal rather than an institutional matter. It is the only viable way today. It alone seems to be compatible with the constant flux of change going on in Church and world, and it alone offers hope that the world in the making will be the work of the Spirit and not the flesh,² and that individual christians will persevere in fidelity to Christ in spite of the massive changes that are bound to continue to take place in the institutions in which we live.

A brief delineation of some of the qualities that characterize an institutional as opposed to a personal commitment will, it is hoped, justify these grandiose claims. I shall list five contrasting characteristics that describe each way. None of these factors totally excludes its correlative in real life; each of the apparent opposites makes its own contribution to a total existence. But taken together, one side or the other represents a bias in life-style that can be called institutional or personal.

The first quality of an institutional commitment is that it is legal, whereas the personal commitment is moral. An institutional commitment is a contract. The religious institution, for example, says to its candidates: 'If you want to belong to us, here are the obligations and rewards. We guarantee you a way of life that leads to salvation; we will give you work that suits your interest and talents; we promise to take care of you in your old age. Keep this rule and the Church will canonize you'. The moral commitment, on the other hand, is not the internalizing of established forms. It is a covenant of love, based on the recognition and choice of shared meanings and common values existing in a certain community. The candidate observes this community and says: 'I want to be with you. I like your values and your objectives. I trust you enough to commit myself to you'. Such a moral commitment can only be made to persons, to one person in marriage, to a group of persons in religious life. In both cases, moreover, it is ultimately the Person of God who is warranty for the open-ended, complete giving-over of one's life to

² Cf Gal 5, 19-23.

others; he alone is entirely trustworthy and faithful.

Secondly, an institutional commitment is a once-for-all promise. It is the wedding rather than the marriage, the *adsum* of the cleric approaching ordination, the religious profession sealed by vows or oath. Personal commitment, on the other hand, is ongoing and developmental. Persons are defined by their relationships, particularly their inter-personal relationships, all of which have a history. The person, therefore, is a process rather than a fact. An individual is constantly 'becoming a person', or else he is moving in the opposite direction of de-personalization. He is growing or regressing in his relationships to others and to God; his commitment is either deepening or eroding. People who break personal commitments originally founded on real love can invariably look back to small infidelities that escalated into larger infidelities, until finally there was a wholesale rejection of the other person or persons. Commitment to persons and to God is always in flux: it is either increasing or decreasing, according to the ancient adage: 'Not to progress is to regress'.

The third contrasting qualities are a certain coerciveness versus the freedom of the children of God. Institutions survive if contracts are observed and mutual rights and duties safeguarded. The institution protects itself against 'defectors'; it tends to use pressure, to exercise whatever forms of 'conditioning' it deems legitimate and necessary to preserve its existence and its effectiveness; often, as in the recent past, it promotes a fortress mentality and closes itself off from hostile influences. The institution thrives best in a closed society. Personal life, however, is open and free. It is founded on free and conscious choices and grows into greater freedom by renewing and deepening those choices. Freedom flourishes in an open society. Gospel freedom, however, is possible only in the community of faith, where individuals communicate and share with each other deeply enough to provide the ambient of trust and love where each man can truly be free. Community makes personhood possible.

The fourth quality of institutional commitment is constancy; fidelity marks the personal dedication. These two virtues are not the same. Constancy means that a member sticks around, that he honours his original promise, and, whether he has grown or not, he is still on the job to the end. Fidelity demands more. It is like love or friendship that never stands still; it grows or dies. The faithful man ideally is more faithful at the age of sixty than he was at the

age of forty. This is to say that he is holier, more loving, more aware, more free. Fidelity is the pearl of great price in a christian's life. It is the best insurance against inconstancy. At the same time it pre-empt's constancy of an absolute value. Constancy frequently demands a generous measure of the *via crucis*, because unforeseen difficulties often occur. Fidelity to the community, whether married or celibate, always brings the cross, because it is love, and love means death to self in order to live to the beloved. The dark night which many observe today covering the whole Church is a challenge both to constancy and to fidelity, but especially the latter, because it is a challenge to purify the love relationship with Christ that is the heart of christianity.

Perhaps we can sum up all these characteristics in the final two designations which have traditionally described the stages of beginners and advanced in the spiritual life. The institutional commitment is primarily functional. If you do the things you are supposed to do, no one will criticize; you will be a 'good' christian, a 'good' religious or priest. But in the judgment of St Teresa of Avila and the whole christian tradition, you are locked in that middle state, living on a plateau of mediocrity. St Teresa describes this condition in the Third Mansions of her *Interior Castle*. Personal commitment, on the other hand, is not satisfied with merely doing the right things. It looks to a transformation of one's whole being, hence to constant growth in one's life with God. It is ontological and not merely functional, because our being, our personhood, is increased by inter-relationships with others and God. It is by love that we grow into full manhood in Christ Jesus. Open-ended growth is the universal vocation of all christians, a fact that is emphasized explicitly in the call to holiness in Vatican II and affirmed implicitly in the Council's preference for seeing the Church as a community rather than institution.

Here, then, is the challenge for an experiential age. As christians and as men of our times we willingly join the ranks of those who are searching for experience. For the christian it is a search for life which can be implemented most securely in the effort to live on a personal level.