WHAT SHOULD I BE?

By MICHAEL IVENS

To LIVE is to change. To live in Christ is to be changed at the very core of the self, through a progressive assimilation into the pattern of Christ's death and resurrection. The process goes on all the time, in the tangible gains and changes of growing up, the hard slog of the middle years and the deceleration of age. It is a growing up, in the deepest sense, in and through the very vicissitudes of our performance: the stumblings, shocks, set-backs and turning points, which leave us feeling, in our more jaundiced moments, that life has more about it of snakes and ladders than scale of perfection. This growth is God's work in us, for it is his life that brings us to that complete wholeness which ultimately is the only alternative to complete destruction; but it is also a work demanding man's response, a response which must be a matter of 'doing the truth'.[1] Those who heard the summons to new life in the New Testament instinctively knew this. After listening to John the Baptist's sermon on repentance, it was natural for the audience to ask: 'what should we do?'[2] The rich young man knew that in order to inherit eternal life there was something he had to do.[3]

'What should I do?' can be an immediate or a long-term question. As an immediate question, we answer it, often quite spontaneously, in coping with the moods of the moment, our clear commitments, or the needs of our neighbours. The answer may well be trivial and obvious. Yesterday in an aeroplane I found myself obstructing a small girl's view out of the window. I had the grace to suggest that we change places; at that moment, this banality was the required answer to the ever-present question: what should I do? Later on, a stranger helped me to find the right queue at a bus terminal. He again, at least for that moment, knew what he had to do. Before we try to press further, it is necessary to insist on this preliminary level of christian response, if only to ward off a constant temptation to discuss holiness in grandiloquent language which is not only

---

[1] Cf Eph 4, 25, vulgate translation, supported by certain greek manuscripts.
[2] Lk 3, 12, 14. [3] Mk 10, 17.

irrelevant to the sheer ordinariness of so much of our christian experience, but implicitly rather contemptuous of it. Nor should we forget that the demands made upon us by the most pedestrian gestures of life are sometimes disproportionately exacting.

But we cannot stop there. If the long-term question must not obscure the simple urgency of the immediate one, the christian's response cannot be reduced to the level of extempore, atomized good deeds. It is a characteristic of human freedom that we have the power to take our future into our hands, in a real if limited sense. We shape our lives, determine objectives, establish those overall value-patterns without which situations of a more complex sort than the ones I have just described will always find us at a loss. Hence our talk about growth must accomodate the immediate and spontaneous, while at the same time recognizing that life is more than a succession of disjointed moments. There are roads of holiness to be followed, means to be adopted.

For a number of reasons, the further question has taken on a new urgency in recent years. Old patterns have broken down, old bearings have disappeared, rapid changes in the Church and society have raised new questions. Two factors in particular might be singled out. First, the unquestionable, if localized, spiritual resurgence in the Church, usually assuming markedly communitarian forms. (A notable sign of this resurgence is the rapid spread of so-called Catholic Pentecostalism.) Secondly, we are witnessing today a new emphasis on the Church's commitment to the world, the opening up of a range of values and responsibilities to which the ordinary christian in the past managed to stand fairly lightly without losing his peace of conscience. These correspond, of course, to the dominant themes of the vigorous and refreshing programme of lay spirituality set forth in the Decree on the Lay Apostolate and the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. The christian is called both to be holy and courageously open to the world. Moreover the two qualities go together. Christian life is a 'living synthesis' of religious and secular values.[4]

But for the ordinary christian who tries to keep abreast of what is happening and being said in the Church, this can make for a certain confusion. The language is magnificent, yet it leaves him feeling that the means of holiness, far from being brought into focus, have become more obscure than they used to be. For one thing,

---

[4] *Gaudium et Spes*, 43.

there are all the appearances in the Church of a minor civil war between those who talk the language of 'spirituality' and those who talk the language of 'commitment'. Each side, to be sure, lays stress upon the same first principles: conversion, surrender to the Spirit, entry into the paschal mystery, love of the brethren. But when it comes to applying these truths to christian life and experience, each side becomes more concerned with differences than synthesis. The emphasis placed by the one side on inner religious experience, on the christian's conscious personal relationship with a God loved for himself, looks at first sight like a different version of christianity from the programme offered by the other side, with its insistence on the need to be a man for others, completely given over to the demands of the secular city. It is not immediately evident that the fear of slipping into 'humanism' or the 'purely natural', and the urgent desire to break loose from the cosy privacy of a religious world view, are altogether reconcilable attitudes. In this state of affairs – and it will not be resolved overnight, for behind the obvious differences of language and tone there probably lie deeper divergencies of theological emphasis, religious attitude and personal experience – it is natural for the man in the middle to feel that clash rather than synthesis is the order of the day.

But there is another consideration. If the two sides are in opposition on most points, each embodies an approach to christian holiness which the ordinary christian may well dismiss at first sight as lying completely beyond his reach. As a man of the world he is dominated – or so he feels – by tube trains, the desk and his family; as a man of the Church, his existence centres around a single parish community, with its strengths and limitations. In the past, he lived by a demanding but feasible ideal: to work out his salvation in the faithful performance of his religious duties and the duties of his state of life. It was a feasible ideal because the religious duties fell within a programme which every parish church made available, and in his other duties he was largely allowed to accept the inequalities and injustices of the world as he found them. And as he listens today to the different advocates of contemporary christian commitment, it becomes apparent that lay spirituality has undergone a shift of emphasis. From the sort of model with whom the man in the pew could readily identify, the centre of the stage is held now by the pace-setters. The spirituality that gets talked and written about is the spirituality which blossoms out of prayer-groups, informal liturgies, and the sharing of spiritual experience in

close-knit communities. Christian commitment to the world is commended in terms of far-reaching involvement, readiness to meet the world's evil head-on, and to work somehow to bring about a more truly human society. The problem here is not so much with the validity of these models, as with the question of what on earth the ordinary christian is in a position to do, even if he does accept them.

This state of affairs is exposed to the dangerous consequence that the truly committed, truly contemporary christian comes to be seen as a member of an élite. Neither the ways of life nor the in-fighting of that élite closely concern the ordinary christian. He, meantime, is left with the remnants of an old-fashioned spirituality on which less and less he finds anything meaningful being either preached or written. The men with one talent are in danger of becoming the Church's new poor.

Christian realism

It may be well to approach the problem by looking at a word which recurs frequently when discussion turns on the practical implications of christian values. This word is realism. Realism, of course, is the most dangerously ambiguous of words, serving all too frequently to confer an air of plausibility upon sharp practice, double dealing, rank injustice, and, in the religious sphere, a dilution of the radical demands of the gospel. But realism, the acceptance of the actual situation with all its limitations, is equally the hall-mark of an authentic christian spirituality. The possibilities open to us at any moment of our lives are restricted, often severely, by our age, our work, our endownents, our opportunities, and indeed by the personal blockages and hang-ups with which life has saddled us. 'Doing the truth' is always the art of the possible. It is no christian quality to take refuge from the exigence and discipline of the possible in the never-never land of the unattainable.

This much might seem only to endorse the distinction between the active, effective few and the passive masses. Taken into the context of belief, however, words acquire new ranges of meaning. The believer's estimate of the possible contains nothing of the complacency and narrowing of horizons characteristic of pragmatism as a way of life. One difference is that the christian realist knows that his possibilities are those of a pilgrim, with no stopping place short of the eschatological kingdom. He believes that in the here and now there is always discernible the ever-present word of

God, summoning us forward to the upward call in Christ Jesus; so that our possible, for all its limitations, is the meeting of our own weakness and the Spirit's power. To set our sights too low is false humility and feeble faith.

Further, he is conscious that every human existence forms part of a pattern of giving and receiving on a scale which in its depth and totality the individual can never perceive, though here and there glimpses may come our way. Our fulfilment lies in transcending ourselves in involvement with others; for better or worse, what we are and do is never our private affair. At the root of christian realism, therefore, lies the awareneness that our decisions, our nudgings forward, the quality of our relationships, even the outcome of those seemingly private conflects within ourselves, all make for a building up or pulling down going far beyond our immediate circle, or the range of our experience (important though the immediate may be). This wider reach of our decisions should be present in our conscious motivation. Otherwise, however emotive our response to John Donne's eminently quotable metaphor, we slip into thinking of ourselves as though we *were* islands, and grow increasingly insular – unrealistically indifferent to the world at large – in our personal values. In particular, only when we become conscious that our own fulfilment cannot be isolated from the struggles of an entire community, itself engaged in a process of growth: only then can we perceive the importance of a form of self-transcendence which becomes crucial in a time of accelerated change. This is the readiness to sow where others will reap, to work, or at least not to obstruct others from working, towards long-term objectives from which only another generation will fully benefit. Prophets and holy men longed to see and hear the things ultimately revealed to Christ's disciples.[5] Yet their lives were not futile and unfulfilled. It was in the very limitations of their place in salvation history, paving the way for the future they were not to see, that they attained their own holiness and full stature.

This sense of the wider reach of our limited possibilities, coupled with the readiness to discover that our possibilities are less limited than we think, is the best corrective to the temptation to put one's single talent into the ground. With the realization that one's talent can and must be traded – traded in the only market which exists, the post-conciliar Church, and the world of the 'seventies – comes

[5] Mt 13, 17.

the discovery that the sort of values put out by the saner protagonists of the various renewal movements in the Church have their bearing on the lives of ordinary christians. The questions both of spiritual renewal and of concern with the world become questions which personally involve not just élite groups but all of us. And it is in being involved that we have to work out our own synthesis of the various inter-related strands of our existence. As for how this works out, it will only be possible here to touch on some the broader implications.

Prayer and community

A common feature of the various movements of contemporary spiritual renewal is the fear that, under the guise of commitment to the world, the modern christian may be trapped into exchanging his spiritual birthright for a mess of humanist pottage. This fear needs to be taken seriously. Christian life is an experience. It consists in its entirety in a conscious response to a God who has graciously given his creature intimate access to himself. But it is equally important to consider this response not in abstract terms, nor even in the concrete practical language of yesterday, but in relation to ordinary life, characterized by a secular environment, this-worldly interests, and very little in the way of privacy – to say nothing of contemplative leisure. If we have the courage to ask what prayer means in this sort of life, we shall find that, far from having diminished the prayer dimension of christianity, we have discovered the imperative need for the modern christian to grow to maturity in prayer. And this in turn will lead to a realistic assessment of the means necessary to promote that growth.

It is a mark of this maturity to have left behind the first stages of the relationship to God, where God is normally thought of as external to ourselves, with the result that the believer seems confronted with the choice of talking to God and thinking about him or else neglecting him in favour of rival claims. The dilemma which arises from this way of conceiving our relationshiop with God is well caught in Teilhard's remark, that 'for nine out of ten practising christians, man's work is on the level of spiritual encumbrance.'[6] If no one questions the need to work, there is a common tendency to assume, nevertheless, that a profound 'spiritual life' is the preserve of those with the leisure to spend long hours a day in

[6] *Le Milieu Divin* (London, 1965).

prayer. Ultimately the dilemma is only soluble in that deeper prayer which becomes co-terminous with life. Prayer on this level is a quality of life, a conscious motivation, a spirit-filled lucidity. This will not mean, of course, that specific prayer moments cease. Indeed, they are likely to become more frequent and spontaneous: the experiences of joy, love, stress or helplessness, indeed any moments of deep awareness, becoming naturally a prayer. But if his experience of God varies from the implicit to the explicit, the diffuse to the concentrated, the mature christian will never think of God as a competitor for his love over against other people. He will not imagine that he is more christian in the 'religious' moments of life, or the times when he is working under the aegis of the Church or acting in explicit accord with the Church's directives. He will know that life is graced in its entirety, and that every decision, every relationship, is the stuff of his relationship with God.

Yet we must guard against the temptation to be facile, to overlook the many factors that complicate this fusion of prayer with the endless variables of human activity: the variety of spirits, not all of them holy, which enter our very commitment; the fact that immediate reality obscures as well as reveals the ultimate Reality at its heart; our tendency to live on the surface of ourselves, shutting off our deeper promptings and questionings. To speak of prayer as a dimension of life, then, presupposes a profound sense of God's reality. Somewhere, somehow, life needs to have brought the christian to encounter God as other than himself, other than creation. Equally, there need to be moments when prayer means gathering ourselves together, making explicit the relationship which undergirds, directs and unifies the entire complex of our other relationships with people and with the world. Certain times need to find us, metaphorically at least, on our knees.

This discovery of God's reality and the focusing of that reality in prayer normally happen within the christian community. The christian community – and this is a truth on which a variety of modern renewal movements are grounded – exists not only to make possible an effective and concerted christian presence in society, but to enable believers to build one another up, to support one another in faith. And a correlation exists between the insistence placed on this today and the growth of unbelief in society at large. We may not agree with the thesis of Daniélou that only a restored christendom could bring about the widespread return of a vigorous faith, but it would be hard to contest his claim that 'it is practically

impossible for any but the militant christian to persevere in a milieu which offers him no support'.[7] It is in a milieu where faith is not only deeply held, but expressed and communicated, that God is found among those gathered in his name, and becomes a reality. The primary function of such a group is, of course, the celebration of the Eucharist. But its aims are further promoted by the experience of prayer in common, and informal sharing (which means rising a little above the modest objectives of drinking beer and playing darts together).

A concern to promote the development of genuine believing and praying communities, then, falls not just to the fortunate few, in a position to enjoy here and now the benefits of prayer groups or effective christian centres like the student chaplaincies at their occasional best. The whole question is too urgent not to concern us all. In many cases, this concern provides an instance of working for the enrichment of another generation than ours, humbly trusting that if we do so, God will show himself to us in those very limitations of our present situation which we are striving to transcend.

In practice, the problem can be tackled on many levels. To begin with, there is the cardinal role of the christian family. There is the need to support and to urge feasible developments within parishes, to encourage whatever experiments we find in the direction of setting up groups which really are microscosmic communities of believers. We need, too, to become growingly aware that the world is teeming with believing christians who *as believers* live in utter loneliness, sharing with no one the deepest meaning of their lives, worshipping even at sunday mass among total strangers. The ministry of believers to one another, the upbuilding function of christian relationships, finds no place in their experience, and small wonder that they fall prey to doubt and vacillation. Such people concern us; if we can do nothing else, at least our friendship with other christians needs somehow take account, tactfully and discreetly, of the deepest bond between us. Our wholly justifiable fear of forming christian ghettos, or of discrediting religion by dragging it into the open in situations where its transforming power is most effective when left implicit, needs to be set against the fact that in our belief, as in everything else, it is not good for man to be alone.

But if the whole of christian life is a prayer, we cannot talk or think about the whole of christian life in terms of prayer only.

---

[7] Daniélou, J., S.J.: *Prayer as a Political Problem* (London, 1967), p 14.

Everyday secular existence, as the task-orientated school of spirituality proclaims so tirelessly from the roof-tops, confronts us with its own immediate objectives. These have to be taken seriously for themselves, striven for in an often laborious process. And surrender to the demands of everyday secular existence brings the christian into encounter with Christ. The full reach of our relationships, choices, our power to influence society, is revealed to us in that meeting, from which we also draw the strength to go on pressing forward. This is not an invitation to throw a cloak of grandiose verbiage over things which on the plane of experience remain pedestrian, routine, even shallow. But it does mean that the christian cannot rest content with the singularly uninspiring spirituality implicit in the injunction to 'perform faithfully the duties of his state in life'.[8] This must give way to the more vigorous conviction that somehow, under providence, the surrender to life will bring the christian to the actual experience of the power of the Spirit, to the point of unambiguous self-transcendence. This basic principle of lay spirituality has been well summed up by Karl Rahner:

> There is no need to affix a particular pious label to these seemingly so secular duties of family and professional life, with their daily bitterness and boredom, and to the civic duties from which no one should try to escape. We need not adorn this reality with pious sighs and complicated theological ideology. Life itself will lead the layman into depths which are actually basic christian situations, whether they are interpreted as such or not, whose darkness is illumined by the light of the gospel and which can be borne only with the help of God's grace.[9]

There is a tendency in some circles to talk as though these situations were confined almost exclusively to direct relationships or to the experience of working to change society. This is too simple, though of course all growth-points – joy, insight, failure, self-acceptance – are growth-points of people who exist with and for others, and whose growth is necessarily the extension of their power to enter into fuller relationships. On the other hand, no one is in a

---

[8] Though deeply significant if properly understood, for example in terms of christian priesthood, the phrase has overtones which savour of the *faute de mieux* approach to lay spirituality. One is reminded too strongly of the definition of laity, as opposed to monks and clergy, given by the medieval canonist, Gratian: 'They are allowed to marry, to till the earth, to pronounce judgment on men's disputes and plead in court, to lay their offerings on the altar, to pay their tithes: and so they can be saved, if they do good and avoid evil'. Cf. Congar, Y., O.P. *Lay People in the Church* (London, 1965), p 11.

[9] Rahner, K.: *Grace and Freedom* (London, 1969).

position to disregard the insistent reminders, urged upon us today from all sides, that the main points of deeper entry into the paschal mystery are provided by the direct, deliberate, willed concern for others, whether in immediate I-thou relationships or in the field of wider social involvement. (And for all the apparent tension between the personalist and the political approaches to christian commitment, both are indispensable.) Just as it is a mark of realistic christian growth to recognize and try to surmount whatever obstructs the element of prayer, so – and equally – christian growth realizes itself in recognizing and striving to overcome whatever impedes the development of relationships.

The first consequence of this should be a growing insight into the facility with which even deeply sincere christians come to terms with the politely reasonable veneer which society is apt to confer upon the crude realities of ostracism and neglect. True, no ready answers can be offered to often agonizing personal dilemmas. Our limits remain – the limitations of our time, resources, strength, commitments. Not every unforeseen irruption into our routine justifies the downing of tools. Perhaps not everyone can be brought into the family home, into contact with our children. But we can and must recognize that the socially approved ways of dealing with the bore, the seriously disturbed, the person who has wronged us, the unwelcome alien, all those whose needs exceed their power to repay (today's successors to the hungry, the prisoners, the naked of the gospels) are subject to higher judgment. To the degree to which that judgment is accepted, christian life takes on a new quality, finds a new principle of growth.

But personalism alone, the parish-pump view of community, is not enough. It is not enough because of factors which, if platitudinous to rehearse, have still to penetrate the fabric of christian attitudes: the shrinking of the world to the electronic village whose major agonies the cathode ray tube in our living-rooms never spares us; the fact that the economic, cultural and social shape of life bears the deep impress of a sinfulness which sets men against each other; the growing realization up and down the world that the way things are is not sacrosanct and that, without being a millenarian, one can entertain the possibility of working purposively towards a more truly human society. Hence the questionings and challenge, the protests peaceful and violent, characteristic of today's world, not least those parts of it where christian opinion is clearly in evidence. Doubtless, the language of those who urge the ordinary

christian to throw his windows open to the world and his energies into the revolution, is often abrasive and immoderate. But what is certain is that the task devolves on every christian – to borrow a key-phrase from Charles Reich's *Greening of America* – to play his own part towards bringing about a new 'consciousness'.

This is not flying in the face of that acceptance of limitation which, as we saw, is of the essence of christian realism. The point is that because of our involvement with the world, what we are and do in a score of ways promotes or impedes the development of that renewed consciousness which is the prerequisite to a renewed society. This holds true of the causes we embrace, the principles we defend in our conversation, the values we communicate to our children, the things we encourage and the things we sneer at, the very thoughts and feelings we allow ourselves to entertain.

It is beyond the scope of this article to offer examples of a more concrete sort, since the working out of the christian's awareness of his wider responsibilites will be as variegated as the opportunities of life. But if he is to meet those responsibilities at all, certain values arising from the situation of the Church and the world today – and hence absent or little in evidence in the popular spirituality of the past – need to be deeply assimilated into christian attitudes, to form part of the very prayer-dimension of life. We need to realize that some degree of openness to questioning and challenge, even when these threaten our security, is one of the ways in which the modern christian finds the cross. In the neuralgic pain of a social conscience we need to recognize our own share in the tension, the 'inward groaning', of a world awaiting its liberation in Christ. Such statements, to be sure, cannot be left completely unqualified. To burden ourselves with problems we cannot cope with at the price of incapacitating ourselves to tackle the ones we can, smacks more of masochistic self-indulgence than of christian openness. Again, the discipline of discernment, of holding fast to the truth as we see it, matters quite as much as the discipline of being amenable to change. But these are not diminishing qualifications. Rather, because they are themselves a matter of the contemporary christian's experience of growth in Christ, they sharpen and direct those other values. In the end, we are brought back to the essential meaning of christian realism, that acceptance of limitation which is the very antithesis of acquiescence.