

# WORK OUT YOUR SALVATION

By MICHAEL NEVIN

**W**HEN I WAS ASKED to write this article, the general subject of it was suggested in the following words:

It is only possible to decide on a feasible objective when you know 'where you're at'. There can be no growth except out of a total awareness of present identity. Only then can one genuinely assess potential and begin to discern about options.

The difficulty with 'presiding over one's growth' is lack of psychological freedom. Choices should always be in the direction of true growth – but we face a whole complex of internal and external pressures which limit the number of options open. What does 'to make a virtue of necessity' mean in the context of choice for growth?

Thus the subject of this article may be summed up simply as the problem of achieving self-knowledge, and the action which should follow upon such an achievement. I want to consider these two questions in the light of what may be described as 'ecstasy'. The reason for choosing such a context is obvious. Wherever I find a christian speaking about his close experience of God I find him describing ecstasy. Wherever I find a human being speaking about his close experience of another human being I find him describing ecstasy. Wherever I find a poet speaking about a deep appreciation of a reality, from a landscape to an event; wherever I find a person re-living or re-creating<sup>1</sup> the experience of an artist or a musician or a writer, I find him describing ecstasy. Ecstasy seems to be the condition of true knowledge wherever it may be found. I cannot believe that self-knowledge is an exception to the rule.

Ecstasy may be described from its semantic root as *a standing outside oneself*. The mystic moves from prayer into rapture, the lover loses himself in the beloved, the poet is entranced by pear blossom or old boots, the artist by a landscape; the concert-goer is absorbed

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<sup>1</sup> See John Ashton's fine article in *The Way*, (April, 1971), 'The Compassionate Heart'; and Eliot's perceptive remark that were Shakespeare to come alive again he would make a poor shakespearean critic.

in the complexity of tunes somersaulting and the intertwinement of various instruments.<sup>2</sup> Each of them forgets himself in the beautiful truth of something or some wonderful one else. Ecstasy describes man at the high point of man, and the highest point of man is when he stands on tiptoe to touch the hem of the divine garment, when his nature is fulfilled by the quasi-formal actuation of the divine life.<sup>3</sup>

And that divine life itself, is it not spoken of by the greek fathers as a *perichoresis*, an intertwinement: as a vine on a tree, as the rose-bush, the rose flower and the scent? Here again is an absorption in each other, an ecstatic going-forth, a series of relationships, but not related as creatures are related, but where the whole of each divine person is exhausted in the description of them as relationship and nothing but relationship. They are not accidental relationships but subsistential relationships. The Father is exhaustively described when he is described as *ad Filium*; the Son as *ad Patrem*; the Spirit is not only *ab utroque*, he is also *ad utrumque*. They are the three ecstasies they experience in one another. And surely here is truth, here is self-knowledge. The Father knows himself in knowing the Son: he conceives himself and speaks the Word: in speaking the Word they breathe out the Spirit of their love.

If man is incomplete, even as a man, unless he is completed by the life of the divine Trinity, that is, if he has a *natural desire* for the life that is God,<sup>4</sup> it is not unexpected that we find ourselves at our human best when we function in the civilization of art or the relationship of love, for both are ecstatic.

How strange it should be if man were to achieve self-knowledge only in that self-forgetfulness that is ecstasy and absorption in another. Can this be the way to psychological health, to spiritual development?

At this stage it would not be out of place to remind you of C. S. Lewis's personal discovery which led to conversion. He found that he only achieved the worthwhile things that belong to humanity,

<sup>2</sup> E. M. Forster's novel, *Howard's End*, describes in chapter 5 a concert where Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is being played. Helen Schlegel is 'enwrapped' in the music, while Tibby, her brother, at the very moment that she is terrified by the panic and emptiness, is able to raise his finger quite coolly to indicate the beginning of the transitional passage on the drums. Tibby is profoundly versed in counterpoint.

<sup>3</sup> See Maurice de la Taille, 'Actuation Créée par Acte Incréé', in *Recherches de Science Religieuse* (1928), pp 253-68; and Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol 1, ch. 10, for the intricate doctrine of quasi-formal actuation.

<sup>4</sup> I align myself here totally with Henri de Lubac's defence of the *natural desire* for grace in, for example, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, (London, 1967).

but especially joy,<sup>5</sup> when he no longer sought them. To seek joy for oneself was not to find it, since the necessary ingredient in joy was to have lost oneself in it.

To anyone who has patiently read this far, the temptation has surely arisen to dismiss this article as poetic vapourings. To avoid this was my reason for inserting the old boots. However, such a mode of spiritual writing is no longer fashionable; and to suggest that the images of the Trinity conceived by Augustine or the cappadocians have any relevance to our scientifico-psychologico-sociological prosaicism goes beyond conviction. Let us put the matter another way.

One of the great difficulties that we have in growing up into maturity, psychological and sociological, if not the only difficulty, is, according to a psychotherapist like Carl Rogers,<sup>6</sup> that we are bristling with defence mechanisms. We are so defensive that we cannot allow other people, let alone God, to get anywhere near us. 'Well', you may say, 'What *is* a defence mechanism?' Supposing I were to reply: 'Of course I shall have to describe it as simply as possible, since I cannot expect any reader of a slushy spiritual magazine like *The Way* to have any professional knowledge or expert study of an intricate subject like psychotherapy. I shall do my best to communicate to the ignorant . . .'

Having read those last two sentences, supposing I had really meant them, what reader would give a fair hearing to what I have to say in the rest of this article? Yet I might have something to say which is of truth and relevance to your happiness. To dull your hearing because I have been extremely impertinent is to have closed up under attack. The defence mechanisms would be bristling. *And we do this all the time.* Unfortunately it is not only when we are under real attack that we close ranks against things, events and people which threaten us. We do it even when the slights are fancied, or the insults unmeant, or the situation pacific. Each of us, and this writer must include his paranoiac self, remains closed to what is other than ourselves, and even when we open up, it is only half-way: and thus we do not achieve ecstasy. It may be seen that the two questions posed at the beginning are really the same question. If to achieve self-knowledge is to achieve ecstasy, a standing outside the defences of the ego, a seed falling into alien ground and *dying*

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<sup>5</sup> See *Surprised by Joy* (London, 1955).

<sup>6</sup> See *Client-centered Therapy* (New York, 1963).

(Christ's abrasive image); and if the achievement of ecstasy is to grow closer to God, then growth in self-*knowledge* will be the *action* of maturation and the release from cramping pressures both external and internal. If one had to describe neurosis in a phrase, one could certainly say that a neurotic is someone who cannot relate. On my understanding, a neurotic would be someone who did not therefore know himself.

Let me try to say again what I have been meaning in a new context. Again I am afraid it is a rather unfashionable one. Let me put ecstasy into the context of the sacrament of penance. Whenever I reflect upon this sacrament, the thought occurs that, although a sacrament is supposed to be the finest expression on the human level of what it ignifies (thus the eucharist is eating at its most perfect), penance, which is about reconciliation and relationship, is so often either boring or ineffective. The school of thought which says it is boring is, I suspect, being insincere. Those who call it unpleasant are surely more truthful. For me penance is thoroughly unpleasant, since it is the great weapon against the self. But, and here is where we go wrong, we do not use it in this way. The Church has always encouraged self-examination, analysis of conscience, particularly in regard to this sacrament, and yet how cramping this all sounds. We want to breathe a larger air, to get away from ourselves: in short to share in ecstasy. And this instinct is surely right. But how do we reconcile the paradox? On the one hand we are urged to turn inwards, and on the other we are told that egoism, self-centredness, is the basic crime of man. Here, as elsewhere in the spiritual and human life, a principle is at stake. So often we reject an important truth, an obvious truth about human nature, in order to safeguard an authoritative teaching on the part of the Church, or in this case an authoritative tradition. It is far better, and this holds for theology in general, to hold on to what we know, even if it *seems* to clash with doctrine, and to try to *reconcile* it with the teaching of the Church. In this way, or I at least have found it so, there appears the rich, if unclear complexity (to use von Hügel's phrase)<sup>7</sup> that is characteristic of truth.

The problem then is simply expressible as a tension between the effort to move away from self, and the tradition of self-scrutiny that we call examination of conscience. In attempting to reconcile these

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<sup>7</sup> See H. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption*, (London, 1952), p 101; and Gregory Palamas, *Theophanes*, PG 150, 930 D.

two movements, I believe we shall find the answer to the puzzle that so many encounter in this area. Why do I go so often to confession and yet never seem to improve?

Let us suppose an imaginary penitent. A man has struck his wife in anger. He has used the name of God frivolously three times. He has missed Mass once because he was ill. He enters the church to make his confession. His first thought is to wonder what the priest is going to say about his striking his wife, since he has confessed misuse of God's name on other occasions without causing remark, and he does not worry too much about missing Mass – he was after all unwell: but he likes to confess this breach of the law anyway since it is better to be on the safe side. But striking his wife! This is something he has never done before; and, *as a human being*, quite apart from Church or God, he feels rather shocked at his own action.

He looks along the row of confessionals and sees that two priests have put their names upon the doors. One, he sees, is the old sleepy priest who never says much and lets his penitents go with just a grunt and a phrase. This is the one he chooses. He enters and makes his confession. 'I have used the name of the Lord in vain three times, struck my wife, and missed Mass last Sunday'. The central transgression is as hidden and as unnoticed as the ham in a railway sandwich. The priest asks whether there was any reason for missing Mass. The man replies that he was unwell and, to his great relief, he is dismissed with three hail Marys and a formula of absolution. He goes back to the bench, makes his prayer, resolves to do better and goes home – to quarrel with his wife over the price of a spring outfit. A few years of similar confessions leave him with an uneasy sense that the whole process is rather meaningless; but he still continues the practice, *just in case*.

The point I wish to make here is that the penitent in question, and I have made the situation a little extreme for the purpose of making a point, is going through a process where the centre of attention and value is himself. How different is the finest example of self-examination that we find in scripture. In the second book of Samuel, we are told the story of David and Uriah. Uriah is married to a woman called Bathsheba; and while he is abroad fighting in David's army, David seduces Uriah's wife and she becomes pregnant. David therefore sends for Uriah in the hope that while he is on leave he will sleep with his wife and believe that David's baby is his own. But even though David plies him with drink, Uriah refuses to sleep comfortably at home while his comrades are living rough

at the front. So David sends a message through the hands of Uriah, telling the general to see to it that Uriah is killed in battle. Uriah dies and David adds Bathsheba to his household.

Now if David had then gone to confession in the way outlined above, I have no doubt that he would have admitted that he was guilty of a grave sin. But I have also no doubt that he would have thought that Uriah had been a bit of a prig and indeed had been partly to blame for the situation which had arisen and forced his hand. Indeed I once heard a bishop express himself rather forcibly along these lines. Perhaps he would have chosen his confessor carefully, and sandwiched the sin between other more respectable transgressions, in order to unfocus the confessor's aim. I do not believe that this is being unfair to David, since it required great delicacy on the part of the prophet Nathan to make David see the enormity of his crime and thus achieve *self-knowledge*. Nathan tells David the story, justly famous, of two men, one rich and the other poor. The poor man had only one possession, a lamb which his children loved as a pet. The rich man, despite owning many flocks and much cattle, had taken the lamb by force to make a meal for a visiting friend.

David listens to the story and becomes enormously angry, jumps to his feet and cries out that the rich man deserves to die. But Nathan said to David, 'You are the man'.

The point here is a subtle one, despite its primitive context. It is rare for a penitent, upon examining his conscience, to grow enormously angry at himself and jump to his feet in the middle of a church, crying that he deserves to die. The reason for this is evident. A penitent examines his conscience by centring his attention upon himself, and thus he cannot see himself clearly. David made the perfect examination of conscience by centring his attention upon someone else – the man he had wronged. David became relational, other-centred and, in the broad sense in which I have used the word, ecstatic. If David had become aware, early on in Nathan's story, that it was he who was the subject of it, the chances are that the prophet would not have left the palace alive. But it was because David did not enter into the picture until it was finished that he was able to make a correct assessment of his action; and this, not only on the rational level, but also on the level of values, a level which must not exclude emotion.

We can now begin to see that ecstasy does not exclude introspection. Introspection and self-analysis are not self-attention. One

can become absorbed in the intricate workings of one's own mind and conscience and motives, without necessarily adverting the whole time to the fact that it is *my* mind, *my* conscience, *my* motives. The examination of conscience is not contrary to ecstasy; rather it is only by growing in ecstasy that the examination of conscience becomes a truly effective instrument of growth. (I do not say *spiritual* growth, since this begs an important question.)

Let us return to our penitent in order to make this point clearer. It is a different man who enters the church who enters it 'ecstatically'. His first thought is not for himself but for his wife. As David had been *wholly absorbed* in the malice of the rich man and the plight of the poor family, so he can *feel* against the first and with the second. Coleridge's suspension of disbelief, which is required when a fictional story is to be told, is perhaps better described as a suspension of self-awareness, at least of oneself as the object or partial object of one's attention. See how close this is to Lewis's notion: the self, while remaining the subject of the activity of attention and feeling, *goes out* to and identifies with the world and people around. And this becoming a subject is to become both more human and nearer to the trinitarian life of ecstatic relationship. Now our penitent may do either of two things (at least a logical distinction may be made between two processes, though in real life elements of both may enter in). He may either examine how he himself has acted in the light of certain external rules of conduct, and come to the rational conclusion that he has erred in one or more ways. Or he may begin by thinking about his wife and about the injustice of his treatment of her. By such activity he may come to identify with her and, like David, *feel* sorry, sorry for her and not sorry for himself. The first activity is an intellectual, almost mechanical process; whereas the second is a divine and therefore a human process.

Clearly we are here noting the connection between what I have been saying and the tension between law and gospel which saint Paul wrote so much about, and which indeed Christ himself made a central point of his teaching. If it is true that the real test of sorrow is that a person purposes and succeeds in his purpose of not doing the same thing again and surely this is the real test (as it is certainly the difficulty people experience in their attempt to conquer sin: mere acts of the will, however often repeated, not seldom prove velleities), amendment will be achieved more effectively by this ecstatic approach than by the other. To see God as some arbitrary legislator, choosing certain laws to be obeyed as a test leading to a

reward which has no intrinsic connection with the behaviour according to that law, a salvational obstacle race in a celestial fair-ground through barrels to an apple: all this bears little resemblance to either a human or a divine activity. Repeated acts of the will in such a context may have little success, but repeated acts of loving sorrow, a continued schooling of the emotions and the sensitivity, a continued effort to put oneself into another's skin, create a certain kind of person, the kind of person who would be able to live in the triune life of total relationship. In this way heaven becomes the last step along a road which has already been taken in this world; just as hell becomes the last step along another road, and not just an arbitrary punishment for getting stuck in a barrel.

If we are going to work out our salvation, to grow as human beings, we are going to need grace with a desperate necessity. Grace, which is the divine life communicated to men, has the effect of making its recipient more human. The man who practises the ecstatic way of examining his conscience, and *feels* sorry, is schooling his emotions and his sensitivity to act consistently in a human fashion. And it should be noted that a strong will is not something that one possesses like strong muscles, as Lindworsky teaches,<sup>8</sup> but depends on the force of that which attracts the will, the force of motivation. Attraction is not merely an intellectual exercise but an emotive one. This holds true even in the case of intellectual development. A man who works hard at mathematics or writing articles may do so either for the *delight* he discovers in maths or writing or from a *desire* for something outside the sphere of science or literature – money, fame, influence and so on. But the great mathematician, certainly the original one, is the man who thinks for its own sake. When Dr Johnson said that no-one but a blockhead wrote for anything other than money, and so many foolish people believed him, they forgot Dante's *Commedia*, Shakespeare's sonnets, Smart and his piece of coal, Hopkins, and a whole host of exceptions. Selfless ecstasy is the quintessential element around which the diamond grows.

Am I then saying that we work out our salvation merely by maturing as altruistic human beings: getting absorbed in games and literature, science, the world and people at the expense of self-centredness? Surely there are wrong ecstasies and damaging absorptions, just as there are mysticisms induced by drugs or mania.

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<sup>8</sup> J. Lindworsky, *The Psychology of Asceticism*, (London, 1936).



Let me recall an important sentence of C. S. Lewis: 'I shouldn't be at all disturbed if it could be shown that a diabolical mysticism or drugs produced experiences indistinguishable (by introspection) from those of the great christian mystics. Departures are all alike: it is the landfall that crowns the voyage'.<sup>9</sup> The object of one's ecstasy *is* all important. As christian men and women we know that we are fully human only when we become totally one with Christ who is the Son of God; and that therefore our absorption finally must be an absorption in the Father, the most real of all realities, the cause of creation and the origin even of the Son and of the Spirit, and that it is around such an ultimate absorption that all our ecstasies must dance. What I want to say briefly, since we must end here, is that we can only be truly absorbed in the real. Our first step, then, in working out our salvation, is to learn to shift our centre away from self. It may be that along the way we will go chasing shadows and ending in deserts, but if we remain true to ecstasy we will come one day to a wide water where trumpets are sounding on the other side. After all, it is better that we should move, even in a wrong direction, than that we should not move at all. As John reminds us: 'So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth'.

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<sup>9</sup> *Letters to Malcolm* (London, 1966), p 68.