

THE QUALITY OF LIFE: TWENTY YEARS LATER

By JOHN DALRYMPLE

IT is twenty years since I was a seminarian. When I analyse the difference between the seminarian I was of the 1950's and the priest I am of the 1970's, an immediate question arises. How much is the difference I detect personal and intrinsic to the development of me as an individual, and how much is it extrinsic to me and due to the enormous developments that have been taking place in the Church during this time? Perhaps the question is a futile one, since I cannot in fact disentangle in myself the strand of Church development from the strand of personal development. The changes have taken place in *me*, belong to me; and therefore the question of whether they would have taken place if Pope John had not released the energies of the *aggiornamento* in the Church since I was a seminarian is purely theoretical. The fact is that some development has taken place and before examining it in this article, it is only sensible to record that I am aware of the ecclesial factors affecting the development, even though this is an article about the personal factors. Clearly this has to be said by anybody who belongs to the generation of priests who were seminarians and young priests in the days of Pius XII, and have worked through the reigns of John XXIII and Paul VI.

When I was a seminarian what made me tick was prayer. I was introduced to it and greatly helped all along by men who practised contemplative prayer in the world. They fired me to imitate them and helped me to understand the developments that were taking place in my prayer life. All this took place in the seminary, but without any help from my mentors within the seminary. A secular priest and a married layman from outside helped me. They both were in the habit of praying for two or three hours a day, and soon I was doing it too. It was my secret life, and far more real and exciting to me than the official regime of the seminary, which was a mixture of counter-reformation order and Glasgow celtic enthusiasm, both of which I respected but did not find congenial. What mattered for me was my inner ardour for contemplative prayer: it gradually be-

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came the criterion for judging all the other factors in my life: theological studies, community life, the history of the Church. It was this personal, secretly cultivated prayer which made me tick. Everything else in my training I brashly regarded as secondary.

I regarded my theological studies as an exercise of the spiritual life. Four lectures one after the other every morning at the Gregorian University, in latin, on top of a jejune roman breakfast were a considerable ascetic discipline. Consequently they were a challenge. Looking back, I can see that I saw very little more in them than that. I did not expect them to give me ideas to live by or a critique of the world I lived in. I looked to my personal 'spiritual' reading for that: John of the Cross, the English Mystics, Garrigou Lagrange. *They* gave food for thought and a programme for action. The scholasticism of the 'Greg' did not. I duly memorized it for the exams, but it passed me by as an introduction to knowledge of God and Jesus. I do not think I was alone in this. My fellow-students likewise failed to draw inspiration for living from their theological studies. It was not wholly our fault.

A third, most striking thing about my attitude to life as a seminarian was my ambivalence towards the community I lived in. I welcomed it and tried to play my part in it. I loved it, and made many friends at college who are still my friends. But I also feared the community as a temptation. Too much familiarity, too much *enjoyment*, might detract from my life of prayer. Prayer to me was an exercise of solitude. Alone with God I grew and prospered. Was friendship not one of the factors which might stunt this growth? I despised too much conviviality among my fellow students. I copied this sentence from the early Thomas Merton into my commonplace book, a few months before I was ordained: 'Every man who comes into my life is sent there by God to remind me more that I belong to God and must be a solitary on earth'. This internal ambivalence towards human company was reflected in the rules of the seminary, which insisted on community living but effectively prevented intimacy between students by not allowing them ever to be in a pair alone. It was fatally easy to conform to that if one was shy.

Finally, there was my attitude to the people all round me outside the seminary. I knew they existed and was delighted by their vagaries. But quite simply I ignored them. For seven years we seminarians managed to remain as tourists in Rome. A few years later I was a curate in a city in Scotland, and became intensely involved in the social problems of a slum area. I walked the streets and visited the

homes; I sat with the families through their troubles. But as a seminarian I walked daily through poor streets, and never knew or entered the home of anyone who lived in those streets. (If you kept the rules of the college you were not normally out of the house after four o'clock in the afternoon.) All this time I was conducting an inner journey of discovery in the realm of prayer. Prayer for me was reality far more than anything else. People outside the college were not real enough even to be a threat to my life of prayer.

Ten years later my spiritual attitudes had changed. So far from being a mere background to my personal pursuit of sanctity, the people all round had become part of the pursuit. I could not ignore them. I did not wish to. I knew that they were my brothers and sisters in Christ, and that if salvation meant anything, and my priesthood meant anything, it meant living with them, helping and being helped by them. Spiritual life, therefore, meant getting involved in men and women, sharing sufferings and joys, hopes and disappointments with them. People were not background to personal spirituality but foreground, the stuff of daily life lived together trying to do God's will. There was no question of their being a temptation against a life lived truly spiritually. Rather they were the means of doing that very thing. This applied both to the people with whom I lived and worked as a community, and those outside my living circle. Walking through the streets of any town I found myself wondering where people lived, what sort of work they did, what schools the children went to, what sort of houses they lived in, how the immigrants fitted into the district, what were the big issues and particular problems of the area. It was no longer possible to be a tourist in any city. Once you have got involved in one community you are sensitive to community everywhere. Ten years after being a seminarian, then, people were as real to me as the private pursuits of my life. I did not want to withdraw but to become involved in every crowd I met, however shy I might feel about the initial contacts.

My attitude to theology, too, was changing as theology itself changed. I now found insights and inspiration for my life in theological works. I realised that theology was all about the life I was trying to live in this world. The theology of grace, for instance, was not an esoteric subject for experts who could understand distinctions like that between 'sufficient and efficacious grace' and 'merely sufficient grace'. It was a study of the marvellous presence of divine power in our private and public moments, Christ our brother alongside us as we relate to each other and try to do God's will. In that light it was

worth studying, because it had much to say about day-to-day living. Books on the Church turned out to be books on the world from a specially interesting point of view. Above all the Trinity came alive for me. It came alive because I realised that it made God dynamic, relational, open, expanding, inviting, sharing, somehow very close to us all ('We will come to you and dwell within you'), and not the remote and slightly repellent mystery I had always found it before. The Trinity is a mystery, but a mystery which gives the clue to life in this world, because it makes the centre of the universe Love as well as Being. All this meant that theology ceased to be a dry exercise of necessary learning and became the subject I was most interested to read and talk about, because it provided a critique of the modern world and clarified my attempts to live in it. My spiritual reading was now largely doctrinal and scriptural and only occasionally 'spiritual'. I should also add that novels and poetry became spiritual reading for me at this time. They too gave insights into that mystery at the heart of the world which at first sight looks completely human, but which the christian discovers to be divine as well.

What happened to contemplative prayer during this time? Was it still what made me tick most, or had it been dissipated by the turning outwards to people and to theology? Were the fears of my seminary days that too much interest in the world would bankrupt my spiritual reserves justified? The theoretical answer to this is that they would not, since the God a christian serves is to be found in the world he made. But what about the practice? In fact, practice followed theory. I continued to pray several hours a day and found my newly acquired love of the world an enormous help to prayer. I had got rid of my fears, of being afraid of myself among people, of being afraid of enjoyment, and this expanded my soul. Thus liberated from fear, I was able to open further towards God. I avoided the silliness of thinking that the new discovery of Christ among people meant that he was no longer to be found in prayer. So prayer and involvement marched hand in hand. There was, in fact, a marvellous coalescing of the various elements in christian living into a healthy whole. Involvement in God by prayer was reflected and supported by involvement in God by theology and in his creation. All the elements supported each other in a way that made me, in my thirties, rub my eyes with wonder when I thought of my unintegrated searchings of my twenties. In those days there was mutual suspicion between prayer, study and people. Now it all seemed miraculously one. How long could it last? What would another ten years, taking me

into the forties, produce?

Here we come to the point of this article. The editor of *The Way* asked for an article about the period 'when life reaches a plateau, measurable progress decelerates, and radical conversion seems less likely to happen'. The point of the article is not to tabulate the insights of the twenties and thirties (God in prayer, God in people – both discoveries are exciting) but to try and make sense of the forties, when no new insights seem to come and the old ones look a bit dusty. Travellers in the Sahara who penetrate south of El Golea have to cross the Tademeit Plateau, whose surface is neither soft sand nor scrub, but a dark, nobbly kind of gravel. I once camped a night there and found it most uncomfortable. The forties are rather like that spiritually. A bit dark and gravelly, with no ups and downs.

There is of course plenty of suffering at all periods of the spiritual life. It is part of the process of growth, the way we learn to root out selfishness and turn outwards to people in love. All growth necessitates the self-discipline of being pruned and having dung put round.¹ Those who are not willing to be treated like that do not in fact grow. The chief form this 'pruning' takes in spiritual growth is the experience of disillusion. People experience disillusion in prayer; it no longer gives them the emotional satisfaction it used to give them. They also experience disillusion in working for people; it loses its initial glamour and no longer thrills – it can even look awfully irrelevant. Disillusionment springs up everywhere: over liturgical worship, over guidance from spiritual persons, over the behaviour of ecclesiastics, over devotions and causes that used to be exciting. A great grey fog spreads everywhere. The significance of all this suffering is the way the christian reacts to it. If he gives up, then he has failed the test. But if he perseveres, then through his perseverance he gains new insight into following Christ, and his practice of christianity drops below the surface to a deeper level.

There are innumerable ways of describing the gain achieved by a christian who perseveres in his discipleship through arid times. One way is to say it brings less dependence on religion and more on faith. The beginner meets religion in the form of corporate support, institutional occasions, all the apparatus of traditional christianity. When all this goes arid, but he still perseveres, then his dependence on it grows less and his faith stronger. He finds, to his surprise, that he can manage without the religious props of his earlier approach; in

¹ Cf Lk 13, 6-8.

other words, he emerges from his trials as depending less on the system and more on God. His faith is, to a certain extent, now religionless. Properly understood, this is what Jesus was striving for when he criticized pharisees for depending on all their legal prescriptions while neglecting the inner essence of religion. Jesus told his followers to concentrate on internal dependence on God and not on external dependence, on 'the tradition of men'.² Starting with St Paul, christian prophets have followed Jesus in this demand for an inner response of faith and a rejection of dependence on the works of the law. For most christians, this is not a sudden achievement but the product of perseverance through years of hard going after the first, fine, careless rapture has ceased. The years of hard going are greatly helped by the knowledge that they are productive, being the pruning and the digging around with dung which ensures further growth.

Now all this happens at every stage in the christian development. I am not going to say it begins to happen to people in the forties. On the contrary, this 'night of the senses' occurs early on in spiritual growth. It goes on happening into middle age. Each time it happens, and is responded to generously, it performs the same useful function of weaning from dependence on 'works' and inspiring growth in faith. Perhaps the way to see this constant repetition of a familiar process is to think of a descending spiral. The same circle is described, but each time at deeper level. The night of the senses is not a once for all happening, but an enduring event for all who are serious about Christ: by it we deepen, though we do not appear to move forward.

The reader will be thinking, at this stage, that the trial described above sounds rather cozy and tame. He will, I think, be right. Aridity and disillusion are irritating and boring experiences, but they are the experience of adults in all walks of life, and, once understood, contain no terrors. They take on the aspect of a familiar friend, to be missed when absent. One almost gets to be suspicious of prayer which is *not* an exercise in perseverance, or of apostolic work which gives a thrill.

What happens round about the forties is that the coziness disappears. The same trials continue, but their mental environment is changed. They are no longer suffered, as it were in the midst of the family, with reassurances all round that they are spiritual trials.

² Cf Mk 7, 1-23.

They are now suffered *alone*. The reassurances are somehow no longer there. They are replaced by serious doubts that the whole process is a fraud. Faith is threatened – is it really anything more than a psychological illusion? And if faith goes, then hope and love are scarcely possible except as empty notions. Emphatically it is not cozy. One is alone. God just is not there. If God is not there, then the whole apparatus of spiritual explanations about weaning from dependence on religion is hollow theory. There is no reassurance to fall back on to make sense of the emptiness all round. There has been what sociologists call a 'social dislocation'. But it happens on a spiritual plane. The society which is missing is not visible human society, but the society of the angels and saints who bore witness up to now that what was happening was traditional and secure. Behind their absence is the still greater dislocation which one scarcely dares to put into words. What if God were absent? One scarcely dares to voice this doubt to oneself in case by putting it into words one were to make it true. One leaves this last question unasked in case it is answered in the way one fears. (Or hopes?) So one stumbles on in very great uncertainty about everything. Chiefly one is frightened. Camping on this plateau is dark and gravelly.

It would be a mistake to make out that the desolation just described is a permanent state. Usually it comes and goes in phases, and in between remains as a dull pain or can be forgotten. The descending spiral is not regular or predictable. It takes plunges from time to time, and at others levels out. The significant thing, anyway, is not the suffering itself but the christian's reaction to it. Suffering itself is simply an evil, something we should all be wanting to rid the world of. In the christian scheme of things, suffering is only valuable in that it calls forth reactions which lead to development in individuals. When the christian is aware of this, suffering is a growth point. In particular, the suffering we are talking about, the 'dislocation' of middle age, is a growth point for those who are prepared to make it so.

The way this is done is to accept the obvious facts of middle age, that the age of enthusiasm is over, that the roll, the rise, the carol, the creation are things of the past, but at the same time to continue to opt into the world and people. The danger is that of opting out, the danger of *acedia*, of becoming a burnt-out case. It is so easy to grow into the sort of person who is immensely wise about the limitations and fallibility of all things human, someone who persistently concludes that human endeavour is a waste of time, something for

the children who have still to grow up, but not for adults. I suppose nothing annoys youth more than to meet this worldly wise attitude which blocks all action and laughs *sympathetically* at all enthusiasm. At the same time it is subtly alluring for those who are no longer young to assume this mask of wisdom and act the role of being a middle-aged failure. This is, however, a fundamentally anti-christian attitude, more serious a temptation than the full-blooded ones encountered in youth, because it goes against the deeply human and christian drive to become involved in the world. Jesus Christ made involvement in God, men and the world the central challenge of his gospel; it constituted nothing less than the good news itself which was to liberate mankind from sin – the good news that ordinary human endeavour to build a better world is now redeemed and has become the building of the Kingdom of God. The middle-aged christian, then, is not absolved from the effort to join in the spread of Christ's reign among men. He may use his experience and wisdom to temper and guide the enthusiasm of younger people, but he may not opt out of the effort to play a part. He must not hide his failures and misgivings behind the mask of indifference. He must continue to expose himself, though exposure comes less easily now than it used to. The exposure to God in prayer and to men in charity, those discoveries of previous decades, needs to go on, even though seldom now accompanied by the excitement of discovery.

This is where the chilling experience of the apparent loss of faith plays its part. You would think that it was the final blow which knocked the christian out. Add disbelief to middle aged *acedia*, and surely christian faith disappears! Surely all that the middle-aged man needs, with his lack of enthusiasm and consciousness of christian failure, is to be told that christianity is not true, and that lets him out of it all! In my experience the opposite proves to be the case. The experience of disbelief acts as an irritant. It puts me on my guard and stimulates me. I become stubborn and find myself both believing 'against the evidence' and committing myself against my inclinations. The terror of loss of faith acts as a kind of inoculation against its actually happening. The very experience of doubting (though it remains frightening at times) jolts me out of a slippery slide into agnosticism in a way that rational argument would not. I begin to cling to God tenaciously. I even begin to see a 'point' in my doubts. Perhaps this strange God we serve has put them there precisely to jolt me into further relationship with him?

In all this I remain middle-aged. I am involved in the world's

problems, but experience a marked disinclination for 'solutions' to them. Human issues for me get more, not less, complicated as I get immersed in them. There are always so many sides to a problem. Protests and parades and campaigns, that student world of telegrams and anger, at times seem terribly superficial. I often suspect they are organized more to help the organizers than the cause. My involvement with people leads to greater and greater complexity with no obvious solutions to the problems encountered. But simultaneously my relationship with God seems to grow more simple – a question of unadorned faith and trust and love. The praying I started twenty years ago goes on and leads to simplicity. In solitude I face God and he faces me. There are no intermediaries. We are just there, together.

In history I take comfort from the life of Sir Thomas More. In spite of his sophistication he made a stand on a matter of conscience. Sophistication for him did not mean sitting on the fence, seeing every side of a problem and doing nothing. He could act when he had to. But when he did, he acted without banging the big drum or courting publicity. His protest was made quietly in a kind of reticent stubbornness. Nevertheless his action was made decisively, and this was surely because the vertical line of his relationship with God was simple and direct. If we keep that line clear, we too will not get lost in the cat's-cradle of the lines of life in this world. Keeping clear the direct line of intercourse with God, we should be able to keep faith with our consciences and God to the end. This is the only way I know to get across that plateau.