HEALING THE DIVIDED SELF

By MICHAEL IVENS

PREACHING THE GOOD news to every creature means preaching it to each creature in particular. In every case the recipient of the good news of the gospel is a particular person, a quite unique blend of human possibilities and limitations, open to the future but the heir of his personal history, and bound by the limitations of the present. And to this particular person, the gospel always comes as the good news that a new existence, a saving involvement in the life of Christ, is a here and now possibility.

By and large, pastoral care has always recognized the practical implications of this for teaching, retreat-giving, direction, preaching and counselling. In the people we deal with, we recognize quite distinct situations: the sinner at the threshold of a new life is different from the fledgling contemplative, and he again is different from the mature saint. Nor can children, adolescents, the aged, the sick and the healthy be lumped together in a single category. There has surely never been any theoretical difficulty with Ignatius's principle that the director should take account of the age, health, situation, intelligence and spiritual dispositions of the retreatant.[1] In practice, however, there is one situation to which Ignatius's apparently straightforward principle has always proved embarrassingly difficult to apply.

The divided self

The situation I have in mind might be described as the state of affairs in which the experience of the divided self, in itself an ordinary element of the human condition, assumes out-of-the-ordinary proportions. There are people in whom the disparity between worst and best, between flesh (in the pauline sense) and spirit, between moments of seemingly complete betrayal and moments of genuine docility to the voice and touch of the Spirit, expands, so to speak, upwards and downwards from the mean around which happier

[1] *Spiritual Exercises*, 18.

people seem to lead their undisturbed and unambitious lives. Their best is a more than common best, their worst a more than common worst. An obvious literary example of such a case of the divided self is Graham Greene's whisky priest: unchaste, a drunkard, yet committed to the point of martyrdom. The problem that Greene's novel poses is probably far more prevalent than many find it comfortable to realize. Yet everyone with some experience of counselling and direction must be aware of the large number of deeply christian men and women who appear never to overcome the recurrent insurgence of their own underworld, in the shape of alcoholism, compulsive sexual drives, recurrent and severe depression, or a chronic inability to form relationships. The reader will have no difficulty in supplying further examples from his own experience.

Traditional categories are unhelpful for dealing with such people. They are not exactly sinners, needing to be roused to repentance. They are not among the people of whom 'not much can be expected',[2] since at moments they reach impressive heights. They cannot be assigned – at least not as a matter of course – to the dark night of the soul. Their predicament does not quite square either with the popular picture of the spiritual combat or with the popular idea of spiritual growth. The endless cycle of success and failure in their lives seems to make a mockery of the promise that no one is tested beyond his strength,[3] and growth in any perceptible sense does not seem to occur. Their predicament is well summarized by William James, when he writes of people in whom 'the higher wishes lack just that last acuteness, that touch of explosive intensity, that dynamogenic quality . . . that enables them to burst their shell and quell the lower tendencies for ever'.[4] Yet even to these the gospel comes, and must be preached as good news.

It would be fair to claim that such divided christians are better served today than they were a generation or so back. Fifty years ago, pulpit oratory would have rallied them in the name of will-power and spurred them by fear. Today attitudes have changed. Few priests are unaffected by current developments in spirituality, the theology of grace, and by the far-reaching consequences of the Church's entry into the post-freudian world. In the present ethos of the Church, there is a general measure of agreement about new

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[2] *Ibid.* [3] Cf 1 Cor 10, 13.

[4] James, William: *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London, 1902).

directions in the pastoral care of divided christians. Without disparaging the ideas of sin and forgiveness, we are alive to the need to complement these by the no less biblical concepts of sickness and healing. We appreciate the nature of and need for therapy, whether the therapy of the professional or the ordinary therapy of love and affirmation that every human being requires.

As we shall see, the pastor's exact stance towards psychology is variously interpreted. But no one denies that we cannot begin to help the divided except on the basis that Christ's therapy works in and through our therapeutic relationships with one another. It will also be generally admitted that the first need of the divided is for a self-acceptance founded on the conviction that they are accepted by God, who loves them with their limitations and does not demand the impossible.

So far, so reassuring. But in the idea of self-acceptance lies an implicit dilemma. To accept ourselves is not to settle for ourselves. The man who truly accepts himself acknowledges his commitment to further growth, and hence to change. While he does not distress himself with unreal projects, he gives himself with a will to the achievement of such real possibilities as still remain open to him. So the question arises: which possibilities are real and which are not? Are there shortcomings, even serious ones, which eventually we must come to terms with, tares among our wheat that we must be content to leave alone? Or, once having accepted the recalcitrance of here-and-now resistance, must we still set our sights on eventual victory? The answer clearly depends on how we estimate ourselves and on the quality of help available. And in a religious context these questions are inseparable from others. The help available to us is the grace of Christ, his victory over the corruption of sin and death. How, then, do we look to Christ; how do we expect this grace, this victory, to be offered to us?

To draw upon another biblical image, there are two possible attitudes towards a thorn in the flesh or a persistent personal demon that buffets us.[5] One attitude is resignation: not the passive resignation of the morally and spiritually inert, but the resignation in faith that reaches out again and again to the strength offered us in and through the very handicaps we are asked to bear. The other is the attitude of Paul before his prayer was answered, which is also that of the sick and maimed who brought their needs to Christ in the

[5] 2 Cor 12, 7–9.

gospels, the attitude of intense hope that if we ask for complete healing we shall not be refused. (Both, notice, have scriptural precedents.) Self-acceptance takes on a different meaning in each case. The first will tend to produce a spirituality of patience, humility, endurance. Attention will concentrate on what Bonhoeffer called 'penultimate reality', our contingent, incomplete, time-bound condition that God entered hiddenly in the incarnation.[6] The second will produce a spirituality marked by a lively faith in Christ's limitless power. The focus will be rather on 'ultimate reality', the irruption into the here-and-now of the radically new dimensions of the resurrection.

People who dislike polarization will point out the need to live these spiritualities in synthesis, and that the synthesis will consist in alternations of emphasis from one situation and one individual to another. But synthesis is a subject on which it is notoriously easy to be glib. It is a fact of experience that in their attitude to unwholeness, people tend to incline fairly definitely to one spirituality or the other. Indeed we can broadly distinguish two schools, each with its own theological stance and pastoral approach. I want to call them the 'spirituality of patience' and 'the spirituality of power'. Before we can think usefully about synthesis, we need to be aware of the difference.

The spirituality of patience

Those who take the first view work on the assumption that there is a realm of healing which belongs primarily not to clergymen but to professional therapists, and that in this realm the limitations of therapy are unlikely to be transcended, except by an advance in science. Admittedly, they go on to recognize that the Church has her own role to play in restoring health to the mentally sick, that there is a therapeutic efficacy in confession and meditation and in the proclamation that ultimate being is love. They will agree with the psychologist, Gordon Allport, that 'to have made a treaty of peace with the cosmos might be expected to have profound effects on the ordering of the personality'. But those who stand for a spirituality of patience tend to be cautious about pressing such claims too far. They are acutely conscious of the point where the role of the minister ceases and the psychologist comes into his own. They are punctilious about the duty of 'referral', and disinclined to

[6] Cf Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: *Ethics* (London, 1964).

expect success by spiritual means where therapy has failed. In practice, they assume that for many of their suffering clientele complete healing is unlikely to happen, an assumption reflected in a gentle and patient pastoral approach which tends to avoid confrontation.

In recent years, the spirituality of patience has acquired an explicit theological basis, thanks to a substantial literature devoted to exploring the relationship of psychology to grace. In the first place, there is the crucial distinction between the concepts of wholeness and sanctification. Wholeness might roughly be defined as an ordinary level of freedom from what the plain man – to say nothing of the plain psychologist – recognizes as immature, sick or thwarted. Sanctification has to do with the very life of God in man. The focus of that life is not the psyche, but rather those depths not directly accessible to experience. It is true that in a normal state of affairs, this life produces wholeness, and grows through wholeness towards the complete living man who gives glory to God. But for the spirituality of patience, there is a further question to be asked. How far are we ready to acknowledge that despite grace offered and generously responded to, road-blocks on the way to wholeness – blocks not of the sort perceptible only to the refined sensitivity of the saints, but of crude and all too obvious proportions – may never be completely overcome? The answer depends on how seriously we recognize the recalcitrance of what Fransen calls the 'dense layer of humanity', which grace, working from the interior outwards, must eventually penetrate if wholeness is to be achieved.[7] If the psyche has its own consistency, laws of growth and vulnerability, it might seem that something like a miracle would be needed to reverse the more serious effects of early deprivation, damage inflicted by others, or missed formative experience. And the miracle is always possible. But if the spirituality of patience does not look for too many miracles, it is not because of scepticism but out of respect for the hiddeness and mystery of the kingdom of God in human history.

If we are not to look for psychological miracles, the alternative, as the french jesuit psychologist Beirneart points out, is to recognize that holiness falls into two broad categories. There are the saints to whom we give the name, and there are nameless saints.[8] In the first case, sanctity is normal and whole. In the second, it is real yet defies

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[7] Fransen, Piet: 'Towards a psychology of divine grace', in *Intelligent Theology* (London 1969), vol iii, p 11.

[8] Beirneart, Louis: 'La sanctification, dépend-elle du psychisme?', in *Expérience Chrétienne et Psychologie* (Paris, 1964), p 141.

the map, so that the nameless saints follow a road that twists and turns and doubles back on itself. To them, St Paul's image of a creation groaning inwardly as it waits for a freedom not yet attained has a direct and telling application. In an important essay on the fundamental option, Fransen puts the matter thus:

> The situation of the man who is mentally afflicted may be very sad. It may keep him enclosed in complexes and determinisms which may upset his apparent morality. So long as that man humbly and lovingly performs all that is still in his power and accepts his life humbly from the hands of God, he is truly tending towards sanctity, the only sanctity possible to him in his condition.[9]

We must be careful, of course, not to oversimplify the point these writers are making. The two concepts of holiness are not on a par. The christian norm is 'whole' holiness; only this can we commend, opt for and possibly canonize. The whisky priest is not only an impaired man, he is an impaired saint. While his courage, integrity, selflessness, and faith certainly spell holiness – a holiness that shows up the sham of much conventional clerical *mores* – he is far from the completely fruit-bearing branch, the salt of the earth, or the new creature renewed in mind and free in the Spirit. Should he ever think otherwise and cease to grope towards the unattainable, he would cease to be holy and become simply a sad, compulsive, occasionally reckless alcoholic. To put the point in another way, we may agree with Péguy that 'only the saint knows more about christianity than the sinner'; but always on the condition that the sinner never mistakes himself for a saint. In the attitudes that a genuine spirituality of patience extends towards those who carry more than ordinarily heavy burdens of divided selfhood, all this is presupposed. But on this basis, this spirituality is not afraid to encourage such people to live without too much anxiety, to look to all that is positive in their lives, to believe themselves loved, to recognize that growth takes place precisely in apparent failure. It is characterized by a certain serenity, a steadiness of nerve in the face of what others might deem scandalous. Undoubtedly, it has injected into pastoral care a welcome quality of evangelical gentleness.

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[9] Fransen, *loc. cit.*, p 30.

The spirituality of power

The first spirituality has never, of course, been without its critics. Up to ten years ago, the shots were fired mainly from conservative bastions where an old-fashioned moral theology, a rather simple faith in the freedom of the will and a mistrust of psychology, still held sway. Today's critic starts with the New Testament. He appeals to the lordship of Jesus, to the power manifested in the performance of his mission to heal and exorcize, to the picture of the spirit-filled christian drawn by Paul – a man in whom new life finds embodiment in 'whole' feelings of peace, patience and joy, in self-control, in activity that builds up others, in unclouded judgment and the self-transcendence of genuine love. From the standpoint of the spirituality of power, then, the christian's relationship with Christ is to be seen not merely as capable of providing a supportive role to the psychologist's lead. It is to be seen as therapeutic in itself. And if this is so, we must take seriously the corollorary that christian life and the ministry that promotes and nourishes it are also therapeutic.

But this does not lead to a disparagement of psychology. On the contrary, those who take the therapeutic element in christianity seriously tend to take psychology seriously, drawing upon its insights to deepen their understanding of God's ways with man. Psychology enables us better to understand the ways in which our relationship with Christ corresponds to the needs and processes of the human personality, by meeting our need for love, assuring us of our value, liberating us from our past, challenging our ego defences, tearing up our scripts, committing us to reality. It enables us better to understand why it is that we can become holy only with and through one another, and why it is that the supportive care of a group provides so effective a context for the healing ministry. The spirituality of power is deeply affected by these lessons. (Had it not been for Freud, would we ever have come to see the healing of memories as a form of ministry?) But there is one direction in which the spirituality of power differs, in emphasis at least, from the spirituality of patience. The former tends to regard therapy as therapy, whether it takes place in a faith context or not. For the latter it is in the setting of a true (and this means truly communitarian) life of faith, that the processes that psychology reveals and uses become fully operative.

Where is this spirituality to be found? Since it is sometimes identified exclusively with charismatic renewal, it will be well to

recall that the characteristics mentioned above are detectable in a wide variety of writers who cover an extremely diversified spectrum of interest and cultural background. To confine ourselves to some very recent examples: William Johnston has explored the physical and psychological dimensions of spirituality with particular reference to Zen meditation, and Bernard Tyrell and Rosemary Haughton have undertaken detailed analyses of the christian's relationship with Christ in the light respectively of the existential psychology of Thomas Hora and the transactional analysis of Berne and Harris.[10] These and many others are concerned to re-establish the relationship of holiness to wholeness, and to show how a rightly understood faith-relationship with God is inherently healing. Nevertheless in charismatic renewal we find the most obvious and challenging instance of a spirituality which regards the healing of the mind as the normal and proper outcome of the christian ministry; and it is here that the lineaments of the spirituality of power assume the boldest relief. In charismatic renewal, we find ourselves in a world where the mediating role of the group that prays, listens and cares is of prime importance. It is a world where we discover a growing concern that the spiritual ministry of healing should draw fully on the insights of psychology, in such a way that the minister, while deeply respecting psychology, should not become subservient to it.[11] In charismatic renewal we meet in its boldest form the rejection of the attitude which places psychological illness on the margin – if even there – of the Church's competence.

Today, then, we find the problem of the divided self coloured by a new mood in spirituality. Under various forms this mood is characterized by a basic expectancy: that even for people severely afflicted by the burden of the divided self, not only holiness but wholeness is a real possibility.

[10] Cf Johnston, William: *The Silent Music* (London 1975); Tyrell, Bernard: *Christotherapy* (New York, 1975); Haughton, Rosemary: *The Liberated Heart* (London, 1975).

[11] On the attitude towards psychotherapy common among the more enlightened clergy since the late fifties, Francis MacNutt observes: 'In time, it seemed that I, like many other priests and ministers, was serving mainly as a referral service for other, more professional services, which could better handle the needs of suffering humanity'. He goes on to observe that while many patients gained help in this way, others progressed 'only minimally', and that increasingly psychiatrists were coming to refer patients to priests for spiritual direction. MacNutt's view of mental illness is categorical: 'I was never able to accept the fact that psychological sickness was God's will for a suffering individual; it was destructive, not redemptive'. Cf MacNutt, Francis: *Healing* (Notre Dame, 1974), pp 179–181. On the ministry of inner healing, the reader is referred also to Scanlan M.: *Inner Healing* (Notre Dame, 1974), and Linn, Matthew and Dennis:. *The Healing of Memories* (N. York, 1974).

Is a meeting possible?

Before we consider how these two spiritualities might meet and exchange, there is an important point to be noticed. The reason why people tend to favour the one over the other – especially when the preference is marked by bleak resignation on the one side or heady optimism on the other – usually has to do not so much with force of argument as with the ways people experience God in relation both to themselves and to other people. Some people tend to have experienced God's working in themselves on the pattern of undulating growth rather than crisis. In their dealings with others, they tend to have known a great deal of suffering, but few happy endings. They have spent hundreds of hours sustaining and encouraging lonely, unattractive, depressed and deprived people, helping them to glimpse, however dimly, a face in the darkness or an obscure presence in the storm. The others are no less strangers to suffering, but for them the happy ending, which is also a fresh beginning, is a fact of experience. They have actually seen the desert blossom. They have memories of countless people who have brought their hang-ups, fears and compulsions before Christ in a retreat or prayer-group and found liberation.

Now, experience is crucially important for the discernment of God's ways with man. Experience, reflected upon in the light of the prophetic word of scripture in the Church, is a *locus theologicus*, a place where God discloses his ways to man. But we can always trivialize experience by constricting it to our limitations, rather than trying to transcend the limitations of our experience, to become aware of the highly diversified ways in which people meet God. This openness to experiences other than one's own and to the insights contained in the wider reach of experience is invariably impaired when a spirituality, however sound its basis, becomes closed in on itself. Spiritual pluralism calls for mutual listening. It is only on this basis that the two spiritualities we have been considering will enrich our communication of the gospel to every creature, for each has something important to say that the other is in constant danger of neglecting. A few examples will serve to illustrate the point.

The spirituality of power restores our faith in the dominion of Christ over man in his totality and our expectation that grace should be, in a sense, visible. It counters the stultifying religious formalism that refuses to allow God to intervene decisively in his creation. But its temptation is to wish away the obduracy of penult-

imate reality, to project expectation onto fact. All too readily it focuses on a single band of the diversified spectrum of man's situation before God. The claim that profound and remarkable healings have occurred in abundance, to say nothing of more gradual and unspectacular transformations, is beyond doubt true. But the danger is to take this segment of reality for the whole and to lean upon sweeping generalizations and unsubstantiated claims. So the spirituality of power must pay heed to the questions and insights of the spirituality of patience. It must listen seriously to the suggestion that many deprived, unstable or disordered personalities have not seemed to find in the spirituality of power the cure they have sought and prayed for. It must heed the insistence that the decisive meeting may need to occur again and again, and that meantime the Church must have a message to people for times of disenchantment and the rediscovered failure.

But the gospel of patience, as commonly communicated, also holds lurking dangers. One of the greatest obstacles to any cure is hypochondria; there is a peace in sickness that the confirmed invalid, for all the discomfort, finds preferable to the responsibilities of health. The besetting temptation of the spirituality of patience, even with its attendant humiliation, is to escape into an inert and evasive peace. Under the trappings of religiosity, such peace may not really be very different from what Gertrude von le Fort called the 'terrible peace of the unbeliever'. So the spirituality of power, with its stress on the need to meet Christ, to let something happen, to allow oneself to be winkled out of an insulated selfhood by the encouragement and stimulus of the faith-community, is a necessary check to that cult of the gradual which, in the end, leads to the standstill.

The spirituality of patience and power represent, then, two complementary aspects of the Good News which tells of the love and promise offered by the Father to those oppressed by the recalcitrance of their own inner division. Neither aspect may be exclusive, though either may be the dominant characteristic of a particular pattern of ministry. Preference is in order. But if the christian ministry is to reflect, however inadequately, the amplitude of the gospel, preference alone will need the corrective of a Spirit-given sense of occasion, and a sense, too, of the varieties of the Spirit's work in the Church.

Patience and power

Of the approaches considered above, the first can be pastorally very demanding, for it is not easy to preach a gospel of healing over a long period of time to people who feel that they are getting nowhere. At times when neither care, prayers nor ministry appear to make much difference, it is hard indeed to understand how the same healing power of the Spirit that shows itself on occasion so wonderfully and even dramatically, is still at work, however gradual and hidden the process. In conclusion, then, I want to offer some further observations, necessarily perfunctory, on a basic yet difficult truth: that the divided christian always, however long-drawn out and hopeless his situation seems to be, meets Christ as healer.

The first point to stress is that the climate in which healing occurs is the climate of peace, which is a degree of felt awareness of the relationship in which we are constituted with our Father. The real possibility and dangers of a false peace we have already considered; but it is equally important for the minister of the gospel to be conscious of the power of false anxiety – often proceeding from a harsh and one-sided teaching – to distort the face of Christ for those who in any case must seek him through the miasma of their own inner experience. If peace is not only the outcome of healing but the condition for it, somewhere there is a mean between the false peace of evasion and the deep peace known only to the already healed. We have to help people to find this mean.

But if we hope to talk convincingly about peace to anxious people, we must be careful not to affront their experience by glib pieties. Like the gift of joy, peace has many modes; and as joy is tried in the furnace, so with peace. Like the apostles on the lake, Peter after the miraculous catch of fishes, the disciples after the resurrection, it is natural for us sometimes to become confused and anxious. Indeed there is something rather obviously shallow about the type of religious people who have never known fear, because they have never had to pray from the bottom of the heart for freedom from anxiety and the peace which the world cannot give. But the christian prays for this precisely because he knows that this peace is offered him here and now, in his rawness and keenly-felt unworthiness:

> O Lord, my heart is not lifted up,
> My eyes are not raised too high;
> I do not occupy myself with things
> Too great and too marvellous for me;

> But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
> Like a child quieted at its mother's breast,
> Like a child that is quieted is my soul.[12]

This is not the peace of repression but the peace of a man who knows that he need hide nothing, not even his wounds. Hence, while we need to be aware of the danger of confronting people with truths they may be unable to handle, we do them no service by encouraging them to hide their injuries under layers of balm. When a wounded man comes before Christ in a humble, perhaps slightly saddened peace, he knows healing now. He knows this not so much because he can feel and measure a change in himself, like the abatement of a fever or the return of a lost appetite, but because he is aware of himself as in contact with, touched by, the Healer. And if he will yield to that touch here and now, he can be assured that the process is after all in hand, however slowly it proceeds and however mysterious its effects. In the gospels, admittedly, the power which works so hiddenly in ourselves displays itself in quick, complete and dramatic cures that may fill us with envy. But there is one gospel text which relates the story of a slow and gradual healing which is still going on when the story ends; the parable of the Good Samaritan. And we have still much to learn from the instinct that prompted the patristic age to recognize in the broken and battered man, ourselves; in the compassionate Samaritan, Christ; in the soothing oil, the gift of forgiveness; in the astringent wine, the challenge of judgment; in the journey back to safety, the gentle care of the good shepherd; in the inn, the time of recuperation.[13] So long as we are subject to the mystery of time, hiding from us what will finally be revealed, this healing cycle may need to recur again and again.

But this is not the sum and substance of the good news we have to offer. One of the most fundamental of our needs is to believe in ourselves, a need particularly strong in those who find little basis in themselves for genuine self-confidence. The experience of dividedness consists of knowing in oneself both a 'best' and a 'worst': a treasure house, as someone once put it, as well as a rubbish heap. It is important to dwell upon our treasure because it is the mystery of the kingdom of God already established within us. So we must try to teach the divided christian to become aware of the essentials

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[12] Ps 131.

[13] Cf St Ambrose: *Treaties on St Luke's Gospel*, VII: § 71–87.

of christian experience – that he is the Father's adopted child, the object of God's predilection, a new creation. Paul does not reserve such language for the inner circle of the perfect. He speaks in this way to contentious and passionate people, in whom he knew well that the victory of the Spirit was far from complete. The christian who lovingly knows God must learn to find within the chaos and darkness inside himself the effects of his new life. He must learn to find in his memories the desires of the good spirit, welcomed and bearing fruit in the shape of generosity and self-renouncement, and also – for we must not be afraid of combat imagery – in victory. Wrestlers who are sometimes above and sometimes underneath, observed Walter Hilton, are doing very well. In his moments of generosity to others he must learn to recognize a hint of a deeper goodness in himself than he dares to acknowledge. He must learn to see something of his best self reflected back in the eyes of those who accept him and think well of him. In these ways, he begins to become aware that the bewildering undulations of everyday experience are not the ultimate truth about himself. Recognizing what the healing ministry of Christ has already achieved in his life, he learns to discern more clearly the ways in which the work is still going on, and peacefully and patiently to yield to that work with all his heart.