SANCTIFICATION AND HUMANIZATION

By JAMES WALSH

IT HAS frequently been noticed in the past decade that among the most positive and enlightening of the doctrinal statements of the Second Vatican Council are those on the call of all God's people to holiness. Here, it is said, the Church has finally put paid to the notion, which has persisted over centuries, that there are first and second-class citizens of God's kingdom.[1] We have returned to the teaching of Paul: 'There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all'.[2] One might be forgiven, however, for wondering how this teaching is being communicated, and what precise demands are being made on the faithful at large in order that they may respond to this call. It is not that the traditional criteria of holiness have been 'down-graded' by the Council, as a glance at the relevant texts assure us:

> The followers of Christ are called by God, not according to their accomplishments, but according to his own purpose and grace. They are justified in the Lord Jesus, and through baptism sought in faith they truly become children of God and sharers in the divine nature. In this way they are really made holy. Then, too, by God's gifts they must hold on to and complete in their lives this holiness they have received. They are warned by the Apostle 'to live as becomes saints' (Eph 5, 3), and to put on 'as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, a heart of mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, patience' (Col 3, 12) . . .
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> Thus it is evident to everyone that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fulness of the christian life and to the perfection of charity.[3]

The call is, in fact, to 'follow the poor Christ, the humble and cross-bearing Christ';[4] and the most relevant gospel text is still

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[1] As early as the ninth century, the Church was opposing the idea that it was only monks who were called to follow the hard way and the narrow gate that leads to life (Mt 7, 13–14). Cf *Concilium Aquisgranense* (816 A.D), in J. de Guibert, *Documenta Ecclesiastica Christianae Perfectionis* (Roma, 1931), p 70.

[2] Eph 4, 4–6. [3] *Lumen Gentium*, 40. [4] *Ibid.*, 41.

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'. . . be perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt 5,48).[5] Where, then, lies the change? Is it simply that the specific way of the cross, which hitherto seemed to be the reserve of monks and religious, who were relieved from worldly cares in order to tread it, is now the road along which all the faithful are invited to travel? 'The way of perfection' in the spiritual tradition of the West had, for centuries, one meaning only: the contemplative process, through purification and illumination to the sweetness and joy of the transforming union. There have been those who have taught exactly this in the context of the universal call to holiness:

> Perfection lies in the full development of baptismal grace. All the baptized possess the seven gifts of the holy Spirit, with which we can arrive, by being faithful and docile, at the fulness of life and understanding, and thus to the fruitive or the mystic union. And short of this, we shall always be children who never reach the age of discretion or of the perfect man, *qui exercitatos habet sensus*.[6] Indeed, we shall be the slothful servants of the Gospel, through not having cultivated the talents we received at baptism.[7]

Though this ceased to be the common opinion, especially after the sixteenth century and the approval of religious congregations which were not monastic, and therefore, in theory at least, not wedded to a contemplative life which demanded a cloistered separation from the world,[8] yet the purification which, in the classical tradition, is the *conditio sine qua non* of illumination and union, is certainly stressed by the Church in her liturgy as the way to holiness – *lex orandi est lex credendi*. A typical example is the collect of the feast of St John of the Cross;

> Father, you endowed John of the Cross with a spirit of self-denial and a love of the cross. By following his example, may we come to the eternal vision of your glory.[9]

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[5] *Ibid.*, 40.

[6] The reference is to the Latin Vulgate of Hebrews 5, 14: '. . . those who have their faculties trained by practice . . .'

[7] Cf the introduction to the tenth edition of A. Poulain, *Graces of Interior Prayer* (London, 1950), p lxxi; see also Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism* (London, 1951), p xxxvii.

[8] So the classic treatise of Prosper Lambertini (later Pope Benedict xiv), on beatification and canonization, defines the perfection of charity without any reference to the gifts of infused contemplation: 'Christian virtue, to be heroic, must make its possessor act readily, joyfully and with ease . . . in his actions he must manifest self-abnegation and full control over his human inclinations': cited in J. de Guibert, *The Theology of the Spiritual Life* (London, 1954), pp 284–85.

[9] We cite the prayer from the approved english translation (the feast of St John of the Cross is now 14 December) of the post-conciliar revision of the *Missale Romanum*.

The Church is proposing the *Doctor Mysticus* as an example of high holiness, not for his gifts of pure contemplation, but for his practical love and imitation of the crucified Christ.

The figure of John of the Cross has been for upwards of four centuries, and still remains, the dominant influence in the spiritual world of the West. He broods over it, as does his crucified Christ in the splendid interpretation of Salvador Dali. We would lose contact with, even make nonsense of, our spiritual heritage, if we failed to incorporate the substance of his ascetical teaching into the universal call, in the twentieth century, to 'the fulness of the christian life and to the perfection of charity'. Yet on the surface of it, this would seem a fruitless exercise. The statement for example, of the Council, that:

> Man is not allowed to despise his bodily life. Rather, he is obliged to regard his body as good and honourable since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day . . . The very dignity of man postulates that man glorify God in his body . . .[10]

seems to contradict the mystic's clear teaching:

> Strive always to prefer, not that which is easiest, but that which is most difficult;
> Not that which is most delectable, but that which is most unpleasing;
> Not that which gives most pleasure, but that which gives none;
> Not that which is restful, but that which is wearisome;
> Not that which is consolation, but rather that which is disconsolateness;
> Not that which is greatest, but that which is least;
> Not that which is loftiest and most precious, but that which is lowest and most despised;
> Not that which is a desire for anything, but that which is a desire for nothing;
> Strive to go about seeking not the best of temporal things, but the worst.
> Strive thus to enter into complete detachment and emptiness and poverty, with respect to everything that is in the world, for Christ's sake.[11]

Is this, one might ask, the holiness by which 'a more human way of life is promoted, in this earthly society as well'?[12] It is certainly, at any rate, a logical expansion of a frequent prayer of the Church,

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[10] *Gaudium et Spes*, 14.
[11] *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, I, xiii, 6 (ed. Alison Peers, London, 1964), p 58.
[12] *Lumen Gentium*, 40.

which is 'to despise the things of earth and to love the things of heaven'.

The first point to notice, and to insist upon, is that 'the striving' is not any human initiation, it is a response to an invitation. The verse, on which the above quotation is commenting, runs:

> On a dark night,
> Kindled in love with the yearnings
> Oh, happy chance!
> I went forth without being observed,
> My house being now at rest.[13]

And the author adds: '... the soul means by this stanza that it went forth (being led by God) for love of him, enkindled in love of him'.[14] Secondly, and this follows from the first, the dichotomy between 'things of earth and things of heaven', is not in the objective, material order, but in the order of intention: in attitude and disposition of mind and heart.

Julian of Norwich, two centuries before, had stated it exactly:

> For this is the reason why we are not all in ease of heart and of soul: that we seek here rest in this thing that is so little and where no rest is in; we know not our God that is almighty, all-wise and all-good. For he is very rest ... And this is the reason why no soul can be in rest until it is naughted of everything that is made. When the soul is willingly naughted, for love, so as to have him who is all, then is she able to receive ghostly rest.[15]

The *nada* of John of the Cross turns out to be a positive 'being called out of oneself', and one which is equally a rediscovery, a new entry into the depths of the self. It is

> a going forth from herself, by forgetting herself, which she does for the love of God; for when this love touches the soul ... it raises her up in such wise that it makes her to go out not only from herself through forgetfulness of herself, but even from her judgment and the ways and inclinations natural to her ...[16]
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> ... the soul that would find him through union of love must go forth and hide itself from all created things ... and enter within itself in deepest recollection, communing there with God.[17]

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[13] *Ascent of Mount Carmel* I, I, 1. *loc. cit.*, p 17.

[14] *Ibid.*, 4, p 18.

[15] *Revelations of Divine Love* (ed. James Walsh, London, 1973), p 54; and cf *Spiritual Canticle*, (first redaction) I, 6, *ed. cit.*, p 33.

[16] *Spiritual Canticle* (second redaction) I, 20: *ed. cit.*, p 196.

[17] *Spiritual Canticle* (first redaction) I, 4: *ed. cit.*, p 33. Elsewhere, John says that 'love

We can, without great difficulty, I believe, translate this language into a more modern idiom. John of the Cross, here as elsewhere, is speaking of an intentional renunciation of a destructive or paralysing egoism,[18] of a coming out from behind one's conscious or unconscious defences – 'the ways and inclinations natural to the soul'. Carl Rogers, for example, in describing the process of the 'good life' according to the therapist, says that it involves an increasing openness to experience which is 'the polar opposite to defensiveness': a situation in which 'the individual is becoming more able to listen to himself, to experience what is going on within himself. He is more open to his feelings of fear and discouragement and pain. He is also more open to his feelings of courage and tenderness and awe'.[19] This, it is true, is a conclusion based on empirical psychological investigation, without any conscious reference to the christian revelation, let alone to any developed theology of grace. We cannot fail to notice, however, its affinity with Paul's description of christian growth from the point of justification:

> Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us . . .[20]

Another psychologist, Gordon Allport, calls this process of growth 'integration', sets it in the specific context of christian maturity,[21] and hints that it is, to some extent, a given:

> Integration means the forging of approximate mental unity out of discordant impulses and aspirations. No one can say 'I will integrate my life, and find it done . . .' Perfect integration, of course, is never

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is like the fire, which ever rises upwards with the desire to be absorbed in the centre of its sphere'. *Dark Night of the Soul* II, xx, 6: *ed. cit.*, p 441.

[18] Cf his exegesis of Lk 14, 33: 'He that does not renounce *with his will* all things that he possesses, cannot be my disciple, *Ascent of Mount Carmel* I, V, 2: *ed. cit.*, p 29.

[19] *On Becoming a Person* (London, 1967), p 188.

[20] Rom 5, 1–5.

[21] Allport notices that integration means much the same as the 'single-mindedness' of the Epistle of James. The reference is significant: 'Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may become perfect and complete, lacking in nothing' (Jas 1, 2–4).

> achieved, but to be even reasonably successful it must admit the requirements of the mature conscience.[22]

It would, of course, be theologically naive to dismiss or even minimize the distinction between the gifts of nature and of grace, either because, in the last analysis, all is gift, or because the 'purely natural' man could never be more than a figment of the imagination. For though it is true that we are made after the image of the Incarnate Word, and 'a purely natural Jesus' would be a contradiction in terms, Luke still makes a distinction between age, wisdom and favour before God and men when he speaks of Jesus's human growth.[23] What the dynamic psychologists have done for us is first to reinforce the understanding we gain from revelation that our assimilation to the perfect man, Jesus Christ,[24] now glorified and manifesting the very stamp of God's nature,[25] is a process co-extensive with our life 'in the flesh'. In fact, if we are to heed the teaching of Paul, the process will be completed only at the end of time, when

> We *all* attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.[26]

Secondly, this new and developing understanding of human growth has emerged from a widespread need for inner healing, and the desire to meet that need.[27] Here again, the process of becoming human seems to join forces with the christian teaching on sanctification: the distinction between inner healing and passive purification is a very tenuous one. How, for example, does the Letter to the Hebrews signalize the pinnacle of Christ's human growth: that is, his lived experience of his relationship with the Father?

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[22] *The Individual and his Religion* (New York, 1960), p 92.

[23] Cf Lk 2, 52. The bitter controversy over 'natural and supernatural' which split the theologians in the 'forties and early 'fifties is, thank God, a thing of the past. But the insights it brought with it are extremely valuable. Cf H. de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (London, 1967).

[24] The Council speaks of the call of the faithful to strive after perfection according to the measure of Christ's grace given to them, so that they might follow in his footsteps and 'be moulded according to his image'. *Lumen Gentium*, 40. (Note the apparently pelagian ring of the Abbott translation here; it renders *Eius imagini conformes effecti* as, 'mould *themselves* in his image' – p 67.)

[25] Cf Heb 1, 3.

[26] Eph 4, 13.

[27] This desire and the ability to heal is one of the most effective signs of God's presence in today's world. To share God's dynamic compassionate love is to share his creative power.

> In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.[28]

For John of the Cross, this process of healing and purification is equally life-long. The nights of the senses and of the spirit are constantly overshadowed by a third, the night of God, which is death. The poem of his final work, *The Living Flame of Love*, begins:

> Oh living flame of love,
> That tenderly woundest my soul in its deepest centre,
> Since thou art no longer oppressive,
> Perfect me now if it be thy will,
> Break the web of this sweet encounter.[29]

'The soul', says the commentary, 'believes that it is about to enter upon eternal life and glory, and that this web of mortal life will be broken'.[30] The growth, however, has its positive side as well. For though the soul needs courage not to turn aside after delights and pleasures, and fortitude in order to conquer temptations and difficulties,[31] it is through the knowledge of creatures, their beauty and the joy she derives from them, that impels her to reach out after the invisible beauty of their Creator.[32]

Yet it remains that the experiences which affect us most deeply, where the pain of acceptance is felt most keenly when we strive to be open to them, are those moments of doubt and difficulty, fear and disappointment, and especially the awareness of our own sinfulness. If, as the psychologists aver, we are open to each new experience of this kind, and completely without defensiveness, then there will indeed be 'a discovery of structure *in* experience, a flowing, changing organization of self and personality'.[33] In the christian context, from the viewpoint of the workings of mercy and grace, this is none other than the process of passive purification; and any small gesture that we may make in the way of active purification (what are traditionally called acts of mortification) are merely signs that we wish effectively to co-operate: that is, to open our

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[28] Heb 5, 7–9. [29] *Ed. cit.* I, 1, p 106. [30] *Ibid.*
[31] *The Spiritual Canticle* (first redaction) IV, 1: *ed. cit.*, p 45.
[32] *Ibid.*, (second redaction) VI, 1: *ed. cit.*, p 212.
[33] Carl Rogers, *op. cit.*, pp 188–89.

hearts 'to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think'.[34]

It would be surprising indeed if the paradigm of this passive purification were not to be found in the passion of the Lord. The Church has prayed for centures, 'Passion of Christ, strengthen me'; and, as though to sketch in the mystical dimensions of this fortification and purification, adds 'O good Jesus hear me, within thy wounds hide me'. And, in fact, it is the Epistle of Peter which assures us: 'Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps'.[35] If we reflect on the mystery of Gethsemane, we see that it is an experience of pressure, tension, suffering, self-pity, diminishment, failure, loss, dereliction. It was out of the things he suffered that he was made perfect. Paul, too, will underline the crucial importance, for growth into the fulness of the relationship, of the acceptance of felt inadequacy, of the need to live through it with total awareness. The experience of the thorn in the flesh, the angel of Satan sent to buffet, seems inevitable if there is to be growth in the relationship: 'my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me'.[36] Passive purification, the experience of diminishment, is both to know the power of Christ's resurrection, to share his sufferings and to become like him in his death.[37]

Paul, then, sees the christian vocation as a life patterned according to Christ's human experience where it is at its most exquisite – in passion and death. He feels his humanness never so stongly as in the moment when it seems to him that he is less a man than he might have been: 'I am a worm, my manhood is gone; I am the reproach of men and the outcast of the people'.[38] It is in the acceptance of human diminishment that he also experiences, 'not without a cry, not without tears',[39] assimilation to the Father in willing, loving union: 'not my will, but yours be done'.[40] The effect of such acceptance would seem to be, in every christian faith-event, the experience and affirmation of christian identity: 'I am a child of my Father in his well-beloved Son'. So Julian of Norwich defines faith:

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[34] Eph 3, 20. [35] 1 Pet 2, 21.
[36] 2 Cor 12, 9. Cf David Stanley, *Boasting in the Lord* (New York, 1973), pp 46–48, 52–58.
[37] Cf Phil 3, 10. [38] Ps 22, 6. [39] Cf Heb 5, 7 (Knox).
[40] Lk 22, 42.

> It is nothing else but a right understanding, with true belief and sure trust, of our being: that we are in God and he in us, which we do not see. And this power . . . works great things in us; for Christ is mercifully working in us, and we are graciously disposed to him, through the gift and power of the holy Spirit.[41]

Teilhard de Chardin, in the course of his reflections on our 'lovable duty of growth', notices that the forces of diminishment are the most widespread and the most profoundly passive and receptive experiences of human life.[42] God must be found, he concludes, in every death:

> Like an artist who is able to make use of a fault or impurity in the stone he is sculpting . . . God, without sparing us the partial deaths, nor the final death, which form an essential part of our lives, transfigures them by integrating them in a better plan, *provided we lovingly trust in him.* Not only our unavoidable ills, but our faults, even our most deliberate ones can be embraced in that transformation . . .[43]

It may not be in the conscious awareness of every christian who is seriously committed, in his fundamental desiring, to respond to God's call that each moment of diminishment is followed by a moment of growth. In fact, the Council, in categorizing different ways of responding, singles out 'those who are oppressed by poverty, infirmity, sickness or various other hardships', and prays that 'they may all know that they are united in a special way with the suffering Christ for the salvation of the world'.[44] However, it is at least possible that, because we often succumb to the fear of diminishment and try to escape from it, or erect barriers against it, we block the moment of growth: the moment of suffering is prolonged; fear enslaves us and prevents us from experiencing truly the loss which may well be the prelude to enrichment. The psychologists, too, emphasize the importance for growth of the conscious reception of 'the sacrament of the present moment'. So Rogers notes:

> I believe it would be evident that for the person who was fully open to his new experience, completely without defensiveness, each moment would be new . . . Consequently, such a person would realize that 'what I will be in the next moment, and what I will do, grows out of that moment, and cannot be predicted in advance . . .'[45]

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41 *Revelations of Divine Love, op. cit.*, p 151.
42 *Le Milieu Divin* (London, 1972), pp 80–81.
43 *Ibid.*, p 86.
44 *Lumen Gentium*, 41.
45 *On Becoming a Person*, p 188.

To take this a step further, and to put it in the christian, that is, the gospel context, diminishment and loss, as such, do not constitute growth. I am not thinking of the loss of a good that is only apparent – the purification of sinful actions or attitudes. It is clear, however, from our contemplation of the gospels, that diminishment makes for growth: in Christ's logic, suffering and death are necessary preludes to resurrection[46] and to that glory which is to be revealed as the consummation of human perfection.[47] For the Apostles, for example, the scandal of the eucharistic promise led to their experience of Jesus as the one who possesses and shares with them the word of eternal life.[48] For Thomas, the experience of doubt was followed by the experience of presence;[49] for Peter, the diminishment of denial by the enrichment of mission.[50]

Perhaps this alternation of the experience of diminishment and enrichment, received and savoured to the full, as constitutive of human growth, which is seen at the last to be the process of divinization, is most clearly portrayed in the gospel account of Mary, who took and kept each moment of her experience, 'pondering them in her heart'.[51] In every mystery of Christ, as they are revealed to us, in which she is given a direct role, we can perceive this alternating pattern. Her experience of maternal deprivation which belongs to the state of virginity is succeeded by the enrichement of the Spirit.[52] Her *Magnificat* is a song in praise of the blessedness which crowns lowliness, of the plenty which follows the famine.[53] In the first manifestation in the Temple, the proclamation of the light and glory is followed by the prophecy of the sword which is to pierce her soul;[54] in the second, the pain of alienation accentuates the mother-child relationship.[55] It is the same at Cana: the experience of joy in celebrating together with her Son alternates with the proclamation of a broken relationship; from this follows the experience of trust, and its confirmation in the first of the signs which Jesus did.[56] And, consummately, the experience of passion is crowned by the proclamation of her universal motherhood.[57] The way to human fulfilment is not so much by drawing up ascetical programmes or casting about for what we should relinquish in our pilgrimage back to him who 'has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing . . .even as he

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46 Cf Lk 24, 26.
47 Cf Rom 8, 18–23.
48 Cf Jn 6, 66–68.
49 Cf Jn 20, 27–29.
50 Cf Jn 21, 15–17.
51 Cf Lk 2, 19, 51.
52 Cf Lk 1, 34–35.
53 Cf Lk 1, 48, 53.
54 Cf Lk 2, 29–35.
55 Cf Lk 2, 48. 51.
56 Cf Jn 2, 1–2. 3–5. 9–11.
57 Cf Jn 19, 25–27.

chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless in his sight . . . who destined us in love to be his children through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved'.[58] Rather it is, as Teilhard has noted:

> By cherishing the 'hollownesses' as well as the 'fullnesses' of life: that is to say, its passivities and the providential diminishments through which Christ transforms directly and eminently into himself the elements and the personality which we have tried to develop for him . . . In that way detachment and human endeavour are harmonized.[59]

[58] Eph 1, 3–6.

[59] *Le Milieu Divin*, p 94.