

THE BREATH OF THE SPIRIT AND THE FREEDOM OF THE CHURCH

By M. J. LE GUILLOU

TODAY, if I were to write a book about the Church, I would like to help people to understand, as the Fathers understood, that the Church is wholly spiritual: that is to say, filled with life by the Holy Spirit. Or to put it more precisely: this would mean grasping the extent to which life in the Spirit, apostolic ministry, the charisms and sanctifying grace are mutually interdependent; they are all given to us to foster a life of holiness, and to form men and women who live their lives according to the Beatitudes.

Life in the Spirit and apostolic ministry

When we brought the Good News to you, it came to you not only as words, but as power and as the Holy Spirit and as utter conviction. And you observed the sort of life we lived when we were with you, which was for your instruction, and you were led to become imitators of us, and of the Lord; and it was with the joy of the Holy Spirit that you took to the Gospel (1 Thess 1, -56).

In this passage two experiences complement one another. First of all there is the experience of the apostle. The power to affirm and the fulness of conviction which penetrate Paul's proclamation of the Gospel, the signs, wonders and miracles which support his words: all these spring from the Holy Spirit, who is sent to plant among the faithful a sure witness to Christ (1 Cor 1, 6). In the second place, Paul points to the experience of the faithful themselves. They welcome the word of God and live it amidst the trials and joys of the Spirit. Because they imitate Paul and Christ in their daily lives, the Holy Spirit affirms the authenticity of the apostle's preaching; he strengthens the word in the hearts of the faithful.

Because you are yourselves our letter, written in our hearts, that anybody can see or read, and it is plain that you are a letter from Christ,

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drawn up by us, and written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on stone tablets, but on the tablets of your living hearts (2 Cor 3, 2-3).

Paul is proud of the full measure of spiritual gifts, which makes the action of the Spirit evident and tangible in the communities he founded. There is no more obvious proof of the genuineness of his ministry than the abundance of gifts welling from the hearts of his people among whom the Holy Spirit was at work. This was his defence against the Jewish traditionalists, who opposed his ministry and contradicted his teaching about freedom from outward observances of the Law.

Paul referred to similar experiences in his letter to the Galatians. He reminded them of the favours they had received from God (Gal 3, 2-4). It is true that he insisted first and foremost on justification and the interior renewal of their hearts; but these essential conditions were never separated from an appreciation of the plentiful gifts showered upon them. Indeed he asks them: 'Does God give you the Spirit so freely and work miracles among you because you practise the Law, or because you believed what was preached to you?' This is probably an allusion to the charismatic powers of healing the sick and driving out demons. The Church's experience of the Spirit — that of a Body with a diversity of gifts (cf 1 Cor 12, 4-30; Rom 12, 6-7) — is for Paul the sure sign that the plan of salvation is being worked out in the world. It is a witness of the Spirit: '... all grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image that we reflect; this is the work of the Lord who is Spirit' (2 Cor 3, 18). This is what authorizes his apostolic ministry and freedom of action: 'He is the one who gives us the qualifications to be the administrators of this new covenant, which is not a covenant of written letters, but of the Spirit' (2 Cor 3, 6).

Discernment and apostolic experience

Personal experiences which enable Christians to enter gradually and more deeply into the mystery of the Spirit — 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Gal 5, 22) — can often be undermined by uncertainty. The Church must therefore discern whether a particular experience is good or bad, true or false; for the Spirit is given in the Church, for the Church and by the Church. That is why St Paul insists so strongly on the criterion of divine love, which is the supreme charism.

the gift of gifts: 'the way that is better than any of them' (1 Cor 12, 21); 'the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us' (Rom 5, 5).

Divine love is so clearly the foundation-stone of christian experience that without this gift we are worth nothing, and the other gifts are valueless. Love builds up both the Christian (cf 1 Cor 13, 1-3) and the Church (cf 1 Cor 8, 1; Eph 4, 16). Our judgment on the other charisms, therefore, will depend on the support they give to the love that builds up the Church. Love is based on faith in Christ alone; once this faith has been established, the Spirit can lead a man to savour the blessings showered on him by God. Primary importance must be given to making God's love known. We should be mainly concerned about the mystery of the Father's love, the Son's love and the transformation of every creature by the Holy Spirit; this is the transformation of being and action which moulds a man's interior states and exterior actions into the image of Christ, and thus fashions the 'new man' endowed with Christ's own freedom.

St John uses very similar criteria to evaluate christian experience. In his first letter he answers the gnostic heretics and gives us a lesson in spiritual discernment. We must unmask illusory experiences and test the spirits.

It is not every spirit, my dear people, that you can trust; test them to see if they come from God; there are many false prophets now in the world (1 Jn 4, 1).

Two basic criteria are proposed by St John: baptismal faith and brotherly love; and these two criteria interlock. The first criterion is the teaching 'given from the beginning' (1 Jn 2, 7) when the Christian entered the Church; and this alone guarantees the authenticity of a man's communion with God. It is the acknowledgment of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came in the flesh (cf 1 Jn 4, 2; 2 Jn 4, 7), who came by water and blood (1 Jn 5, 6) and who teaches us to give our lives for our brothers (1 Jn 3, 16).

His commandments are these;
that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ
and that we love one another as he told us to.
Whoever keeps his commandments
lives in God and God lives in him.
We know that he lives in us
by the Spirit that he has given us (1 Jn 3, 23-24).

The Christian takes his stand between God's inspiration and the devil's temptations: the world and God, Christ and anti-christ. This hard struggle can only be resolved with the help and with the discernment of the Holy Spirit in conformity with the norms of the apostles' experience (1 Jn 1, 1-4). In other words, there should be no conflict between charisms and the apostolic ministry. Apostolic ministry is itself a charism, and the whole of christian tradition has understood it to be so. It is called the charism of truth by Irenaeus, when he argues that bishops are the successors of the apostles at the service of the Father's plan, and underlines the truly eschatological nature of their ministry. According to St Ignatius of Antioch: 'Jesus Christ, our inseparable life, is the realization of the Father's purpose, just as the bishops, established throughout the world, realize the purpose of Jesus Christ' (*To the Ephesians*, 3, 2). In their apostolic and ministerial succession, fanning out through the centuries, bishops form a single body and exercise an eschatological function: to show what the Trinity is doing for salvation of the world. The structure of the Church as a whole sends us back to Jesus Christ, who does not speak about himself, but whose glory comes from the Father and returns to him (Jn 17). Church structure matches christian truth, which is simply a witness to the Trinity. The questions — whom do you come from? From whom do you hold your authority? — only play such an essential part throughout the gospel because they settle the whole question of truth by pointing to the explicitly stated relationship with the One who sends. The ultimate source of mission and apostolate is the Father.

The inwardness of the mystery of the Spirit

Bishops have an essential task in the Church: to submit all experiences and all charisms to spiritual discernment in the light of apostolic teaching, and to form the Church into a loving community. 'We are all to come to unity in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God, until we become the perfect man, fully mature with the fulness of Christ himself' (Eph 4, 13). At the same time, we are in danger of being 'children . . . tossed one way and another and carried along by every wind of doctrine, at the mercy of all the tricks men play and their cleverness in practising deceit' (Eph 4, 14). The Church is ceaselessly caught in conflicting currents: scattered to the four winds and gathered into one, childish and grown-up, drifting morally and doctrinally and yet totally committed to Christ. The proper task of the bishops is to build up the Church, which

means that God's action in the Church, carried out by the apostles and their successors, creates the community by discerning the charisms which serve the Body as a whole and each individual within it. The episcopal charism is therefore essentially a charism of discernment. It is like a radar station, set up to detect ambiguities and to direct the Church on a straight course towards experiencing Christ: a task which must be accomplished in collaboration with the whole Church. The Epistle to Timothy makes it clear that this charism, given once and for all, has to be renewed by each bishop in his own experience. Bishops must understand their ministry in the Spirit as a service to the brotherhood of the entire Church. Similarly, Christ founded the charism of Peter and his successors to maintain the unity of the Church. 'If there is a pope in the Church', says St Thomas, 'it is so that the Church as a whole may be subject to the Spirit'.

The Holy Spirit is the principle of unity in the Church, because he brings all that is deepest in us into communion with the Father and the Son; but he is also the principle of differentiation. For the Church is a Body composed of members who possess different charisms. It is true that everyone receives the gift of grace, which enables him to share in the same privilege of sonship. This is the basic charism on to which all the others are grafted: that is to say, they are gifts of grace for the service of the Church; they foster the formation of the people of God; they make sure that it is a single and complex organism, whose particular structures intensify the movement and growth of Christ's life. The Church on earth needs the charisms on which she depends for the ceaseless communication of light and love. Each member of the Church receives particular gifts which help to serve other members of the Body, either as the occasion arises or in a more stable and lasting fashion.

All the gifts of the Spirit, from the multitude of religious vocations to the humblest tasks at the service of the Church, originate from the central aim of the Church, which is to put all people, with their personal riches, to work for the coming of the Kingdom of God. At certain moments in history, the Spirit shows himself in a more immediately tangible way: in gifts of healing, of tongues, of miracles, which offer witness to the power and goodness of God. But the greatest gift is to rejoice lovingly in the gifts of others, and to dwell lovingly in the harmony of the Body of Christ. St Basil tells us:

As the gifts of the Spirit differ among themselves, and no one can possess them all or possess the same gifts, each person should wisely

and gratefully hold on to what he has received. They should all live in harmony among themselves and in the love of Christ, like limbs in the body. Thus the person who has been least favoured in the scale of gifts should not refuse to recognize those who are superior to him; and the one who has received the greatest gift should not despise the man who occupies the most modest place (*Moralia*, 60, 1).

Thus the Holy Spirit is the source of unity and difference in the brotherhood of love. The Church is this brotherhood, wholly concentrated on the action of Christ our Saviour, who gathers into one all the members of his Body, and so makes them share in his glorious passion. The Church recognizes Christ as the object of her experience; Christ is the centre of her mysterious existence, at once present and hidden in the scriptures and christian liturgy. The essence of christian life can be seen as the experience of the world to come. The scriptures reveal this heavenly world as having come, and the liturgy beckons us to enter it. By bringing together contemplation, gospel proclamation and liturgical celebration, the Church makes God's love visible. She is the loving communion of brothers and sisters in the Spirit, all reaching out towards the heavenly Christ, who is the complete realization of all that their faith is trying to grasp. In her whole being the Church is an epiphany of God's love.

Living the Beatitudes

Whether we are listening to the scriptures or participating in the Eucharist, our concern is to allow our lives to be enlightened from within by the Holy Spirit. In this joint work with the Spirit we have one purpose in mind: to live the Beatitudes. For this is what the Lord wants each one of us to do: to express in our lives the whole mystery of his love, the paradoxical, dazzling, extraordinary secret of God who plunges into human activity, so that we can become like him, witnesses to the love of his Father and manifestations of God's love. The Beatitudes take hold of our lives in a thoroughly concrete way. 'Blessed are the poor. . . .' We could sum up: 'happy are the unhappy'. Yes, the Beatitudes mean happiness at the heart of man's predicament, where real misery exists. We live in a world of suffering and unhappiness; we cannot avoid such a tide of atrocity. And nevertheless the Lord tells us to be happy. How can that be, unless it is given to us by the Holy Spirit? How can that be, unless we accept the paradox of a life surrendered, a life handed over, a life

shaken by the mystery of God, a life crucified by the mystery of God? The Beatitudes are always shaped like a cross, so that joy can burst forth from them. 'It was with the joy of the Holy Spirit that you took to the gospel, in spite of the opposition all round you' (1 Thess 1, 6).

We are face to face with God's final deed both in the Eucharist and in the Beatitudes, which come true in many a spontaneous meeting with our brothers and sisters. I would be willing to say that christian life in the Holy Spirit is beauty; that it is radiant. The eastern tradition speaks of *philokalia* or love of beauty. A spirituality based on love of beauty would encourage us to be in love with beauty, in so far as God is beauty and splendour. This does not mean an intellectual satisfaction with God, but rather a profession of faith which comes from the depths of a man's being, which transforms him from within, so that all his faculties and powers, spiritual and physical, are set free to rejoice in God. The final summit of all this beauty is the face of God, the face of Christ himself. There is nothing more beautiful than a human face. Ikons represent a face transfigured by the presence of God. The most beautiful thing in the world — more beautiful than all the scenery, the sun glimmering on sea, the light caressing the mountains — is the sight of a man beaten down by his enemies, utterly broken, yet fully penetrated by the love of God.

What the Lord asks of us, as we live in the memory of what he has done, is to meet our brothers in the light of his own loving gaze: with the look of an admiring Father who can give up his own Son to death, that man's new face can shine through and each new day dawn in the glory of God. Every single one of us has a name of his own and a face of his own. To an infinite degree every single one of us is watched by God, contemplated by God, loved by God. In our meetings with each one of our brothers and sisters, the self-same love ought to be triumphant. Our aim is to love with the power of God's love, with the heart of the heavenly Father. To love with the uttermost folly is indeed the folly of Christ as he hands himself over to us.

In the whole course of human history, the secret of Christ is to express the love of the Father in the heart of a man. For the first time a human heart beats with perfect love for his fellow-men, and we are invited to share the full reality of this love. All we have to do is to beg like the blind man, asking for healing: 'Son of David, have pity on me' (Lk 18, 38). And the presence of Christ makes the

light shine in him. For us it is a question of opening our eyes; of understanding as God understands; of seeing our brothers as they really are; of allowing our hearts to be cleansed of evil impulses. Distracting thoughts and preoccupations must be set aside, so that gradually the energy of the Spirit can be given free rein. If we were only conscious of what the Lord was asking of us, the light of Jesus would shine through our lives.

A great theologian said to me one day:

This is what life is all about. When I look at my life I see myself as a little green plant which grows and grows; it's really wonderful! And it grows all on its own. Then the gusts of wind, the sand and the hurricanes begin to strike. Yes, the whole of life unfolds in this way. And one fine day I wake up and find that I have changed into a little cactus.

The only way to avoid becoming a little cactus — a danger that threatens us all — is to receive the open-hearted creativity of the Spirit and to possess the freedom of the children of God. What remarkable freedom children have when they are filled with wondering admiration! We have seen children facing the world; everything becomes marvellous in their eyes. I think that every Christian is an astonished child, for he is in the world of his Father, the world of his heavenly Father.

Conclusion

If the picture I have drawn is accurate, the task of the Church is three-fold: listening to the Word, worship and brotherly love. In the Church all three should mutually and spontaneously complement one another. It is true that in the history of the Church the charisms often lost their missionary character; and they were placed on the level of the individual's relationship with God. As a result, sanctifying grace and the institution of the ministry had virtually taken over all the other forms of service mentioned in the Gospel. What the Church must manifest afresh is a reorganization along the lines of her great tradition. According to this tradition, the Church experiences the life of the Trinity in the mission of the Spirit. The Spirit then shapes the offering of each individual who is striving to bring about the coming of the Kingdom by means of serving his brothers and the world. Divine love is revealed in the spiritual gifts (1 Cor 14, 1) as the service of the faithful, of the communion of saints and of the entire world.