THE SPIRIT DIMENSION OF CHANGE

By ALOYSIUS PIERIS

PIRITUALITY is our innate orientation towards God in so far as it is consciously cultivated and translated into a way of life. But this God-relatedness, even prior to becoming a spirituality, manifests itself as a *coincidentia oppositorum*, an unusual blend of two antithetical inclinations programmed into us at the moment of creation: our *creatureliness* which humbles us and our *creativeness* which exalts us.

Thus, in an intense encounter with God, which is a highpoint in a spirituality, we are humbled by the persistent awareness of being continually *created* by God, a vivid consciousness of being ever on the verge of, but gratuitously suspended from disintegrating into the dust of which we are made; at the same time we are exalted by divine summons to act as God's covenantal partners in *creating* a new order of love, her kingdom on earth. We are at once the substance and the agents of a massive transformation initiated by God.

The bipolarity of change and the epiclesis

This bipolarity springs from the fact that our God-relatedness is based on creation, namely that we have both *God* and *nothing* as our absolute beginning (2 Macc 7,28) so that the possibility of both divinization and annihilation is built into our system. If God and dust are each our origin (Gen 2,7), are they not also our twofold destiny (Qoh 12,7)? 'Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life', the Church declares at our graveside.

Indeed it is the ability to keep ourselves in touch with the dustward and Godward orientation of our human existence, that is to say, the conviction that we are at once nothing and everything (Ps 8,1–5) which authenticates our spirituality.

This ambivalence can lead to much confusion as the history of spirituality attests. Some medieval mystics who were groping for words to express this experience were accused of manichaean

dualism and, as in the case of Margaret Porette, even burnt at the stake! Many of them (Mechtild of Magdeburg, Julian of Norwich, the author of *The cloud of unknowing*, and others) seemed to advocate self-annihilation or 'noughting' of the soul for the purpose of 'deification' or 'alling'.

In fact, the dynamics of the Ignatian Exercises lie precisely in fostering the soul's spiritual growth along this binary path of creatureliness and creativeness. The one evokes a deep sense of shame, self-effacement and many degrees of humility; the other spurs the exercitant to a chivalrous participation in the adventures of Christ the King.

This bipolarity which ensures spiritual transformation is not an invention of the mystics. It can be traced back to the gospels, eg, the dialectics of living and dying (Jn 11,25;12,24-25), losing and finding (Mt 10,39) and decreasing and increasing (Jn 3,30). There is also the Pauline spirituality of noughting the 'I' for the alling in Christ (Gal 2,20), and Jesus's own cyclic movement from *pleroma* to *kenosis* to *pleroma* sung about in one of the earliest Christian hymns (Phil 2,6-11) and celebrated annually in the Church's slow-motion unfolding of the liturgical cycle from Advent to Easter.

This whole sequence of the liturgical cycle is, in its turn, epitomized in the Eucharist which schools us in the art of crumbling to dust and rising to life. The brittle wafer of bread that breaks to bits between our fingers and the weakness of the wine which time turns into vinegar and vapour are the fruit of our labour, but also the symbol of our own dustness. With them, however, we too are transubstantiated gradually into the body of Christ by the creative power of the Spirit invoked upon them and upon us. This is the *epiclesis*, the 'Spirit dimension' of change.

The *epiclesis* is the highest manifestation of our creativeness operating in the depths of our creatureliness. God's creative word at which the Spirit hovered over the primordial waters to bring forth life (Gen 1,27), breathed life into mud to make it man (Gen 2,7), descended on Mary to plant and nurture the theandric seed of life (Lk 1,35), and raised the mangled body of Jesus from the limbo of death (Rom 8,11) . . . indeed that creative word which calls down the Spirit can be uttered by the human heart to change all cosmic dust into the body of Christ.

This creative word is Love. Love which is coextensive with God (1 Jn 4,16) has been generously poured into our hearts (Rom 5,5; Tit 3,6) and is that very love by which we love one another (1 Jn

4,7-13), and, therefore, defies death by its power to call the Spirit on all that is frail and friable. When our own crumbling and pouring (2 Tim 4,6), sweating and bleeding, ageing and dying becomes a nourishment *for others*, like the sacramental bread and wine, then we have uttered the creative word. The *epiclesis* that christifies all that crumbles to dust, including ourselves, is love. Not to love, then, is a sin against the Spirit who changes the face of the earth. Stoic cynicism about socio-political changes, ecclesiastical narcissism that precludes God from non-churchy activities and heresy-hunting which does not allow error to take its own time to tell the truth it is trying to say are all a defeatist concession to our creatureliness and a vote of no confidence in the creativity of human love.

On the opposite side are those who fear to accept their creatureliness. They refuse to die. They cling to life only to lose it all. The incapacity to retire gracefully from positions of authority, from the stations of life and from life itself or the stubborn refusal to accept changes that threaten one's personal convenience is the old temptation to be like the creator (Gen 3,5) without acknowledging one's creatureliness. This suicidal hungering for the fatal food which creates a lethal thirst for deathless perpetuity (Gen 3,2-4) is the total negation of the Eucharist which quenches our hunger and thirst for ever (Jn 6,35.38) and promises eternal life only to those willing to die.

Eucharist is bread and Spirit together; so, too, the christification of the world is possible only through the conspiracy of both creatureliness and creativity. The mystic and scientist Teilhard de Chardin identified these impulses as two energies—tangential and radial—whose dialectical interaction accounts for the epochal formation of that cosmic-human-divine continuum called Christ, a formation that converges towards and radiates from one single theandric nucleus: Jesus in whom God becomes the dust of which we are made, the dust which is subsumed by him into the bosom of God.

Put more precisely, these dustward and the Godward thrusts of creation conspire to bring to fruition the yet incomplete process—the axial change of all ages—of Jesus becoming the pleroma which is Christ. The implication is that Jesus who is wholly Christ (*totus Christus*) is not yet the whole of Christ (*totum Christi*) which he certainly will become only when all are christified in him.

To use a graphic simile, we, his body, are still held back by our creatureliness, reluctant to leave the cosy and comfortable womb of death and darkness, while he, our head, is already out of the womb ('first born among the dead') struggling to pull us out into the light by the power of the Spirit which animates the whole body, head and members, so that our eucharistic acclamation could very well be: 'Jesus has died, Jesus is risen, but Christ will come again when we have died and risen with him!'

Obviously, this grandiose view of christogenesis is granted to us only when we stand with him on Thabor. Were we to come down to the 'hi-tec' society below, we might meet quite another perception of the phenomenon of change.

Godless change and the changeless God

Those who crusade against hellenistic stoicism contaminating the Christian faith, including Martin Luther, have taught us to sing: 'Change and decay all around I see. But thou who changest not, abide with me'. His intention was perhaps to contrast the fickleness of the human heart with God's steadfast love. But the words, as they sink into the depths of our being through repeated singing, could elicit from us a stoic response to the world around. The infinite chasm that yawns between creation which is 'change and decay' and the creator who 'changes not' makes us subscribe to a spirituality that invites us to anticipate, here and now, our eschatological fulfilment in a Being that knows no becoming.

It was within such a theological framework that Cardinal Ottaviani strove to be *semper idem*, 'always the same', like the God of Aristotle, the Immovable Mover! Never to change was also the ideal he proposed for the Church! Thus, our pilgrimage on earth is not to end up in a permanent city that would replace this impermanent one, as St Paul would have us believe (Heb 13,14), but in an unchanging *state* of beatitude; the Risen Lord's gift to us would not be an incorruptible body in place of our corruptible one, as the same St Paul hoped (1 Cor 15,42), but one that would neither change nor decay.

Indeed should change be so neatly equated with impermanence and perishability? Surely, change is robbed of its spiritual or rather, its Spirit dimension if God is expelled from it. Outside a changeless God, all is going to be godless change!

This notion of change has been challenged by the process theologians. The scope of this article is too modest and practical

to bring them in. Suffice it to note that one of them, Teilhard de Chardin, did not allow God and change to cancel each other in our minds. With him we perceive change as christogenesis, we see God and dust *becoming* each other, Creator and creature *growing* one into the other, so that we can truly sing a new canticle to the Lord:

> Change and growth all around I see.
> Change Thou who changest all, grow now through me.

Regrettably, Teilhard lived all his life on Thabor and did not live long enough to see his ecstatic vision obstructed by biospheric pollution, his dream of a gradual amorization of the world shattered by the imminent threat of its pulverization, the Christian participation in the recapitulation of all things in the person of Christ challenged by a counter-process that reduces even persons to things at the service of Mammon. Yet, without his vision we cannot initiate a counter-culture that can redeem our generation from technocracy. We need Thabor.

It is more in keeping with the theme of this article to focus on the fact that, contrary to his prediction, the old theory of the changeless God has survived long enough to produce its ghost: godless change. What I pick up here for discussion is the current behavioural pattern which operates on the unformulated principle that change is the antidote to that dreadful disease which our hi-tec society has produced: boredom.

Like any unexamined assumption which tacitly justifies a social practice—'ideology' as Marx would call it pejoratively—this practice too discloses its absurdity only when formulated into a theory. Hence our question: is change in itself the remedy for boredom? Rather, is not boredom itself the result of a misconception of change? After all, does not continuous change bore us as much as changeless continuity? Read a few pages of a dictionary: how tedious it is to find the subject change with every new word!

In fact boredom cannot be correctly diagnosed unless the nexus between change and *routine* is first established. In fact some of postconciliar renewalism illustrates how 'change' which is introduced as a remedy for routine can itself be so routinized as to make one seek routine for a change! When, for instance, the triteness of a tradition, the immutability of an institution, or the repetitiveness of a ritual begins to bore us, we turn to change as

the remedy. So changes are made in the rules and rites and roles of religious groups but *life* which is 'change and growth' remains unchanged, i.e., *dead*. The innovators themselves cannot keep up with their own urge to change which, in any way, brings spiritual boredom and bankruptcy.

Though not as widespread as the alarmists have claimed, this species of renewal helped the traditionalists to justify their infantile regression to the *status quo* and the *semper idem*. Some Catholic seminarians who sought holy orders in the Lefebvre sect are known to have claimed that they were so fiercely tossed by the waves of renewal on a sea of incessant change that they finally found their anchor in the clarity of the past, the security of the rite and the regularity of the pre-Vatican II seminary.

The error behind this confusion is to oppose regularity and repetitiveness to change when in fact they are integral aspects of it. It is also assumed that the biblical faith's unilinear movement of history must correct the 'cyclic' or repetitive conception advocated in other religions. This contrast is too neat to be true. Besides, a unilinear movement can be simultaneously cyclic like the wheels of a moving car. In fact the whole liturgical cycle we referred to earlier demonstrates that even the Church, in her 'life in Christ' (this is what liturgy means in Vatican II), captures the rhythmic movement of the cosmos, the moods and seasons of nature. It is this cosmic liturgy that the Hindus have perceptively visualized as a cosmic dance, dynamic and repetitive. The ancient Vedic expression for the cosmic order is *rta* which is etymologically related to the English word *rite*. Therefore, routine, rhythm, regularity, rite and repetitiveness cannot be divorced from change which is also growth. Change is not necessarily the antithesis of routine and routine is not necessarily the source of boredom.

What causes boredom is the disorientation that occurs when we stampede against this cosmic order, ignoring the rhythm of nature, out of step with the changing beat of the cosmic dance, technologically distancing ourselves from nature's cyclic movement towards Christ, her personal centre. Conversely, being and acting in conscious harmony with this rhythmic process of christogenesis is true contemplation. It is faith seeking an understanding of the Spirit dimension of change.

It is, therefore, a false diagnosis of boredom that allures the victims of technocracy to seek 'peak experiences' to break the monotony of the plateau of daily life, a *change* that lifts them above

the ordinary. If the chemical inducement of such 'changes'—the 'altered states of consciousness' as they are respectably known—are not indulged in by Christian believers, there are other drugs of a spiritual nature available to them. In contrast to Newman's contentment with just enough light to see the next step in the life of faith, some of us prefer extraordinary illuminations which would exempt us from that faith. Thus, such gifts of God as the charismatic movement, oriental mysticism, shrines of saints and centres of healing are resorted to with an obsessive craving for the ecstatic and the miraculous. Is it not a wicked generation that seeks such signs (Lk 11,29; Jn 4,48)?

After all, did not the 'peak experience' on the Red Sea, God's stupendous intervention on behalf of his people, lose its impact within a few days of desert life? Did not their enthusiasm sink below zero and their songs of praise turn into psalms of plaintive murmurs as the weariness of walking through the wilderness began to irritate them? Did not the *boredom* of the desert delete from their memory all traces of their miraculous past? A miracle does not solve the problem of faith, warns Rabbi Kushner, any more than a sumptuous dinner could solve the problem of hunger for long.

> So God changed his tactics. Instead of a spectacular miracle once in a generation, He provided the Israelites with water to drink, manna to eat and shade to rest in, *everyday* [. . .] they experienced the goodness of God and the fullness of life in the *everyday unspectacular miracles* which made their lives bearable [. . .] a few small experiences of the meaningfulness of life everyday will do more for our souls than a single overwhelming religious experience.[1]

Such small experiences can hardly be possible where speed is the rule. Like the frames of a filmstrip that fascinate us by the velocity with which they move past our eyes, it is the hurry and haste of our hi-tec world (now intruding into the urban societies of developing countries) that keep us from enjoying the individual 'stills' of life, each of which, to adapt Kushner's words, is an 'everyday unspectacular miracle which makes our life bearable'.

We are seduced by what one might call our 'highway spirituality' (each individual rushing to his or her spiritual destiny, whatever that be, ever fighting against time) so that even a simple thing as our lunch (is it not as much a sacrament of life as a biological need?) turns out to be 'a hurried refuelling, the equivalent of an

auto-racer's pit-stop', whereas it could really be 'an opportunity to savour the miracle that dirt, rain, seeds and human imagination can work on our taste buds'. And Kushner concludes: 'We just have to be wise enough to know how to recognize the miracle and not rush headlong past it in search of 'something important'.[2]

To recognize this miracle is to recognize the Spirit dimension of change. That 'something important', if there is one, is the peak experience that awaits us, the pleroma of Christ that lures us to take the small strides that make up the long leaps of his cosmic dance. An old Italian song instructs us on how to have our eyes on the peak in the horizon and dance towards it without missing the miracles of every moment:

> Se tu corri, non potrai vedere
> Le cose belle che stanno intorn' a te;
> Se ti fermi, non potrai salire
> La vette bianca che sta di front' a te.

'If you rush, you will miss the beautiful things around you. If you're stuck, you'll never reach the dazzling peak in front of you'. 'Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit' (Gal 5,25).

NOTES

[1] Kushner, H. S.: *When all you've ever wanted isn't enough: search for a life that matters* (Pan Books, London, 1987), p 144. Emphasis added.
[2] *Ibid.*