

## Traditions of Spiritual Guidance

# Should desire be consecrated to God?

*Louis Roy*

**F**OR THE VAST MAJORITY OF WESTERNERS the idea of consecrating one's life to God appears as either dangerous or meaningless. There are objections to this idea as well as reasons for not considering it seriously, and we shall mention some of those presently. Yet, in the heart of the human being, there is a yearning which usually goes unobserved, not only in the eyes of others, but also in the eyes of the one who desires. It is the longing to love deeply, totally, without reservations. The Creator put this sentiment in us before explicating it with the command: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself' (Deut 6:5; Lk 10:27).

The aspiration that is most rooted in the human heart is to give all it can. John Paul II proclaimed it before thousands of young people, in 1984, at the Olympic stadium of Montreal, as he stated: 'Life is worth living . . . and worth giving!' It is exemplified by the two small coins that the poor widow put into the treasury. About this heroic gesture Jesus commented: 'She out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on' (Mk 12:44).

The gospel demands this gift of self, this consecration of desire to God. Such a self-gift is not the privilege of those engaged in the religious life, with their vows of obedience, poverty and chastity. Married and unmarried people alike are urged to love God without restriction. However, St Paul, in his discussion of marriage and celibacy, leaves individuals free to discern what practical conditions favour their particular union with God: 'I say this for your own benefit, not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord' (1 Cor 7:35).

### *The heart which does not surrender*

Currently, among those who believe in God and also in Jesus, a good number do not realize that they may impede their calling to give

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themselves. Influenced by the ideal of self-actualization, many insist on what pleases them, on individual success, on personal growth. They experience passion and thrill, and yet no profound commitment and hence no lasting fulfilment. The problem, for the disciples of Jesus, is to decide which comes first: self-realization, or the good of others? Should individual growth be subordinated to the fundamental purposes of life? Ought the development of one's interests and talents to take place in a broader context than the quest for one's own well-being? What is suggested by the great New Testament symbols of the Kingdom of God, the Body of Christ, the new Jerusalem, or the Vine that Jesus is, with us as its branches? To what extent should the whole relativize the part?

At one extreme, evidently, one risks running aground on the rock of self-centredness. However, it would be an illusion to attempt to avoid floundering by ceasing to try and navigate as best one can. To be capable of self-gift, it is necessary that desire take hold of us, clarify its options and achieve an autonomy in the face of other people's expectations. I must strengthen my self in order to have a self of my own to give.

The heart that does not give itself closes itself up either in an optimism or in a pessimism which rules out the kind of thinking that would get to the bottom of things. On the one hand, in his choices, the optimist often adopts the attitude of the aesthete, who seeks primarily what is interesting and pleasurable in activities as well as in human relationships. He ignores the good that would be fitting in a given situation but that would necessitate the effort, for example, of facing a conflict or of paying sustained attention to the sometimes complicated needs of others. The propensity to lead a relatively easy life entails a withdrawal from tough decisions, instead of considering the sacrifices indissociable from the pursuit of challenging values.

On the other hand, the pessimist is content to carry out her duties mechanically, without putting into them the quality that could enhance them. What distinguishes her from the optimist is that she does not expect to obtain great personal benefits from her work or her relationships. These two categories of people are nevertheless alike in the fact that they keep themselves sheltered from evil and remain distant, physically and psychologically, from those who suffer.

### *A much needed reconciliation*

The total engagement of desire is based on a preliminary condition: a genuine reconciliation with what we are, with our gifts and limitations.

It is necessary to accept our personal history ungrudgingly, to place it against the backdrop of the others who have influenced us and who have been influenced by us. All the great religions, including Christianity, carry this fundamental intuition: the acceptance of destiny. Far from being impersonal, this destiny can be viewed as a paternal providence, respectful of freedoms and yet capable of drawing good from any situation.

Some religious-minded people want to consecrate themselves completely to God, without recognizing that they have not truly accepted their strengths and their weaknesses. Inauthentic consecration can be a way of feeling spiritually successful, of admiring oneself, of remaining imprisoned in one's ego, no matter how generous one strives to be. One then lives the *ideal* of consecration instead of the *actuality* of consecration. One is interiorly divided, because one cannot but hanker after what one has discarded. For example, the fact of being attracted, indeed fascinated by what one has not yet experienced, signals that one has not sufficiently interiorized the self-esteem which renders sacrifice possible without excessive regret.

When a person struggles with inner emptiness, one of the typical errors is to think that one ought to try out everything, multiply experiences, attempt to have one's fill. This amounts to pursuing quantity instead of quality. By contrast, serenity sets in provided we reflect on what we have become, look back over our life, remember the times in which we were genuinely loved, and allow ourselves to interiorize our self-worth. At the end of such a prolonged meditation, many come to the stage where they say in all honesty: 'Throughout my successes and my joys, I see that there has always been something missing. This lack is permanent. I accept this basic dissatisfaction, but against the background of a strange fulfilment. I am happy to have found what is essential and to be more free than I used to be with respect to contingencies.'

It is not easy to accept one's singular path without nostalgia, and peacefully to acknowledge the consequences of the past upon the present while envisaging the future with hope. This state of mind requires forgiving others for many things, and forgiving ourselves and even God for our mistakes. But when we fully assume what life has made of us, with the accomplishments and failures, without assets and lacunae, we are in a position to offer to others a self that is really worthwhile and unique. We realize that, as a member of the Body of Christ, we have received the grace of being a gift to our brothers and sisters, in terms of personality, presence and activity.

*Acceptance of the negative*

Properly understood, consecration does not amount to an impoverishment of human experience, nor to spiritual escapism. Consecration, which is the same as sanctification, cannot be made at the expense of truth. Let us consider carefully what Jesus says about his disciples and himself during a long prayer to his Father:

‘Consecrate [sanctify] them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I consecrate myself, so that they also may be consecrated in truth.’ (Jn 17:17–19)

Consecration presupposes that, in the light of revelation, we have let truth shed its light into our dark recesses.

What turns out to be difficult is to enter into the whole of reality, that is to say, into both the negative and the positive. We are spontaneously grateful for that which the outside circumstances have positively made of us and we thus easily assume a portion of what we are as persons. But this phase must be prolonged in the confrontation with the negative. There can be a death and a resurrection of desire. The desire that dies is the misguided one, which flees from the evil that lies inside of us. It dies when an individual becomes dissatisfied with the one-sidedness of saying yes only to the positive and of always saying no to the negative. By saying no to the negative, one continues to fear it, to run away from it and thereby to create all sorts of problems for oneself.

What helps to accept the negative in others is the discovery that this negative exists in ourselves too, at least as a possibility. Holy people know they are sinners, not because most of them have committed execrable deeds, but because they have entertained, even for a short while, attitudes that might have induced them to perform harmful actions. Saints are perfectly aware of the fact that it is easy to enter into temptation, namely into states of mind which are hurtful, both for others and for themselves. As they say yes to God, they experience the strength of the no. They have the audacity to explore their capacity to refuse. The unsatisfactoriness of the no, in effect, leads to the yes, to a reversal which is conversion.

Entering into the negative places us in a position where a twofold enlightenment occurs. First, the Holy Spirit grants the insight that, attractive though it may seem, the evil that I could commit amounts to emptiness. I then feel less and less aroused by what I recognize as

devoid of fruitful possibilities. Second, the Holy Spirit grants the insight that, feared though it remains, evil no longer fundamentally threatens me. 'All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose' (Rom 8:28).

Trusting that divine providence utilizes the negative for our good and for the good of others does not abolish the duty of resisting evil, injustice, immorality. However, saying yes to the negative completely changes the attitude with which we fight evil. In its paradoxical manner, the folly of the cross elicits a great wisdom in the way Christians interpret the negative. They learn how to say yes to the entirety of what happens, how to accept not only the good but also the evil that befalls them, and they understand why it makes a salutary difference to stop restlessly seeking only the positive. They consent to the pros and cons in their state of life, in their work, in their relationships.

### *Attachment-detachment*

Desire grows. This process calls for two complementary movements: attachment and detachment. By responding to events, and thanks to prayer, desire increases and is strengthened. When we renounce cheating with the exigencies of reality and take seriously the faith perspective opened up by the Sermon on the Mount, we notice an intensification of desire, in attachment to Jesus, who declared: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (Jn 10:10). Attracted to the Mystery, we develop as beings of desire and become capable of simply desiring. We are no longer content to pursue finite objects, to obtain this or that, since we have consented to being pulled by the Holy Spirit. We desire the Spirit for ourselves and for the Church. 'How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!' (Lk 11:13).

While attached to God, desire is purified by learning to be detached. The believer concentrates on her mission as a member of the Body of Christ. To make her unique contribution, in accordance with God's will, she readily gives up many possibilities. She wants to be more than *partially* detached, because she is not satisfied with imitating the non-believer who, having a modicum of wisdom, practises a reasonable form of detachment. She realizes that, prompted by the Holy Spirit, Christian detachment must be *total* with respect to her plans, her roles, her accomplishments and her failures.

Thanks to grace, attachment-detachment settles down in us. Despite the persistence of old reflexes (particular cravings and refusals of the

negative), we stay calm throughout a double process of purification. On the receptive side, what we experience are the unique workings of the Holy Spirit, who can reach the bottom of our affectivity so as to heal it and intensify its vitality. The active side amounts to our co-operation. We figure out how not to be completely immersed in our sensibility, we acquire a higher degree of self-confidence and we ascertain with greater precision our strengths and weaknesses in handling the perceptions, enticements, repulsions, projections, fears, etc., which make up our daily lives. 'If your whole body is full of light, with no part of it in darkness, it will be as full of light as when a lamp gives you light with its rays' (Lk 11:36).

### *Beyond hesitancy*

The consecration of desire is the fruit of a basic choice, that of allowing in the full sweep of desire's attraction to the Mystery. But given our poor performance, ought we not to hesitate and doubt the validity of our yearning to give ourselves totally?

By creation this yearning is naturally inborn; moreover it is supernaturally enhanced by the Holy Spirit. A real – in contradistinction to a purely imaginary – inclination towards the One who is unqualified Good can coexist with lots of particular shortcomings. Because of grace, believers can descry the somewhat obscure manner in which they actually seek the Absolute and want to assume the consequences of that pursuit. The will is intensified and is unified by clinging to God, by depending on his presence, by believing in the mission his gracious design entrusts to us and by situating our particular role in the broad context of that gracious design. We agree to prune a rose-bush whose branches extend in all directions, so that it will look good in a garden bigger than itself. This experience does not involve self-deception, so long as we go on to prune our attitudes and actions.

In its resolution to conform to the divine plan, desire implies something passionate, tenacious, almost obstinate: the determination to take all available means to consecrate itself to God and to encourage the consecration of others as well. This effort of faithfulness remains secondary with regard to the trust in Christ, based on the fact that he calls us to consecration and gives us his Spirit to accomplish it. The most secret aspiration of the human heart then becomes quite conscious and powerful, in the certainty that the folly of the cross is the only answer suited to the enigmas of desire, of the negative and of love.

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