

CHRISTIAN COMMITMENT

By GEORGE B. WILSON

THOU ART a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek'. 'To have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse . . . till death do us part'. 'I vow perpetual poverty, chastity, and obedience'.

Hallowed words, these. Words enfleshed by countless richly human lives. Yet for all that, simply words, with all the power and the precariousness of any human symbol. To say that their true worth depends on the lives which embody them would be trite. Habits and monks and all that. But today these words face a challenge of a far more radical kind. Modern man – and need I add, therefore the contemporary christian? – is not content to ask that words be authenticated by the lives of those who profess them; he wonders whether such declarations can even have any meaning. What on earth could perpetual commitment possibly signify? Or perhaps the scalpel is wielded still more deftly so as to lay bare the jugular: yes, it is said, the words do indeed have a meaning; but that meaning is itself a betrayal of man, of his dignity and his destiny, and even a direct denial of the christian gospel. Perpetual commitment is worse than an absurdity, it is a sacrilege.

What is one to say in the face of such a charge? One could ignore it, of course, much as one learns to live with smog; but atmospheres like Everest are *there* and unlike Everest they can kill if imbibed unfiltered. A more obvious and easy task would be to hold it up as a blatant example of the soft, neo-pagan materialism of the modern post-christian world (how's *that* for a sledgehammer against the heretics?). This kind of resort to a facile moralism has been employed often enough. Unfortunately, however, it fails because it refuses to come to grips with the elements of truth in the critics' position. And what is more costly, it deprives us of the rich potential for growth which such a fundamental challenge opens out for us if we will but meet it honestly. There is bigger game than semantics or moralism lurking here.

For we must face it, there are truths which would seem to call into question the possibility of any permanent commitment on the part of man. The case is made from various points of view. Whether

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you speak of the cultural conditioning which essentially affects each of man's decisions and therefore leaves it open to re-assessment when the pre-conditions are changed; or whether you start from the contemporary view of man which sees him, not as a closed nature, as a given with pre-established frames of possibility, but rather as a spirit open to the ever new question in which he is ever called to create new meaning out of his life; the fact remains that modern man's consciousness of his fundamental historicity has been too painfully achieved to be lightly jettisoned when it comes to his own personal life-style and stance toward his decisions. And *homo theologicus* translates all of this onto an even more awesome plane when he meditates on the radically pilgrim character of human existence before the *parousia*. We live in the time of the Church, when all forms are imperfect and touched by man's sinfulness and therefore in danger of becoming idols, states of life included. This is the era of sacrament, which always retains the fateful capacity to become anti-sign and counter-sacrament. Our God remains a jealous God, his lordship be praised forever and ever.

The meandering remarks which follow do not pretend to be an answer to the problem. They may even end by making it more acute. Good theology, I take it, does not resolve the mysteries of our faith but only leads us to ask better questions of it and thereby allow ourselves to be more deeply summoned and judged and redeemed by it. I would only wish to suggest here that, if the christian fact makes the issue of permanent commitment more urgent, it must be to the same christian fact that we must look for any illumination. I fear that we christians have tried to understand commitment in abstraction from the fact of Christ, and that will always and inevitably introduce a distortion into our search.

Participation in Christ's commitment

It would be agreed, I presume, that conscious christian commitment involves participation in the life of Jesus, the Christ. But this participation is not some ontological reality devoid of 'content'; it involves also sharing in a *way* of being. The Christ in whose life the christian shares is not some gnostic ideal; he has lived through human experiences in which and through which he has disclosed forever the structure, if I may put it that way, of man's return to the Father. First, all authentic life is indelibly marked by a death-and-resurrection structure; the christian proclamation is that life, which is promised to man by the faithful God, is achieved in death.

'Was it not ordained that the Christ should suffer and so enter into his glory?'¹ This implies further a certain irreversibility. There is in the reality of commitment as lived out humanly for us by Jesus of Nazareth the disclosure that this fullest of human experiences bears within it the element of irrevocability, and that this irrevocable character of the act of commitment is both authentically human and within man's capacity. Man can in a humanly valid way lose his life and thus save it. In Jesus we are put in contact with the connaturality of a once-and-for-all 'yes' – even for this historical spirit who remains a pilgrim on the way to his Father's house.

This, of course, does not resolve the tension. For the question still remains: *To what* is the definitive yes of Jesus a response? Is it a yes to a call to perpetual openness and readiness to be led by the Father? Or to a 'must' which pins him to a here-and-now cross with its own limited, incarnate texture and indeed its own meaning as the physical extension of the real people who sinfully will his death? Or are these mutually exclusive possibilities? To put the questions in other terms: is authentic human commitment ever commitment to a form? Or to a life-style? Or is the only valid commitment available to man always and necessarily to a person or a group of persons? I believe the christian message summons us to the latter position, but there are still many nuances to be considered.

For some the notion of commitment to persons would imply that any commitment therefore always remains radically open to re-evaluation. Person in such a view is precisely that which is free to be otherwise, to re-constitute itself and create its own new meaning; it is never fixed either as subject or as term of the relationship. But is such a description really true to our experience of human personhood? To say that human person is totally and without qualification open to re-evaluation would seem to evacuate the meaning and value of human time and history, of action-and-consequence, of responsibility. As limited as man is, he does make real choices which have real meaning and real consequences. Granted that these consequences are themselves the material for further choice and the new creation of meaning which will arise from the personal stance I then take towards them, it remains nonetheless true that no amount of subsequent acts will ever unmake the reality of the original action.

¹ Lk 24, 26.

Commitment at its source

Perhaps it might be profitable at this point to turn our attention from the term of commitment, from the question whether it is directed to a thing or a person, and reflect for a moment on the origin of commitment. If human commitment is *to* something or someone, it must also be *from* someone, from a self in some measure already constituted. We must, it is true, also acknowledge that the very act of commitment, as an expression and embodiment of self, gives rise to a new experience and a new creation of selfhood. This, I believe, is the understanding of personhood and its expression which forms the backdrop of the famous statement in the constitution on the liturgy, that 'the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the fountain from which all her power flows'.¹ Each new personal expression, whether individual or communal, grows out of a self and begets a new experience and a new grasp of that very self. But however formative the experience of decision and commitment may be, it remains true that it does not proceed from a formless void. The spirit has already separated the waters before new life can issue forth; commitment, as a form of love, is from act to act. In more contemporary psychological terms, commitment issues only from one who has in some measure 'identified' himself, from one who has already become a *some-one* with the experience of a self out of which to speak. A man must have a self to commit, or there will be no act of commitment, christian or otherwise.

Nor need such reflections relegate us to the position of defending some sort of eternally immutable, closed nature. After all, this experience of the achievement of an identity or self was itself clearly something which might have gone some other way. Change a meeting or two along the way, remove a key figure who loved me and summoned me to believe I could love myself – and I would not bring the same self to my present moment of decision and possible experience of commitment, this potential share in the mystery of Jesus.

On the other hand, such a view may help us to rectify a false understanding of the biblical notion of the *pilgrim*. A man – or a people – is not constituted as pilgrim simply by being in motion. To experience the pilgrim condition a man must allow his horizons to be expanded in a twofold direction. First he must 'gather up' the

¹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10.

past, which is what we really mean by re-collection or, on another level, *anamnesis*. And that past embraces the experience of liberation *from*. To be rootless is one thing, to have the experience of being uprooted is quite another; and it is the latter which is conversion, the first essential of the biblical experience of pilgrimage. The person entering upon a commitment is aware that his power to do so, to embrace decision and the death which it necessarily entails, was given to him by the merciful love of a Father who uprooted his real self from its prison of apathy and inability to believe in himself and his worth. Beyond that, the pilgrim experience involves being stretched in another direction, being drawn on towards the God who comes to meet man from the future. The pilgrim, in other words, is summoned to gather up the past and affirm it in its fullest meaning as grace, as the gift-love of the Father creating him and bringing him to the present moment; and in the very act of that profession to place this past-now-present, this actual self with limitations arising out of his history – and indeed out of his sinful history – before the Father in expectation of that new act of his fidelity by which he will make it life-giving. Man by the love of the Father, mediated by men, has been made a self and is now called *as self* to produce new life in others.

Perpetuity and persons

At this point it might begin to seem that it is the element of *perpetuity* which is the trap; perhaps this is what distorts the question. If commitment is always present response, is the attempt now to commit myself perpetually simply another variety of the old apple, man's eternal temptation to be God? Or, to put it another way, does the seduction of perpetuity mask man's refusal to be precisely what God wants him to be: man? This is of course distinctly possible *if* what I commit myself to is perpetuity in a form or a state or a style of life. All of these can easily become so many self-projections or idols.

But if commitment is directed to persons, this would seem to be precluded. To be sure, it remains true that it is possible to manipulate another person into being no longer really a *who*, a subject, and to make of him an object; but of course that is only to say that man's efforts at commitment to persons fail too. Where there really is commitment to person it will always be something which is not fully 'my possession': this relationship is a reality which involves me and to which I can and must make a contribution, but which is

ultimately *beyond* me. It is ec-static, 'out there'. A new reality has come into being: a we. Insofar as I embark upon this new mode of being I am already 'dead to myself'. Commitment to persons, by definition, implies becoming an element in a reality which is not subject to my *control*. If I attempt to control it, I become like the butterfly collector, futilely attempting to preserve beauty by the very process which destroys its life. Commitment to person seeks to promote the integrity and freedom and personal growth of the partner, whether this be a marriage partner or a broader community in the Church. A good case could be made, it seems to me, for the view that the source of many failures in perpetual commitment, whether in marriage or celibate service, lies in our failure as a Church to explore the full demands of commitment to persons; we have made both marriage and celibate service into adherence to a state or institution, to a sociological reality, whereas the gospel message is all about love, which can only reach its term in people.

We are not out of the woods yet. For the life of human person is incarnate and embodied, it involves form and life-style and sociological reality, and necessarily so. When I love a man (or a community of men), it does make a difference whether he is Peter or Pedro. The point is that all of this, whether it be on my part or on my partner's, is the embodiment or enfleshment of a reality which lies deeper than any form or expression can actually capture, and it is to this reality, this subject of all this attempted expression, and to its unending unfolding and flowering, that a man can dedicate his life and energies. It will cost him his death, the death of experiencing his ultimate aloneness and inability to become the beloved, but that death will be swallowed up in the joyful experience of giving life and sharing in the creative act of the Father.

A share in the Father's fidelity

For indeed this is precisely what the Father does in committing himself to Jesus and to each of us in him, irrevocably and with unshakable fidelity. His creation of man as a free subject and his invitation to man to join in the ongoing task of creation lays him open to experience in his Son the radical otherness of man's 'no'; but paradoxically it is in the same act in which the Son experiences the fallibility of other men's commitment, in his loss of self in death, that he experiences the irrevocability of his Father's commitment and, with that, the power to win the free adherence and allegiance of men which we call the holy Spirit. Real commitment to human

person cannot but be perpetual and irrevocable because it is the experience of the reality of man's graced existence, which is *the* Good News. To the extent that man succeeds in committing himself to his fellow man he does the God-thing, he experiences in himself something of what it means to be God. All of which is only a much too complicated way of re-affirming what John said so simply, that God is love.

Some implications

I realize that our reflections have taken us far from the words with which we began. We may seem to have lost touch with the real people who speak these words. What does this all have to do, really, with flesh-and-blood priests, couples, and vowed celibates?

The implications on the level of spiritual exhortation for the individual are obvious enough. We must face the fact that mere perseverance in a state of life is worse than simply inadequate; it may be positively harmful to the Church's mission. States of life constitute a form of being analogous to the traditional *res-et-sacramentum*: as forms of ecclesial reality, they are an orientation to become operative signs of a further reality, namely authentic human community, and it is a prostitution of their being if they do not in fact radiate human love. Gabriel Marcel has made a significant contribution to the discussion by alerting us to the difference between mere constancy and true fidelity; ecclesiology opens us onto an even more awesome perspective when it reminds us that inauthentic sacraments are worse than empty, they are scandalous. No one has the power to wound the Church and cripple its mission quite as deeply as the unloving priest, couple or group of public celibates can.

But if the measure of the effectiveness of these signs is their success in promoting the authentic growth of persons, we have ruthlessly to re-examine all the institutions which affect the living of these vocations, to see whether they are in fact fostering that growth. I would not claim to give an exhaustive catalogue of the areas for investigation; it will be enough to indicate a few examples. Are the procedures for selection of the community's leaders (bishops, religious superiors, seminary rectors and professors, family-life boards) conducive to securing men whose primary orientation is the development of persons rather than the maintenance of an established organization and method of administration? What norms are operative in the selection, and how does the community change the norms if they are in fact actually screening out person-oriented leaders?

How is the community handling its mavericks, those who challenge the *status quo* because it is frustrating personal growth and promoting infantilism? Does the community practise ostracism of those who challenge it? At the other end of the line, what is the community's stance towards those who come to the decision that they must change their state of life if they are to be true to the gospel? Are its methods of meeting these situations in effect based on the judgment that such a person must be in bad faith? Do those who represent the community in counselling such persons have as their primary goal the 'preservation of a vocation' (i.e., the sheer continuance in a course once begun) or the person's most faithful response to the Spirit (which may or may not mean remaining in the same situation)? Can they even admit the *possibility* that such a change might be a true response to the Spirit?

I would not, of course, presume that every such change is in fact a growth in holiness. These signs too clamour for the *res* which is charity, and only by their fruits shall their real meaning be known. But what I am suggesting is that we must continually re-examine the procedures by which the organization attempts on the level of policy to attain its objectives, to see that these policies are not themselves counter-productive. The Church of the new covenant is not exempt from the seductive temptation of the old, to substitute law and custom for the painful interior conversion exacted by a pilgrim openness to the Spirit.

There would be much to say further concerning the interaction of those attempting to live the christian commitment to love in each of these ways. It may suffice for our present purposes to observe that healthy personal relationships on an adult, peer level between priests, sisters, brothers, and couples could do much to promote permanent commitments. Too many of our people are attempting to resolve in isolation from one another the difficult tensions involved in living any of these forms of the christian life. Many decisions to change states are undoubtedly being made on the basis of wholly unrealistic and idealized expectations. Ecclesial grass is subject to the same illusory appearances as any other type. Modern advances in the human sciences suggest an additional, far more important value in such relationships. It is only by confrontation with 'otherness' that man comes to know himself, and this is equally true of communities of people. Mature couples and priests and sisters and brothers can summon one another to more perfect self-knowledge if they are free enough to point out that the king or queen has no

clothes on. Perhaps this is the only way that the Church will resolve the vexing question of the identity of the priest and religious: they will be identified by the real needs of the people they are called to serve, which they will only discover in personal dialogue with them.

Evelyn says somewhere that only God really knows what love is because only God is love. And so it must be with commitment: only God can share with man the experience of what it means to be unfailingly and ever faithful; for only God is fidelity. And so it seems we must say that, as scripture is written 'from faith to faith', christian commitment is life from the Lord to the Lord. How that will be called forth in any given christian's life, whether in fidelity to a marriage partner or to a broader community of men, is, I should think, matter for unsandalled prayer, for it is surely holy ground. All I know is that it happens. The Lord loved us and delivered himself up to us.