EXPECTATIONS LOST AND FOUND

By GEORGE EARLE

SIMON came from an excellent catholic family.[1] The sisters at his primary school were soon attracted by his fine appearance, open manner and unaffected piety. 'That boy must have a vocation', they told his parents, as they prepared him for his first confession and communion, and noticed the ease with which he approached God. The seed had been sown. Simon's mother could not resist mentioning the sisters' seal of approval to her friends and eventually the news got back to Simon. Soon he himself was saying that he wanted to be a priest when he grew up.

Expectations

Simon carried with him into the secondary school a glowing report from his headmistress, who said it had been an honour to teach such a deeply religious boy. Some of the priests on the staff of St Luke's Comprehensive School were sceptical; others were more optimistic; all were eager to see what this highly praised boy would be like. As things turned out, the only disappointed members of staff were those who always hoped for the worst. Simon proved to be intelligent, hard-working, good at games, popular with his contemporaries and actively involved in several out-of-school activities. Most important of all, he reflected the virtues of his home and showed the same spontaneous appetite for religion which had impressed the sisters. He was often seen coming out of the chapel, regularly attended voluntary Mass, belonged to a weekly prayer group and took a leading part in community service.

When Simon was about fifteen, careers began to be discussed more realistically at parents' gatherings. The school had a competent careers master, who was delighted to hear that Simon was still thinking of being a priest, and suggested that he should make a retreat. Fortunately, St Luke's had a good record for promoting closed retreats, and Simon was able to spend a few days away from

[1] Simon and Cora do not exist. Their fictitious, but factually based, stories were devised to start a mid-afternoon discussion about the unfolding of a vocation.

school and home in serious prayer and reflection. He did this for three years running, and on each occasion he discussed his persistent desire to be a priest with the retreat directors, who cautiously encouraged him.

With the wholehearted support of his parents and school, Simon entered the novitiate of the Society of the Precious Blood a few weeks before his nineteenth birthday. Even those who were not normally keen to take young men straight from school were prepared to waive their objections in Simon's case. He seemed to be exceptionally balanced and mature and to have done everything possible to discern the will of God. Those who admitted him were sure that Simon was the sort of candidate they wanted in the Society.

Lost

Simon had always been a prayerful and well-behaved boy. The novitiate, with its emphasis on spiritual exercises and an orderly, unruffled existence, suited him well. The novice master had no difficulty in recommending him to take his first vows. The years of study that followed were not so satisfactory. It was difficult to say specifically what was wrong: prayer was arid, study was a drag; catechizing the local children, games and recreation with his friends all seemed pointless duties, which aroused little of the enthusiasm he had experienced at school. Simon had never been accustomed to introspection; he had been discouraged from brooding over his aches and pains by sensible parents who had a great devotion to the heroism of the martyrs. Spiritual directors talked about the dark night or a mysterious disease called *acedia* or *accidie*.[2] Superiors referred to the familiar and special problems of these years; young men of the same age were finding jobs and wives; in comparison with them the lack of responsibility and challenge were bound to produce a sense of suspension and artificiality. One man accurately described the situation as 'living in inverted commas'. Some of Simon's teachers were prepared to admit that the prescribed ration of philosophy and theology was pretty uninspiring. Afterwards Simon could see that these years were covered by a blanket of sadness and inertia. At the time, the life seemed to suit him in many ways and he was not willing to admit that he was homesick, let alone that there might be a doubt about his vocation.

[2] Both versions are to be found in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*.

Found

As Simon looked back over this period of his life, he wondered how long the grey nightmare could have continued. The turning point was clear: two events occurred at about the same time and complemented one another. The first was Vatican II: reading through the documents and returning to St Paul, especially 1 Corinthians 12, Simon saw that there was no necessary connection between a call to holiness and service in the Church on the one hand, and a vocation to the priesthood and religious life on the other. He realized that his vocation, from its very beginning and throughout its development, was based on the assumption that perfection in and service of the Lord were the special prerogatives of priests and religious. Layfolk were therefore second-class citizens, on whom lesser demands were made. Simon thought it strange that he had excluded his parents from this rule, but that their humble acceptance of their own lowly position in the Church and their exaltation of priests and religious had powerfully reinforced his false classification of members of the Church.

It was therefore with some questioning and openness of mind rather than real doubt that Simon approached the second event: the annual retreat. It turned out to be very different from other retreats he had made. Instead of asking them to listen to a number of conferences and to wander round the grounds in a prayerful daze, the retreat director that year stressed that each member of the group was different; that the real work of the retreat would be going on in the thoughts, feelings and reactions of each individual; and that the Holy Spirit would touch and guide them at the heart of their current problems and prevailing moods. For the first time, Simon's sadness and sense of being out of place was allowed to come to the surface: whereas in the past, feelings had been cast aside as irrelevant or undesirable.

Fairly soon Simon realized that this retreat was going to be decisive, because he was confronting a clear choice: either to re-affirm his commitment to religious life or to leave. Encouraged by his retreat-director, Simon decided not to be in a hurry; to restore his battered confidence in the teaching and gifts of a loving Father; to be ready for whatever it was God chose for him. Simon was surprised by the violence of his experiences. Many of his happiest childhood memories and aspirations came vividly to mind and gave him great joy; but soon afterwards he was afflicted by fits of rebellion and even nausea. He loved his parents and he hated them; he loved himself and he hated himself; he loved God and he hated God. At times these oscillations

were frightening. He wondered whether this acute self-awareness was healthy; whether his subjective explosions were getting in the way of the retreat; whether he was making any progress at all. At times he was tempted to give up altogether; to run away or to go back to his old somnolence, which was depressing, but at least had the advantage of being well-trodden territory. He wondered whether he was having a breakdown, which happened, so he had been told, to quite ordinary people. His director kindly and reassuringly convinced him that the Holy Spirit was leading him through the strange events of this interior pilgrimage. He came to see that in spite of his periodic betrayals the Lord loved him, stayed with him and was continually drawing him back to himself. He read and prayed his way through the gospels with a fresh mind and heart. They really seemed addressed to him. 'Were not our hearts burning within us?',[3] he read, and agreed that often they were.

From time to time, as he came back to his fundamental choice — priesthood or lay state? — Simon wondered which would be the more difficult course to take and which would call for the greater sacrifice. He thought it would be harder for him to give up a life-time's ambition and to break the news to his parents than to face the interminable emptiness and restrictiveness of religious life. More and more he simply prayed: 'Thy will be done'. The words, spoken countless times before, took on a new meaning; now he knew that he was praying through, with and in Christ, and that he was not pre-empting the decision, for by now he was quite prepared to stay or to go.

On the day he set aside for making his decision, Simon was flooded with light; 1 Corinthians 12 leapt from the page and he saw the Body of Christ with its infinite variety of members, each person serving and praising the Lord in his own way. Without any struggle or recriminations about the past, he saw the Lord beckoning him to be a layman, a citizen, an inhabitant of his own neighbourhood and possibly a family man. When he looked back he realized that he had been the victim of a mistaken view of the Church, which he had accepted with too much docility. In so far as he cared to blame anyone, he blamed himself for absorbing too uncritically what he was told. He did not think anyone — parents or teachers — forced him to be a religious. On the contrary, he had freely and enthusiastically followed out the consequences of his false assumption. Ten years later he is still at peace with the decision he made in the summer of 1967.

[3] Lk 24, 32.

II

Expectations

Cora had been thinking for some time about joining the Daughters of the Sacred Heart. After her final exams at the university of Wessex, she spent part of her summer vacation writing down what she hoped to find in religious life. As a thorough and systematic person she listed her expectations under several headings and sub-headings.

She first considered a number of personal expectations. She thought religious life ought to take account of her uniqueness, her own distinctive temperament, character and history. She realized that she had been blessed with a wide range of faculties and talents; that she was good at music, dancing, drama, talking to people, making cakes, and notably bad at maths and putting up with boring people. She could react to people and situations at so many different levels — mind, imagination, intuition, feelings — which could be highly developed or stunted and more or less in tune with one another. Her unique and complex self would have to grow through ever-expanding experiences, which would make demands on her freedom, her creativity, her sense of responsibility and her self-assurance. To make the most of herself she would need a group of people who would pay attention to her, encourage her, make her feel appreciated, show her that she had a special part to play. She did not think that she was simply pining for the impossible, because her family, her last year at school and the university orchestra had all given her the experience of belonging to a group which heightened and harmonized the gifts God had given her.

When she considered her religious expectations, she took the word in the general sense and then in the specific sense. Her meanderings in comparative religion and her knowledge of christianity had led her to think that religion ought to have a number of correlative dimensions. At the centre there was a historical event, which nevertheless transcended history: God's word and deed in Christ was anticipated in the Old Testament, realized in the New Testament and lived out in history, which therefore possessed unity, meaning and direction, because it was always the meeting-point between time and eternity, man and God. She realized that these were just so many fine words and ideas unless they penetrated into every corner of her own experience; she too had to meet and to mirror God as she responded to the various events of her everyday life. These experiences had to be shared in a mutual receiving and giving, which was both the foundation and the creative bond in religious communities. With others she would want to celebrate events and her experiences in words, music,

movements and the careful choice of evocative places and occasions. The religious community would have to reflect on what was happening to them, grow in understanding and then state in appropriate language the force of their experiences. Their conduct, both in its interior dispositions and in its exterior manifestations, ought to reflect God's way of dealing with people, observed in history and in their own lives: 'A God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness and faithfulness'.[4] Thus she etched out the essential and interdependent elements of her religion in its historical, experiential, social, ritual, doctrinal and ethical dimensions.

Religious life in the more technical sense, she thought, was simply this christian life lived out in a particular way. She had noticed that founders, from St Benedict to Mother Teresa of Calcutta, were only trying to embody the gospel, but with a distinctive and original accent, so that they could respond to the needs of their particular age. To be faithful to a founder it was going to be necessary to absorb both his special contribution and to adapt it to different situations.[5] Cora was already beginning to wonder how her foundress with her breton peasant background and strongly monarchical notions of government was going to fit into industrial, urban, democratic, unbelieving Britain.

Cora hesitated before outlining her secular expectations; but she had thought about the problem for some time, and was now sure that a religious person professing a belief in the incarnate Lord must have a proper appreciation and understanding of the world to which she belonged and to which she was sent. Under this heading she jotted down: a good general education, an advanced specialized education, professional qualifications, promotion through a recognized career structure, facilities for acquiring new knowledge and skills (courses, sabbaticals, libraries, encouragement), flexibility to respond to changes in herself and in the people she wanted to serve.

Before she put her list away, Cora thought it was important to express the hope that there would be an interpenetration of personal, religious and secular expectations; that there ought to be harmonious contact between her various sub-headings. She tried to clarify what she meant by drawing a diagram with arrows going in all directions. The point she was attempting to make was that each one of her expectations would be diminished and lopsided unless it received the beneficent influence of all the others.

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[4] Exod 34, 6; cf Ps 103, 8-18; Mt 5, 43-48; Eph 5, 1-2.

[5] Cf *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2.

Lost

Many years later, when she discovered her list of expectations at the bottom of her trunk, Cora's first thought was that, unlike her cousin Simon, she had never had a serious or lasting doubt about her vocation. This was all the more surprising, because hardly any of her expectations had been fulfilled. Her fragile set of personal expectations had been mown down by a mighty army of virtues, values and customs. It was not only personal possessions like books and family photographs that had been torn away in the name of poverty. Every mark of identity was carefully obliterated. She was not supposed to have a point of view or a personal reaction; her affection for her family was questioned and undermined; she was not even allowed a taste in dress or hair style. Humility, it seemed, was to be interpreted as a drab and faceless uniformity. Cora's talents were only appreciated when she was being considered for posts in one of the numerous schools owned and managed by the Daughters of the Sacred Heart. It was taken for granted that the demands of these all-powerful institutions must sweep aside any careful consideration of God's gifts. If her own inclinations and aptitudes did not equip her for the position of bursar or headmistress, they must simply be offered up. Somehow her deficiencies would be supplemented by blind obedience.

Her religious expectations had also been disappointed. Religion in the broad sense was impoverished by an excessive dependence on authority, which too often meant the authority of the local priest or bishop or some ancient author, whose book was reverently passed on from generation to generation. Cora noticed that these authorities were frequently less well qualified than she was. Doctrine or rather abstract statements of past councils and theologians reigned supreme, and the God-in-history of the scriptures was rarely acknowledged. The ethical standards of her sisters were peculiar: a high level of dedication and corporate loyalty went hand in hand with much spitefulness in the school and community, and ignorance about investments and the low wages paid to servants. Cora reflected that Kohlberg would have placed her sisters on scales four or five, but all too seldom among those who believed that their own informed conscience was the only judge of the rightness or wrongness of an action.[6] She understood that a religion which made so much of authority, doctrinal orthodoxy and conformity could not find much room for joyful and personal celebration or social expression. And so it

[6] Cf *Supplement to The Way*, no 31 (Summer, 1977), pp 27-28.

was. Apart from the periodic reminders that the cook needed time to get the breakfast, the chaplain was left undisturbed in his complete control over the liturgy. Special occasions such as vows and jubilees were delightful, blighted only by the absence of parents and families; but the daily periods called recreation were not at all what she expected: stretches of silence, broken by the click of knitting needles and small talk. In her early days she wondered whether the sisters had taken secret vows not to enjoy themselves and never to mention religion.

Religious life, in the more specialized sense, was very different from the energy, creativity and enthusiasm which appeared to prevail in the early days of the congregation. The urgent needs of God's people and the promptings of the Holy Spirit had been replaced by a conventional way of doing things, traditions accumulated over many decades and brought over from nineteenth-century France as 'the rule'. Many of her sisters seemed fearfully reluctant to consider whether these customs were sensible, apostolic or in conformity with the intentions of their foundress.

When she examined the secular expectations of her sisters, Cora noticed in them and in herself the co-existence of two opposite tendencies. On the one hand there was ill-concealed worldliness: ambition, careerism, talk about salaries and pensions, speculation about who was to get which job, grovelling to those in power, especially when they controlled purse strings, revelling in the success of their pupils and old girls. On the other hand, suspicion of all that was worldly had led to withdrawal from and ignorance about the barest elements of housekeeping, finance, politics, psychology, sociology, pedagogy and the arts. Cora thought that this simultaneous worldliness and unworldliness was due to an implicit separation between heaven and earth and the failure seriously to work for the establishment of God's kingdom on earth.

Found

Cora was puzzled to know how it was that so many of her expectations hung in shreds, while her vocation, so far as she could tell, remained as solid as ever. She realized that many of her sisters had come to share her own aspirations; but she thought that the grounds for her serenity lay elsewhere. She no longer looked for religious life in the strengths and weaknesses of a particular school, community, province or congregation. The word which best summed up her view of religious life — in both senses — was covenant. The point from which she started and to which she repeatedly returned

was that God had done and was doing everything for her. She felt a strong fellow-feeling for Elizabeth, who contrasted her barrenness and motherhood with the words: 'The Lord has done this for me'.[7] God's gifts included her own personal response to and recognition of God in the depths and heights and infinite variety of everyday life. The covenant was therefore a mutual interaction with God, which in turn had to be shared with, received from and given back to friends and passed on to other people. Covenant took shape in community and gave impetus to apostolate.

Community now seemed to her much more complicated than the group living under the same roof. She likened it to the many facets of a diamond or the antennae of a plant, insect or radio station. Strands went out in so many directions: her family, members of other congregations, old friends and new ones, a prayer group, people in the neighbourhood, pupils and colleagues at school. All of them were in different ways gathered into the covenant community, experiencing God's steadfast, loving action, responding and communicating this great fact to one another. She realized, painfully at times, that there was an awkward problem of weaving such diverse communities into a whole, and of reconciling them with her home community and her own congregation. In spite of awkward tensions, she found that the different communities did enrich one another. Home was a better place when she went out and returned to share what she had been doing; when she could be on her own for a while and come back to the community; when past and present could talk to one another across the decades, whether in conversations with older sisters or in her studies on the early history of the congregation. Local life meant more to her when she felt it to be part of national and international movements. Her notion of overlapping and interlocking communities was well expressed by St Ignatius: 'That the diversity may, when united by the bond of charity, be helpful to both of them and may not engender contradiction or discord among them or with their fellow men'.[8]

Covenant and community, as she experienced them in her relationship with the Lord and her friends, were a great improvement on the religious life which had so failed to realize her expectations many years ago. But there were still plenty of disappointments as

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[7] Lk 1, 25.

[8] St Ignatius: *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* (ed and tr George E. Ganss, St Louis, 1971), 624 j, pp 277-78.

she became more conscious of her frailty and waywardness and the limitations of her fellow religious. Happily she understood that her personal, religious and secular expectations were not unattainable dreams, but lived and integrated to the full by Jesus Christ. Her disappointments served as fingers pointing to him: 'I am not the Christ.[9] . . . Look, there is the Lamb of God.[10] . . . He must grow greater, I must grow smaller'.[11] Lost expectations were no longer interpreted as a depressing sterility, but as a blessed lowliness, which enabled her to say:

> This is what I pray, kneeling before the Father, from whom every family, whether spiritual or natural, takes its name. Out of his infinite glory may he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden selves to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts . . . until knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fulness of God. Glory be to him whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory be to him from generation to generation in the Church and in Jesus Christ for ever and ever. Amen. [12]

[9] Jn 1, 21.
[10] Jn 1, 29.
[11] Jn 3, 30.
[12] Eph 3, 16-20.