LAW AND EVANGELICAL LIFE

By G. FOUREZ

IN SPITE OF the efforts made in the last decade by many religious Institutes towards radical re-orientation, it would appear that we have scarcely begun to perceive the sort of changes involved in the fulness of the evangelical life.

Religious life is still subject to the yoke of theologies which, according to the expression of Teilhard de Chardin, 'often command the world not to move'. We can hardly expect, in any generation, that the authentic living of the gospel should cease to be other than Christ himself, 'set for the rise and fall of many in Israel, a sign of contradiction' (Lk 2, 33).

One certainly essential element for the evangelical life is enshrined in the mission of the Twelve, and repeated in the sending out of the seventy-two disciples:

> Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not take a spare tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there, and from there depart. . . . And they set out and went from village to village, preaching the gospel and healing everywhere (Lk 9, 3-5; cf 10, 1-11).

The call implies a way of life which is centred on the practicality of living the Kingdom of God in the actual human situation of the here and now. Once the apostle believes that the Kingdom can be lived like this and today, then concern for the future is totally different from the anxiety over survival which is a mark of the current apostolic scene. It is not that the apostle is unconcerned with people's future; it is that the very desire to live takes its shape from the human relationships implied in preaching the Good News.

In practice, 'evangelicals' are not obsessed with their survival as groups or individuals, but with God's 'present moment'. They can live fully in the 'now' without seeking first for assurance about tomorrow. They are able to risk themselves, a leaven certainly for the future as they live out the values of brotherhood and liberation: values which cannot come alive when there is undue concern about assuring one's future. This is also an attitude which leads to such a sharing in the common human condition with its deprivations and constraints, that solidarity with the poor and the oppressed is an inevitable consequence. It is not possible to lead the evangelical life and allow ourselves to be trapped in structures which alienate us from the deprived minorities.

The paradox which is immediately apparent in the evangelical attitude is that of the beatitudes. To share people's life is to share their aspirations to the joy and happiness which is rooted in the gift of the Kingdom and of the freedom of God's children. But this is the freedom and happiness of faith and hope, which can flourish in the soil of ambiguity, limitation and the very

curtailment of freedom. Radically to choose from day to day the values of liberation and friendship is a constant stimulus and a witness in the struggle for freedom.

Thus, those who opt to live in the 'now' of God's Kingdom must become not only a leaven, but an unparalleled revolutionary sign in modern society, whose sights are constantly being lowered in the name of the pragmatic. The evangelical community (and by this we do not mean a group necessarily living under the same roof) which dares to speak in the name of Christ escapes from the snare woven for themselves by those who, with their eye on 'survival' or 'realism', always end by being taken over by the alienating structures of society. There are too many religious congregations and communities so busied about their own apostolate, their corporate commitments, their own survival, that they can scarcely glimpse the radical stance demanded by the gospel — of being 'in the world yet not of the world' (cf Jn 17, 11; 14-18). Yet the effective signs of religious consecration themselves proclaim a life directed to the now and not to the future: celibacy, for instance, which essentially emphasizes the now of God, and detaches the person from any obsession with the merely human future.

Sign of contradiction

To live the gospel in today's world begins from the recognition of being endowed with the gift of God's freedom. But to experience the gift is itself a call to turn aside from modern society and its structures. This divergence connotes not an escape from the mainstream of life, but precisely to live in the world without embracing its values. The authentic Christian has no wish to be marginalized. But he accepts the fact that one cannot serve two masters: the values of the gospel and those of the world.

To live the gospel radically is thus to become a sign of divergence from the values of the society in which one lives. It is not hard to imagine evangelical communities (undoubtedly few in number) which are 'deviant', marginal, with respect to the rest of society. This marginality implies not a withdrawal from historical evolution, but a constant challenge to the limited and unjust ideas of society. If, for the sake of the gospel, these communities are often in conflict with established society, this is not to destroy the latter but to open it to a fulness yet unknown. For the religious to be 'deviant'[1] is to be like Christ, a person who can cross all barriers which separate groups (publicans, pharisees, prostitutes), who shares feasts and banquets as well as anguish and human struggles, confident in the power of the Good News. The failure of many revolutionary groups lies in the fact that they are defined solely

[1] I use 'deviance' not in any pejorative sense, but as accepted by sociologists. This is not to deny that the deviant group will always bring out the latent conflicts. It is a difficult question to discover how far the deviant group can be marked as 'separate' from society and continue to survive. Cf Kanter, R.: *Community and Commitment* (New York, 1972).

by their opposition to others, so that they are finally completely marginalized. The gospel group, on the other hand, is defined by grace: that is, by liberation freely received. That is why the marginalization of the Christian is perhaps best characterized by peace in concrete soldiarity, rather than by the anxiety and bitterness of the average revolutionaries.

To recognize the deviant character of the evangelical life is also to pose the question of its relation with the hierarchical Church (and/or the establishment), and finally that of 'canonical recognition'.

Canonical recognition of religious life

Religious life today is organized by canon law, as the substance of this *Supplement* demonstrates. Reflection will show that such organization seems to involve two differing conceptions of religious life.

According to one, religious must be the most faithful servants of the ecclesiastical institutions; their task is to do surely and quickly what they are asked to do. On this view, religious orders will be the first to furnish 'the staff' of established institutions, such as schools, hospitals, parishes and so on. It is expected that they will be the first to fulfil the orders and directives of the hierarchy. In a real sense, they often appear as mediators between the ecclesiastical administration and the rest of the people of God.

According to the other perspective, evangelical communities will often find that life puts them at odds with ecclesiastical institutions. The Church owns and loves her sinners and thus is 'always in need of purification' (*Lumen Gentium*, 8); she is unceasingly tainted 'by the spirit of the world', and it is good for her to encounter Christians who will tell her: 'your spirit is not the spirit of the gospel'. This current of evangelical life is very traditional in the history of the Church. So many founders of religious orders have had to say this, by example if not by word. Conflicts between ecclesiastical authorities and radical evangelical communities are inevitable; they are the direct result of taking evangelical life seriously. Canonical tradition itself has ratified this in the practice of 'exemption', by which some independence from common law was granted to religious orders.

The ordinary way of living of 'the world' is not compatible with the spirit of the gospel. Those who are set on living this spirit radically must expect to be rejected by society, because they cannot accept the principles of efficiency, productivity, 'consumerism', private property, capitalism, exploitation, control, indoctrination, inquisition, and so on. And such deviation and marginalization is not restricted to civil society. It is a firmly established tradition for evangelical life to be opposed to the spirit of the 'world' in the Church itself as well as in the State. Unfortunately, deviation from 'the spirit of the world' has too often been interpreted as the acceptance of a marginal system of values which is not genuinely evangelical. The 'flight from the world' was often an excuse for keeping one's hands clean from the dirt which is endemic to the lives of ordinary people. Neither the 'habit' nor ritual

purity is a sign of evangelical contradiction. Gospel deviation is much more radical, and, because of its own peaceful character, is much more of a threat to established society. To live evangelical values and the consequent deviation from society is certainly to enjoy the liberty of God's children and his life in abundance; but it also means to belong to a whole christian tradition of conflicts and persecutions which is always the lot of those who keep the word alive. At the same time, the christian way of facing these conflicts is a call to love one's enemies (which, parenthetically, implies the existence of enemies). The power of Christ is that of humble love, and of solidarity with the oppressed.

One of the most difficult but most important tasks for evangelical communities today is to clarify their deviation *vis-à-vis* the establishment society. Actually to be recognized as deviant within a system is to be an integral part of it, but in a different way from those who accept the established character of the system. For a group to define itself within a larger group is to trace lines of demarcation from others. This is not easy for an evangelical community, one of whose finalities is to proclaim by its life the denial that there should be any such separation in human society. That is why it is essential that evangelical communities clarify their relationship with others, without letting themselves be defined uniquely by them. It is in this light that the profession of the counsels are given meaning. Such profession is not a temporal definition of religious life. The counsels are unreal if they are seen simply as a way to situate oneself in society with respect to possessions, power and sex. To give a social context to the three counsels of poverty, obedience and chastity, some 'political' analysis is necessary. It must be seen how a radical Christian can 'profess' such realities in today's society.

From many points of view it is clear that evangelical life is not directly defined by the three vows; certainly its 'social' essence is the radical stance the 'professed' take in society for the sake of the gospel. Such a stance appears to be mere posturing, unless it is substantiated by some analysis of how it is socially relevant. Actually, the three areas defined by the counsels are readily subject to such political analysis; as long as we focus not so much on how they were understood in the past social context, but how they confront the present.

So it seems that the vow of 'poverty' is real in so far as it expresses genuine solidarity with today's oppressed. A modern meaning of 'obedience' will speak about non-oppressive ways of using power. Chastity in its turn speaks to a society in which people consider others as their own possession by marriage. Through such analysis, evangelical Christians can understand that there is some mutual alienation between themselves and society, which involves them in many conflicts.

In fact, there are many conflicts in the history of religious orders; and this is the order of things for those who want to follow Christ. The difficulty

resides in learning how to live through these conflicts with the goodness and the peace of those who, like Jesus, recognize themselves as loved and finally reconciled.

In this area, it is obviously legitimate to ask whether the emphasis placed on the canonical recognition of religious life does not risk extinguishing the radical dimension of the gospel by forcing Institutes into certain predisposed patterns. One can also ask if there is any sense by distinguishing so sharply two categories of Christians, 'lay' and 'religious'. Perhaps it was necessary in an agrarian society based on the status of the nobility and the privileges of corporations. But was it entirely evangelical? Is it necessary that the Church grant a 'status' to religious?

In any case, if one looks at the history of religious life for the last fifty years, it seems that all the confusion of ecclesiastical rules has scarcely favoured the flowering of a radical evangelical life. It has been said above that 'the perfection of written law tends to coincide with the passing away of the circumstances for which it was written'. Perhaps the rather frenzied organization of religious life in the Code of 1917 marked the final stage of a movement of confinement of evangelical life in the institutionalized Church. Certainly the armies of religious men and women organized across the face of the Church over half-a-century appeared to be more at the service of the institution than as a charismatic leaven. One wonders further whether the abandonment of canonical structures would not happily restore the place of religious life in the conflict which lies below the choice of radical evangelical living. The contradiction is again apparent: to acknowledge as good the solicitude of the Church which wants to be universal, to maintain unity with the whole christian community and its shepherds, while still remaining 'the sign that is spoken against' in the name of Christ. Even if evangelical movements are sometimes found to be in conflict with the ecclesiastical and social community, it is necessary that they do not let themselves be effectively separated; thus they will remain as effective signs as well as posing the right questions. It is of crucial moment that evangelical communities be in a certain way 'recognized' for what they are; but the 'canonical organization' is not required for that. The Council has stressed the fact that, traditionally, the hierarchical Church 'recognized' the authenticity of religious life but did not 'organize' it. One cannot help but wonder if, in the actual conception of canon law, the canonicity of religious life does not run the risk of destroying religious life itself.

Another aspect of the organization of religious congregations is important here: their centralization and the importance given to vertical obedience. It is interesting to note that insistence upon a strict and entirely vertical obedience appeared very late in the development of religious life, probably not in a significant way before the beginning of the jesuit Order. The Society of Jesus has indeed given itself structures very different from that of conventual chapters, one that is extremely efficacious and is a good parallel

to the large commercial companies born at that period. Such centralization for a group having a well-determined task was copied by many later structures. Religious life was thus similar, organizationally, to the structures of a budding capitalism; which certainly permitted religious orders really to share in depth the destiny of the people of their period. But the consequences are possibly grave, in this capitalist and technocratic world; we need to take another and deeper look at the structures of religious congregations. Do they not resemble in many respects the large multi-national corporations of our times? Does the mobility of a personnel that can be moved around according to needs stem solely from a call to radical evangelical living, or does it unconsciously give credence to the de-humanizing structures of the technological world? Is the importance given to the job to be done inspired uniquely by the urgency of the Kingdom, or is it partly a result of the non-critical acceptance of the principle of performance proper to the capitalist and technological world? Would it not be necessary, in other words, to review radically the implications in today's culture of the sociological structures of government in religious orders? Is the future of evangelical life to be found in the social structures of industrial companies, or in other movements entirely freed from the influence of economical and political structures?

One can thus expect to see religious life distance itself from the ecclesiastical tendency to move towards absolute control, a little like Dostoievsky's Grand Inquisitor. In opposition to this mentality, religious life must witness to fraternal community.

The fraternal character of evangelical life

One cannot be Christian on one's own. One needs others, Christians and non-Christians. That is why it is not possible to practise a radical evangelical life without belonging to a particular community (although this, evidently, does not demand living under the same roof). It is thanks to this particular bond that Christians can have their anchorage in a socio-cultural group with its diversity of involvement, and verify together the evangelical authenticity of their response. It is this fraternal community which helps Christians to discover the spiritual sense of the gospel in the experience of believers. Without this fraternal community, the radical call of the gospel would have to be addressed solely to supermen. And even these would, when alone, soon be reintegrated in the alienating social structures.

But we must face a fact: the present structures of religious life still insist more often on the hierarchical character of the organization of the community than on its fraternal character. In other words, these structures are influenced much more by vertical relationships than by horizontal ones; this is why communities often become ideologically and objectively the two parts of an oppressive and oppressed society. If, at the grass-roots, one is becoming more and more aware of the importance of the horizontal character, it is equally evident that many hierarchical figures, both in the episcopacy

and in religious Institutes, are still extremely negative. It is likely that one of the most radical transformations of evangelical life in the present world would be a genuine renewal in fraternal relationships. The gospel itself insists on this point:

> You, however, must not allow yourselves to be called Rabbi, since you have only one Master, and you are all brothers. You must call no one on earth your father, since you have only one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor must you allow yourselves to be called teachers, for you have only one Teacher, the Christ.[2]

Nevertheless, the hierarchical structure of religious life has usually been restrictive rather than fraternal: it is more often a question of controlling life than of promoting it. Even in the most apparently open communities, authority at the moment of crisis frequently responds by a reflex of control and security. Is such an attitude evangelical, or is it not rather a mirror of human relations as our society builds them?

In order to be evangelical, the community has to abandon the temptation of controlling its members. There is certainly considerable risk involved. It is because he did not control Judas that Christ was brought to die on the cross. It is clear that the attitude of confidence is always a risk, because it makes one vulnerable to the other. But this is perhaps one of the tests of evangelical character: when the fear of extinction or of becoming more involved leads to the manipulation of the members of a community, is it possible to pretend that one is following radically the teachings of Christ? It is then essential to permit each one to use his own freedom. That is why, in the process of renewal, it will be necessary to accept a true pluralism and way of acting alongside others without wanting to model them on ourselves. To accept to live in a group familially, to engage one's whole being in the following of Christ, is to take the risk of being led by this group into an uncontrollable situation. To remain faithful to the brotherhood and to bear together the consequences, this is surely to live out the type of involvement expressed in traditional religious life by the promise of obedience? The content of the vow will be seen, sooner or later, to hold the choice of preferring to be oppressed rather than to become an oppressor.

These reflections suggest, I hope, why religious life is a very relevant topic in today's society, and why many distance themselves from what they see to be the practical consequences of the commonly accepted idea of religious life. Shall we be able to renew over and across the accepted forms, or must we admit that we cannot put new wine into old skins without making them leak all over? We hope and pray that this is the moment to let the dead bury the dead and to follow Christ.

---

[2] Mt 23, 8. It is worth reflecting, in the light of this passage, on certain words and titles that flavour current as well as traditional ecclesiastical vocabulary.