

Life of the Spirit

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ACCORDING to a recent enquiry there is reason to believe that perhaps as few as five per cent of Catholics in this country can be said to relate their religion to their lives.

I am not altogether certain about what is meant by the relation between religion and life in this context. I presume what people have in mind is the type of regular church-goer whose ordinary business and home life shows no outward sign of Catholic activity or whose behaviour is even known to be lax and irregular. Yet, of course, it may be that there is real spiritual life unperceived by the observer, and it may also be that the irregularity and sin stimulate an intense, if painful, spiritual preoccupation. On the other hand, constant church activity with membership of many a society and sodality is compatible with a life, both in its religious and secular outlook, that is spiritually very shallow. It is always very hard to judge what is really going on between God and any individual soul.

Yet it does seem broadly true of a high proportion of church-going Catholics that their religion is divorced from their lives in the sense that their religion seems to extend only to public worship, certain acts of prayer and some grip of Christian teaching where their family and marital life are concerned. Apart from that, the life of the spirit seems hardly to exist, and this may be true even when they are active in parish and public work. To discover the root cause of this seems to me the essential question for the Church today. If so, the problem is not really at the external and statistical level of behaviour. It is much deeper down, and concerns the relations between *religious* observance, and the quality of *spiritual* life, and this, not only where Catholics are concerned, but

¹ The substance of a paper read to the LIFE OF THE SPIRIT Conference, Hawkesyard, October, 1951.

also with people in the world generally. For it is always possible that we may come across a higher quality of spiritual life among people with very little in the way of religious appurtenance than among some with a great deal of it. And if so, very valuable light on the problem may be derived from the fact. Indeed, I think that a serious enquiry into this question of why religion and real spirituality can be so divorced from one another will land us, oddly enough, into having to answer the sort of question which popular newspapers and magazines love discussing—the sort of question which is stated in terms of: 'Are the Churches doing their work?' Such a question may make us smile, but the reason is really that we do not understand its serious implications and that the sort of people who usually ask this question answer it in a ludicrous fashion, such as suggesting that a cinema should replace outworn ceremonies. Some Catholics dislike it particularly because Catholic churches are full, and therefore it seems obvious that the Catholic Church at least is doing its work today. They would be more intelligently facing the implications of the question if they considered, first, how it is that full churches are consistent with apparently non-Christian lives, and, second, how it is that despite full churches vast numbers drift away from the Church, while at a time when there really seems to be an appetite for some spiritual reality among people generally, only a handful are in fact attracted to God's own Church which, even phenomenally, seems so well placed to help them?

Perhaps, too, there is some fear lest a radical facing of such questions should involve one in taking up heterodox or at least dangerous positions. Yet of course the truth is that the stronger our faith is, the firmer our conviction about the truth and fullness of the Church, the better and sounder will our position be for giving the right and most fruitful answers to what seems to me to be the real religious problem of our times.

Yet I admit that it is never easy to find the right language with which to express what appear to be the shortcomings of our religious practice and way of life, and thus avoid being misunderstood. Maybe we shall be safe enough if we think of it all in terms of putting first things first, or, if one prefers, of recognising and distinguishing ends and means, and relating them together properly. For the Catholic considering the immense breadth and depth of God's revelation it is not so much a question of saying

that this is wrong or false, but rather that this is out of its proper place, this was meant to be used as a means to an end, but in practice has too often become an end in itself. One has to remember, too, I think, that one cannot presume to lay down the law for individual cases. The actual relations between God and the individual soul, I repeat, always remain mysterious to the observer. What seems like rank superstition may be a rich means of grace for this or that actual soul. Still, the world is what it is and religion seems to fall far short of doing the job which our faith tells us it ought to be doing, so we must consider what is being lost through putting first things second (or apparently forgetting them altogether) and hopelessly muddling up means and end.

The end and meaning of religion is nowhere better stated than in the answer to the second question of the catechism: 'To know, love and serve God', yet I venture to suggest that nine-tenths of our religious practice, observance and way of life can be said to be only distantly related in our consciousness to this end. Whereas the true spiritual movement, it would seem, is from God to self and back to God, the actual religious movement practised and preached is from self to God, apprehended anthropomorphically through human and self-centred concepts and imagery, back to self.

Our spiritual comfort, *our* respectability, *our* craving for happiness, *our* salvation, here and hereafter—rather than 'Eternal Life', as defined in St John, have in fact replaced the knowledge, love and service of God as the real end of religion. Now it seems to me that this substitution has had the most fatal effects and goes far to explain the large measure of religious impotence today. For we are all inevitably children of our own times. Our times have called in question practically everything which is defended or taken for granted by the Church as the basis of her system of doctrine and practice. But if religion has come in effect to be centred on the self, on ourselves who are children of doubting, sceptical times, religion itself is directly affected by our modernist personalities. This is really just as true of those who resist temptations against the faith as of those who reach some sort of inner compromise about it all. In either case you get some degree of double life. In either case religion is bound to be off the psychological centre of our personalities, so to speak. If we dig in our heels, as it were, and consciously plump for the full bag of tricks

in this self-centred, mainly personal salvation-seeking religion, our religious attitude, while outwardly integrated, is inwardly one of constant protest, not only against the world, but against part of ourselves and probably the most vital part of ourselves. At best, our religious attitude becomes sectarian. We think of ourselves and our fellow Catholics as strange, not quite real, people apart. We feel alone, individual, self-conscious, artificial.

All this is true of the most Catholic, the most faithful among us, and no doubt particularly true of the clergy who are, as it were, the professionals within the Church. But of course in the case of the vast majority the line of division is outwardly manifested in their personality and Catholic life. The vitality, the belief, the interest really belongs to the anti-religious, the 'secular world, and the religious life is more or less of an imposition, even though a self-imposition. One feels that if, *per impossibile*, God revealed that he had not intended men to be immortal, that the life of our souls would be extinguished by his act, then Catholic religion would collapse as completely as a balloon when the air that keeps it aloft is released. Religion has in fact become debased into little more than a hedge against the chances that all is not over after death. Some take this more seriously, and really do want to give part of themselves to religion; the majority do the minimum, just in case. And, inevitably, vast numbers drift away altogether. But in this setting of a self-centred, personal salvation-seeking religion, at whatever degree of seriousness it may be taken by a self essentially divided in its views and values between this world and a higher and better one, religion tends to be thought of primarily as an 'extra', an odd appendage to one's real life, that demands doing the right things in religious observance and moral practice, and, in so far as speculation enters, sets us looking for the right answers to doubts, from whether God really exists to the subtlest theological or moral problem.

I have said all this, because it seems to give the right key towards solving the problem of why Catholic religious life seems so often to be spiritually barren and why it so fails to impress a world that is seeking the answer to the problem of human life. This kind of religion which in effect transposes the places of self and God, and could really be described logically as a form of idolatry, seems unfortunately consistent on paper with strict orthodoxy because it denies nothing, but merely disarranges in

practice the relative effective order of importance of the factors that make up the religious whole, while acknowledging intellectually the true order. But however correct, however worthy, however much requiring self-sacrifice and discipline it may be, it is not spiritual or only very indirectly so. For spirituality begins and ends and all the time centres on God, the supreme Spirit, the supreme Reality, the supreme Good, and everything of true religion is but the means to know, love and serve God. I repeat that I am trying to work the thing out logically, for I am perfectly aware that God can and does make short work of our shortcomings and that under the *appearances* of what I described above as a kind of idolatry his grace can and does flow into souls whose state is not governed merely by the logic of the position. But this does not necessarily prevent the ill-effects of an outlook that, taken to the extreme, logically stands on its head.

As for the world, we can, I think, understand fairly easily why it is not impressed by what it sees of much of our Catholic life and practice. We must accept the fact that the world has by and large lost all its belief in the philosophical and theological basis of the Catholic faith as taught and taken for granted in the Church. We, of course, still accept this basis, and that is the reason why a religion which has come to be so self-centred psychologically nevertheless essentially retains its objective, transcendental and God-centred character. But to the outsider the terms of that transcendental faith mean less than nothing, and for him our self-centred preoccupation is far from attractive. For the world's religious interest, in so far as it has one, is precisely to get away from an intensity of self-preoccupation which has brought it nothing but disillusion and disaster. In many reflective quarters there is today a revived interest in the so-called mystical approach to religion, Eastern as well as Western. This undoubtedly reflects a feeling for, a search for, the profoundest, the most fundamental, the least self-regarding element of religion, for the permanent, the truly real behind the world of deceptive and corrupt appearance. And the search is not the reasoning type of search which seems to find a place or a logical necessity for a self-worked-out God whose existence remains subject to changing attitudes of the human reason, but an investigation into the actual experiences of other races and specially spiritually endowed persons whose lives, characters, works, quality, testify to contact with the Divine, the

Numinous, the Eternal Other.

But this only affects a tiny minority, at any rate in the West, and I am thinking rather of the type of idealism which today has its wide appeal. Communism and Fascism, for example, are partly attempts to create a positive, worthy way of using corporate human life in terms of the limited values which alone survive for many post-Christians. However false and ultimately suicidal such ideals may be, they do reflect a strong reaction from the self-centred individualistic outlook of *laissez faire*, petty nationalism, Benthamism and so on towards the search for an 'other', a cause, a system that is felt to be nearer accounting for the yearnings of men, as opposed to a man, and in the service of whom the individual can more worthily fulfil his and their destiny.

Now between a world which has such *out-reaching* feelings and thoughts, however puerile and inadequate in themselves, a world which is frankly fed-up with the more self-regarding self and thus committed to a choice of banal idealisms or desperately making the best of sensual appetites, and a professional religious outlook seemingly dedicated in large measure to self-regarding practices of unintelligible pieties and moral commandments and habits largely unrelated to the conflicts and values of the day, there is surely an almost impassable gap.

The position would be a matter almost for despair, let alone an obvious cause of Christian ineffectiveness and internal Catholic weakness, were it not true that so much of institutional religion today, though conforming to the letter of Catholic teaching and tradition in theory and on paper, actually falls very far short of Catholicism. As too often practised, it is not a religion centred on God, but so largely on ourselves.

In what sense our religion has become self-centred can be briefly illustrated, I think, on the level of religious practice, the level of morals and the level of philosophy and apologetics.

The sacraments are an outward sign of inward grace, one of the most powerful and striking means chosen by God to help us to know, love and serve him, to make his will our will, to learn to surrender ourselves to him. Yet they are too often regarded as primarily a means of self-improvement and a source of personal consolation. We can see this particularly clearly in the most wonderful of them all, the Eucharist. The Eucharist is of course an integral part of the Sacrifice of the Mass in which Christ the

God-Man, is the victim offered up in praise and honour to the Eternal Father in unity with the Holy Spirit—God's own chosen supreme means of making men one with God. Every prayer of the Mass makes this clear; yet how many of those who regularly go to Communion can explain the meaning of the Mass and the relation of Communion to it? Instead of offering the Eucharist as victim, and receiving it as the means of self-surrender to God, is it not the common practice to receive the body and blood of Christ for ourselves, to fill *us*, to comfort *us*, to console *us*, as though our enjoyment of all this were the end of all religion? The difference here may seem very tenuous because it is God himself whom we receive, but the Incarnation and the Eucharist were intended as the sublimest means to the end; they were not intended as ends in themselves. And *quoad nos* a confusion even here is dangerous and weakening because the representation which we make to ourselves of the Second Person, and which God enabled us to make to help us to know and love and serve God, is a human, temporal, spatial representation, and consequently a sensible and self-bound representation. As the God-invented supreme *means*, it is sublime; as the end in itself it can and does become *quoad nos* a remove from the Supreme Reality, a step human- and self-wards. And, liturgically, to dissociate Communion from the Mass, which is the common tendency, is wrong. The result is psychologically to rest in the concept of bringing God to man, instead of helping man to yield himself to God. In practice, Communion can thus become little more than a ritual, at times almost a social thing.

Confession is today a greatly lauded Sacrament because of its good effects on us. It is said to be the best form of psycho-analysis because it clears our minds of morbid complexes and removes the sense of guilt. But all this which we emphasise is quite secondary. How much attention is actually given to the essential spiritual significance of the Sacrament, God's loving means of clearing the soul so that his grace can inhabit, fill and suffuse it even after the will to self has gone the lengths of actually turning with full deliberation and consent against God? What God has done to enable us to forget self and look to God again is the part of the Sacrament that matters, and the beneficent psychological results are but a consequence. Nor do even these always result when we concentrate on what happens to us instead of turning to God,

because through this error, confession can either create scrupulosity, thus increasing the self-regarding emotion, guilt, or be looked upon as a kind of magic trick which will work whatever our dispositions may be.

Other Sacraments, like Baptism, Confirmation and even Matrimony, tend to be likewise regarded as necessary rituals which open certain doors that we need to have opened rather than as openings of the doors of heaven and letting through them the light and love and power of God, so that what we want to do and have to do here below is raised to the level of the divine and completely altered in its inner significance and life because it can now be done with and for God who is our being and our end.

Beyond the realm of the Sacraments which Christ instituted as our necessary means, when we know about them, of surrender to God, there lie the multitude of rich and diverse helps put at our disposal by a God of infinite inventiveness, from the devotion to our Lady, in its own special class, to that of all God's friends, the Saints, and to the manifold devotions and exercises of piety. But each and any of these means or helps, some of them very remote indeed from the true spiritual end, can and are habitually used as ends. The old charge against Catholics of worshipping our Lady, the Saints, images, or using devotions, indulgences and what-not superstitiously is not without foundation, even though it is easy to refute it by quoting sound doctrine which every Catholic accepts in theory. When in fact Catholics grow into the habit of excluding from their piety and devotion all consciousness of God the Father, God the Holy Ghost, and even God the Son, the process is in fact one of preferring the beauty, the sentiment, the human attraction, the concrete image, all of which are human and self-regarding, to the supreme and only final end of the life of the spirit, God himself. Of course, it is true that human acts are rarely pure one way or another, and no doubt we do subconsciously intend to pray to God when apparently praying exclusively to St Patrick; and God, I am sure, sees to it that souls come nearer to him across the very solid plaster of St Patrick's statue. But it still remains true that all kinds of purely this-world, self-indulging, associations tend to corrupt true spirituality through the confusion between the end and the means. Our hearts were made for God, and we cannot afford to set up our tents permanently even on roads which, if properly followed, should lead us to God. I

need hardly add that the Church itself, the Mystical Body corporately and socially realising Christ, can very easily be considered as a quasi-temporal end and thus become the instrument of all kinds of this-world, sectarian, political, self-regarding loyalties which can and do gravely interfere with the love of God and the love of our neighbour for God's sake. Perhaps this last danger is the subtlest of all for Catholics today.

The same general disorder can be illustrated far more simply in the moral sphere, where the conditions or technique necessary for human beings to realise in some degree Almighty God are converted into ends and ideals that are regarded as more valuable and important than God. The law, our own respectability, the right thing to do, even the gratification derived from enduring hardships, mortifying oneself, conforming to the precepts of Church or society, these things tend to replace the supernatural purpose for the realisation of which they, or some of them, are means and from which alone in the end they derive their value. So much so that among Catholics devotions and pieties themselves come to be regarded as moral duties rather than spiritual acts. It is true, no doubt, that with our complex human nature, which only feebly apprehends the true end, it is necessary to inculcate and practise moral discipline and teach the Commandments as it were for their own sake and because of their intrinsic value. This is obvious in education. But even in the temporal order men grow to realise more or less clearly that morality is necessary for the good of society and their own real good. How far do Catholics realise the same in the spiritual order? The end many conceive, in so far as they do conceive one, is usually the avoidance of damnation and, at a higher level, doing their *duty* as good Catholics. Yet even in the natural order we realise well enough that the quality of the end and the degree in which we feel the need to reach it governs our attitude towards the means. The soldier, the explorer, the mountaineer, the scientist think nothing of enduring the most terrible hardships or putting up with years of discipline and self-sacrifice for the sake of the vision which draws them, and we know that those who serve earthly ideologies endure as much as martyrs have done for the sake of the cause. If we are only prepared to do a minimum, if indeed we come to regard our religious and moral duty as a habit, a convention, something often psychologically indistinguishable from the self-regarding morality of respecta-

bility, it is because it is unrelated to our vision, the vision of Supreme Reality, Supreme Love, God himself, because we concentrate on the religious and moral means, not on the vision which is our true spiritual end and which includes the good in all its aspects. It is little wonder if, in an age when human ideals can be so strong and when God's revelation about himself is everywhere implicitly denied, Catholics themselves, children of that world, reduce a visionless, loveless, religion to self-regarding morals and pieties more or less half-heartedly accepted. It is even less wonder if the world thinks little of our claims, or at best admires our moral teaching for its social, rather than its spiritual, value and truth. That is why the State is so ready to woo the Church, say, in wartime, when a purely this-world, perhaps a fundamentally anti-Christian, morale has to be whipped up.

And I think that I can, coming to a conclusion, sum up the whole disorder by a brief consideration of what has happened to our whole metaphysical outlook as Catholics. The fundamental metaphysical question we ask ourselves is 'Does God exist?' or, more crudely, 'Is there an after-life?'. Once this question has been really asked with the expectation of a full and adequate answer in terms of our human reasoning, we always remain subject to doubts about the answer. The conclusion to which we come one day can always be reversed on another, and thus that endless problem of the relation between faith and reason dogs our religious lives. This approach involves the subconscious assumption that *we* are the arbiters. It is for *us* to settle the question of God's existence. *We* decide. True, from the angle of theology we take and teach the opposite view that God reveals himself by the divine gift of faith, but the faithful know little of theology and a great deal about a doubting world. Yet if our religious training, habits, life, centred on its only possible object, the knowledge, love and service of God as revealed by faith and realised by the spiritual life, we should soon see that the only real philosophic question is not whether God exists, but whether we exist. Only the most astonishing delusion of self-centredness, of subjectivism, can explain our questioning reality itself, reality surrounding us, suffusing us, ante-dating us, post-dating us, and not questioning what we, the conditioned, the passing, the momentary phenomenon, can really be. The difficult question for the spiritual mind is not the possibility or otherwise of theism, but the avoidance of

pantheism. Indeed, I think that we may surmise that it is because of this difficulty that God in his infinite and eternal Wisdom had recourse to the stratagem of the Incarnation, as though to show us through God himself becoming man, that man really is, that mysterious as it must seem to us, God's almighty power extends to the creation through love of persons other than God. And the Incarnation is the act of divine love by which this act of creation, which is an act of separation, attains its supreme loving object, the supernatural one-ing of the self-denuded creature with the Creator who 'emptied himself' in the Incarnation, and mystical union which was the object of the separation which creation involved. And further to help man to this mystical union, God as it were thought out all the other means and helps, the foundation of the Church which is Christ's mystical body, the sacraments, above all the sacrament of God's body and blood, the protection of the Church from error, the intercession of our Lady and the Saints, the devotions, the commandments, all means to help the separated creature, animal, sunk in sense, space- and time-bound, to rise back freely, answering Love's call, to the Creator, to supreme Reality. The whole of creation, in fact, and all our secular activities, find their place as means. But what has taken place is a process of self-adoration, self-interest, exclusive concentration on temporal matters, which even questions the very existence of God, and tries to drag back these God-given means of union with him into the means of self-help, self-comfort, self-importance, and at best a self-regarding spiritual security thought of too often as a mere insurance against the possibility that man does not count as much as he thinks.

Unless we can return to what is after all the Gospel teaching itself and the meaning of every liturgical prayer, and for that matter the teaching of all the great spiritual leaders of the world—within or outside Christianity, and fit it to the richness of the God-instituted Church, with its wonderful variety of helps for reaching to God, suited to every diversity of person, then our Catholic practice, while outwardly religious, is in danger of hardly being spiritual at all. Religious practice and devotion, the leading of a decent moral life: these things are not in themselves spiritual. Often they are no more than social, and differ merely from social rituals and habits in that they *appear* to have no purpose—as indeed the world thinks. What makes them spiritual is *their* transcendent

purpose as means of self-denudation and God-realisation. This is, no doubt, what we do intend, but what a difference the quality of our faith would possess and how infinitely more inspiring it would be to a disillusioned world if our lives were wholly consciously and constantly directed to this sole end!

This, I imagine, might be called the mystical approach—an approach which the clergy are said to dislike and fear, an approach which is most tiresomely named 'mystical' or 'contemplative' and therefore to be reserved for exceptional people. I do not understand this at all. It seems to me the plain way of the Gospels. It seems to flow directly from the most elementary understanding of Christianity. It is the way of the liturgy. It seems to me to be for all—in fact, the only means, since it alone gives meaning to our religious, indeed our human life. True, if faithfully followed, it reaches to the sublimest heights, but is that any objection when the Beatific Vision of God is the very purpose of our Creation? Meanwhile there is plenty of room in the plains and valleys of our earth-bound, animal-bound, self-bound beings. We are not likely to soar too rapidly. But surely it is right that from the first we should be constantly taught and trained to keep our minds and hearts on our spiritual end, and specifically warned against the danger of confusing means with ends, of putting second and even fifth-rate things first.

My contention is that this is not in fact done, and that so long as it is not done, Catholic religious life will be feeble at best and positively unspiritual at worst. And such a Catholic religious life will never impress a world which, I believe, can be got to understand again the need to know, love and serve God, but can never understand again the complexities and formulae and actualness of Catholic dogma, liturgy, ritual, devotions, practices, moral teachings, unless these can be shown to be the necessary means and invaluable helps towards the realisation of the vision and end for which God, by a boundless act of Love, brought this strange, feeble, passing creature, mysteriously free and independent of the Supreme Reality, into existence.