

He served the count of Wertheim, and lived long enough at Wildenberg for the place to be transmuted in his imagination into Munsalväsche—Mont Salvaiges—the hill on which the Graalsburg materialised. The climax of the poem was composed at the Wartburg, where he served the Landgrave of Thuringia with Walter von der Vogelweide, in 1203. He took the basis of his material from Chretien de Troyes and the Provençal Kyot, but he added far more from his own experience and his own invention, and the story as he told it was full of the question that was being asked by the best spirits of his time, 'How can I be a knight, and a Christian too?' It is not only a question of one's membership of the Church. In the development of Parzival's inner life, an individual is striving to reconcile opposites, living contrary experiences through to the bitter end so that he may make his own synthesis and prove its worth. To unify one's activity in the world, in society, with one's service towards God and the Church, is something which every Christian must approach in a way that belongs to himself alone, at least in some degree. The core of the problem is his alone to solve. Wolfram, in his castle which is at the same time a temple, is an embodiment not only of that Gothic *Streben* that lifts every pointed arch and pointing spire, but of the situation of every man who becomes aware that this world is the place where the next world must be won.

## Lay Spirituality

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In these days when the part to be played by the laity in the revitalising of the life and apostolate of the Church is becoming increasingly emphasised, it may be of some value to examine lay spirituality in its present form, in order to analyse the extent to which the spiritual life of lay men and women is in fact being formed in the Church, to discover how far defects in this formation exist and how far they are remediable, and to make some suggestions for the leading of at least a section of this vast potential of men and women to a deeper personal contact with God, and consequently to a more fruitful service of their brethren.

The word 'spirituality' can convey both an extremely simple and a profound meaning. Primarily it is used to describe man's daily life with God and the manner in which this is activated. From this simple definition we can see the necessity for a more profound analysis of the elements that compose it, since these include all the various means by which the layman enters upon his personal relationship with God.

We are quite well aware—on a superficial level at least—of the main sources of grace that God has provided to enable the individuals who form part of the mystical body to proceed to greater knowledge and love of him: prayer and the sacramental liturgy itself. What is not so easy to discover is whether the layman's understanding of each is such as will enable his life with God to grow deeper and more fruitful in grace for himself and consequently for his brethren. Does he really understand to the fullest extent of which he is capable, the part that each must play in the development of his personal contact with God, and so with the rest of the mystical body? Or does he, for the most part, grope, rather blindly and to a somewhat limited extent, for a 'spiritual life', which he vaguely understands ought to be there, ought to vitalise his existence, but which somehow fails to do so, for reasons which he cannot himself understand?

It would seem at present comparatively rare for members of the laity successfully to lead a fully integrated spiritual life alone and without any clear direction. Their attempts, however well-intentioned, often lead at worst to a purely superstitious or sentimental piety, or at best to a formal, rigid, and to a great extent lifeless routine.

It is by no means infrequent for laymen to express both their awareness that a vital force is lacking in their spiritual life, and their longing for something more, but they seem to have become resigned to the fact that, as they say, 'it just doesn't work' and that consequently there is no alternative for them, as they have not a vocation to religious life inside the cloister, which is where many of them imagine that the only real religious activity takes place.

If we examine in turn the main aids towards this 'spirituality', it is possible that we may draw certain conclusions with regard to the way in which the laity approaches each, and which may show to some extent where the inadequacy lies.

*Prayer.* The catechism definition of prayer is well known. The practice of it, however, is not as simple as it may appear to be. It should be stated here beyond all doubt that this is not an attempt to turn the average layman into a mystic (though he is frequently far more of one

than may be supposed) nor is it necessary for him to imagine that he is not praying unless he is attempting a mystical approach to God. This is quite untrue. On the other hand, a purely mechanical repetition of pious platitudes, or even of set prayers from a manual, will eventually cease to bring him into personal contact with God, and this is where he finds himself in need of help if he is taking his spiritual life seriously.

It appears to be an agreed fact among writers on the spiritual life that there invariably comes a time when prayer, at one stage a reasonably easy matter, becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible, when one tries to continue on the lines previously followed. It is at moments such as these that many laymen finding the way apparently blocked, either talk of 'spiritual dryness' as if it were a disease like measles, to be 'got over' in time, or else, finding themselves unable to deal with a situation that in their view has 'got out of control', they reluctantly abandon attempts to make further progress and decide that prayer is not for them. They then confine themselves to the type of repetition referred to above, so that the life that was beginning to blossom within their souls withers and dies. It is precisely to avoid this discouragement and abandon, that help is needed. From where is this help to come? Books on prayer exist, but for any beginner they tend often to induce a sense of bewilderment, inevitably followed by the decision to abandon any real attempt to judge their own particular case, always a very difficult thing to do, and to keep to what they call 'practical' lines, which in fact lead them nowhere.

Might not the answer to this problem lie rather in an explanation from the pulpit, given in a way that all can follow, week by week, of what is really meant by prayer? Vocal prayer, meditation and mental prayer are all capable of being described with a reasonable degree of clarity. If this were done, and suggestions made for the widening and deepening of experience in each method, a layman whose interest in the subject was serious would be able to experiment, to discover which suited him best, and even to find that all three could be used profitably by him at different moments.

After general instruction and direction of this kind, he would be much more ready to embark upon some fairly simple book dealing with the subject. Again, there might be profitable reminders from time to time, also in the form of sermons, which would serve for further encouragement and perseverance.

*Liturgical Worship.* The eucharist and the sacrament of penance are two of the chief means instituted by God for the sanctification of his

people. It is clear that the layman who is trying to use every means that God has offered, will not be slow to make as much use of them as he can. The Church encourages daily mass and communion, it is for the laity to profit as far as possible from such opportunities as may be available.

The need for regular Confession is fully realised by the Church and occasion provided, but it seems to be here that a great opportunity is missed—that of stressing the value and idea of penance itself. The custom, in our country at any rate, seems to be for a penance to be one of a number of prayers chosen from a very narrow selection. This does not give the penitent any real cause for reflection on the sins he has committed, nor any realisation of what his deeper responsibility is. If the penance given were invariably to have a direct bearing upon one of the sins confessed, there might possibly be much greater awareness of the sin itself and of the real value of penance as an expiatory force and what it really implies for each individual—a very salutary lesson. This would seem also to indicate that more positive direction in the confessional might also be a most valuable means of progress for the spiritual life of the individual who really desires it—since he would, from time to time at least, be compelled to face his own lesser inadequacies, refusals and recoils from God's invitations, none of them gravely sinful, and so passing without comment. Since these are by no means always clearly realised, they can effectively block that grace by which God draws the soul to himself with increasing fervour.

It has been said by some laymen on first encountering this type of direction that it gave them an understanding of their own weaknesses, a will to improve and a sense of progress along a definite path, that they never dreamed they could acquire. There is perhaps matter for reflection in this observation.

The liturgy is the worship of man in union and communion with his fellows; it is, in all its forms, a joint act of adoration made by the mystical body. The importance of this fact cannot be overstressed. Many good and sincere laymen are distressed by what they consider an 'encroachment' on the rights of private devotion. They prefer to say their rosary rather than to participate in the dialogue of the mass. This is because they are unaware of the fundamental value of communal worship and its essential part in the life of the living Church of which they are members. It would follow, then, that not only this, but all the liturgical worship of a parish needs explanation, in order that the layman may clearly understand that part that he should play, not only for

his personal sanctification, but for God's glory and the benefit of his brethren in the mystical body. To worship thus may at first appear to require some sacrifice on the part of those unused to doing so, but this sacrifice is rewarded by progress in knowledge and awareness of the value of this communal offering to God. Such awareness will grow chiefly as a result of the preparation and of the encouragement that form an essential part of the layman's discovery of the value and beauty of the liturgy.

But the eucharist itself, the centre of the Church's worship, is both an individual and a communal sacrament. By the communal reception of the body and blood of our Lord, the members of the mystical body are drawn more totally into one. It seems to be a failing perhaps characteristic of our age that we tend to see it rather as we see a 'self-service' restaurant. Each man withdraws, with his meal, into his own private region of thought; he does not take part in a communal feast. This is one of the dangers in our reception of the eucharist: to bury ourselves in an individual thanksgiving, oblivious of the duty that we all have to rejoice with the priest and with our neighbour, through the communion and postcommunion prayers of the mass. There seems to be a false inference that our Lord 'won't wait' until the mass is over, so that we can then begin to thank him in our own individual way.

This again could be a subject for further instruction on Sundays from time to time, together with suggestions on the attitude to communion to be adopted by the laity; the preparation to be made, and the kinds of thanksgiving to be attempted. How often is the church empty five minutes after mass is over! It is not always pressure of time that is responsible for this, but an inability to do more than repeat a given formula, which discourages attempts at a more personal, individual prayer.

In this way the layman might come to realise just how far *his* communion, *his* preparation and thanksgiving matter, as part of the worship offered by the living members of the mystical body.

With the discouragement of non-liturgical devotions during mass in particular, might there not also be some scope for the introduction of the laity to the other great section of the Church's worship, the breviary? Apart from a few churches in which on Sundays Vespers or Compline are recited, and in which the laity participate, sometimes in the vernacular, there seems to be a general idea either that the breviary is a burden not to be laid on the backs of the more fortunate layman, or that the beauty of the psalter is one that only the clergy and religious

are capable of appreciating. Are both these views really accurate? The psalms have been the prayer of the Church for almost two thousand years, and were the basis of the worship of every ordinary Jew long before being transmuted into the Christian liturgy. There are psalms for every mood, for every occasion, together with prayers that are the result of centuries' accumulation in the treasury of the praying Church. Are these all, in fact, beyond the understanding of the laity? Is it not possible that some kind of communal recitation of parts, at any rate, of the breviary in the vernacular, might serve as a basis for community of prayer and intention of the worshipping laity? The short amount of time necessary for the recitation of one of the Little Hours during the day might well be within the scope of the praying housewife or the worker during his lunch-hour. Might they not thus become more aware of their union with all who say the divine office daily, and so play a more conscious part in the vitalising of the whole Church?

*The Bible.* The Pope has recently been urging upon the faithful an earnest study of the Bible, which includes the Old Testament. We must bear in mind that he speaks with a deep awareness of the actual needs of the Church, and his pronouncements are not made idly. What, then, lies behind this particular exhortation? May it not be that in these days of materialism and atheism, because we are not as profoundly aware as we ought to be of the spiritual values on which our lives should depend, we need to turn more and more to the fundamentals on which our Christianity was built? By reading the Old Testament we can realise to a much greater degree the long-enduring love of God for his chosen, his care for their material and spiritual welfare, his eternal patience with their weakness and sinfulness, his exhortations to them through the prophets to turn back to him and acknowledge their debt of love, culminating in his greatest gift to them—his only Son.

It would seem, then, that the basis of the spiritual reading of every layman, whatever other reading or study he may undertake (and there is ample scope for such study), should be the Bible. Yet the Old Testament appears to be precisely the book that most of them avoid. This may be for two reasons; in the first place, it must be admitted that only comparatively recently has the critical study of the Old Testament by Catholic scholars been productive of such help as the layman needs if he is to read with understanding. Secondly, in England at any rate, the stand of our Protestant brethren on 'the Bible and nothing but the Bible' has tended to arouse misgivings in the Catholic layman's mind.

These now can and should be dispelled, and encouragement of an active nature would be most helpful, if obstacles here are to be overcome. Such help might take the form of Old Testament study groups; or courses of sermons during the Lenten or Advent seasons might prove fruitful to the layman, particularly in inspiring among them some real sense of the continuity of inspiration of the text. They are frequently conscious of 'snippets' of Old Testament teaching which have been selected for comment of some kind, but these do not, in their minds, seem to form a coherent whole, and they have no conception of the way in which God's inspiration moved unfailingly from one period of the history of Israel to the next, nor how he has always shown himself aware of the changing needs of his chosen people and been ready to fulfil them.

Sometimes it is objected that a man's spirituality is purely a matter for his own conscience. That, of course, is to some extent true, and the approach of a man to God will vary from one individual to the next, but this spirituality is the sum total of his relationship with God. If the means are defective, is it not likely that the result may be so too?

It is important to remember that spirituality, of whatever type, does not 'come' by itself. In any religious community, it is acquired by the personal effort of the individual in conjunction with the presentation of the particular outlook of that community by those whose work it is to train and form its members; the novice-masters and mistresses and religious superiors. Is it not somewhat optimistic to expect any real attempt at the formation of a 'lay spirituality' without a considerable degree of formation and guidance from those who are primarily responsible for showing them the way to God?

This guidance seems to be lacking to a very considerable degree in the Church in England today. It is a fact that the clergy are badly overworked, and that much of their energy has to be expended on fund-raising to help build schools and churches which are essential for the growing Catholic population. However, without a really fervent laity, the buildings are simply an empty shell in which the true worship of God is allotted only a fraction of its depth and value.

All through the Church's history the value of the spiritual over the material has been stressed. Is not the danger at present, in this age of materialism, that this fact is being obscured? The laity need clergy for whom spiritual realities are the primary concern; who are prepared to feed their flock with the bread of life that is also the word of God. Much more systematic preaching would seem to be indicated, with

these fundamental needs of the laity borne in mind, rather than brilliant, haphazard sermons, which may often strike a spark in the listener, but never kindle it into flame.

This is, of course, an over-simplification of the problem. The essence of it goes deeper, and lies in the education of the children by nuns, by clergy, by teachers and parents alike in such a way that when the living faith is presented, it will rouse real enthusiasm in the child; not as a series of answers to questions that can be learnt by heart, but which have no application to their own lives. In this way the ground will be prepared for a living adult spirituality that will steadily widen and deepen until it radiates through the individual to all the members of the mystical body with whom contact can be made.