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SOME PRACTICAL LESSONS OF HISTORICAL SPIRITUALITY

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SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I HAD THE JOY OF TEACHING THE SISTERS FROM ALL OVER THE world at the Regina Mundi Institute in Rome, a course on the history of spirituality. As any instructor knows, when we teach, we seem to learn more than the students. It appeared to me as the course was drawing to a close that some basic principles were emerging, which were not very flattering to theologians or persons aspiring to live a deep spiritual life.

If secular history teaches us anything, it teaches us that people and their leaders repeat the similar blunders throughout the centuries with or without a knowledge of history. Sacred history produces a more interesting knowledge of mistakes for believers which have greater consequences than the bad decisions of secular history. By reading both primary and secondary sources, I was able to fathom some, but certainly not all, of those principles which are violated and ignored down through the ages of the Church.

Much of the dynamism of the Church's spirituality came from the monks, other religious families and bishops because they specialized so much in the work of consciously growing in virtue. Likewise, they thought a great deal about what it means to seek God and love him deeply both in the contemplative and apostolic poles of their lives. The reader, then, should not get the impression that this particular religious is simply trying to blow his own horn to the detriment of other ways of life.

SPECIAL TIMES: SPECIAL PEOPLE NEEDED

The Holy Spirit is called by Pope Pius XII, among others, in his classic encyclical letter, *Mystici Corporis*, the quasi-soul of the Church. When the Church needs revitalizing, God raises up saintly people and thinkers to challenge the Church and the people living within her bosom. In essence, the history of spirituality is the study of how this living presence of the Holy Spirit stirs up both the likeliest and un-likeliest people in interesting or ordinary ways (think of St. Anthony of the desert, or the hermit St. Romuald, both of whom ran away from the world only to change some of its orientations; study St. Charles Borromeo who was ordained at a very early age for the flimsiest reasons and became an ardent reformer and promoter of the decrees of Trent).

Since the Church is part of the world order yet above it, she is always faced with some kind of turmoil be it political, cultural, moral and the like. By facing and living with each crisis, she learns and grows in understanding of the meaning of her message either speculatively (Arianism) or practically (Pelagianism) and how even more effectively to hand on the deposit of faith (Iconoclasm). Because the faith is so mysterious being light and darkness, the Church always appears (and sometimes is) late in trying to apply the message of Christ to new situations (Vatican II's theology of the laity had begun in the nineteenth century with St. Vincent Pallotti, who in many ways anticipated Catholic

action). And new challenges cause her to reflect and see new treasures in the faith itself (see the Council of Ephesus teaching that Mary is the Mother of God). St. Thomas and Yves Congar also come to mind. The Angelic Doctor almost singlehandedly forced the Church in the thirteenth century and afterwards to confront a new philosophical analysis of reality. In the twentieth century we find Congar among others helping the Church understand herself as a life and institution called to ecumenism, communion and that the laity also build up and participate in the mission of the Church.

The difficulty, it goes without saying, is that what is lasting and profound from classic spiritual authors is generally never read very deeply by the many (with some exceptions, the Bible among others). And if read, these works are either misunderstood, disagreed with or simply not put into practice by laity and theologians alike. Part of the problem seems to be human nature's inertia or its desire for novelty. And what may be popular for a time becomes just as easily forgotten and perhaps a small footnote to the history of theology, if that.

TWO DIFFERENT VARIATIONS

There will always be two extremes in both the institutional side of the Church and in the prophetic side, religious life. The latter is both a mirror of the holiness of the Church itself and the school of perfection par excellence. We find moral laxity within the members of the hierarchy and religious life itself at one extreme (corrupt monasticism or jolly friars, worldly popes and cardinals of the early Renaissance). And at the other pole, we find moral rigorists (Savanorola, the Franciscan Spirituals and the Jansenists). Those located on the former pole will try to seek exceptions not only from fundamental moral principles (Henry the Eighth, Radical Moral Dissenters of today) but will want an easier and more comfortable way to be with God (Quietists). On the other hand, there will be some who will want to be hard and disciplined on themselves (Carthusians and Trappists). It is also a temptation to be harder on others (Albigensians, Cathari) in the hopes that the more imposed strictness will necessarily produce more perfection. Some like the worst of the desert fathers seem to think that the more one is austere for austerity's sake, the more one will necessarily love God and neighbor, since one is trying and perhaps succeeding in one's own mind to prove one's love for God. Besides this problem, the sense of austere zeal is felt by some groups to keep alive both the strong identity

and self-importance of the organization.

Observing the easy going religious communities in artistic representations, we find that they at least have smiles on their faces while the opposite types or highly stern look much like worn out joggers running for miles in their ascetic ways (portraits of Savanorola). Rarely do we find that balance between the two (strictness and leniency leading to joyful tolerance - St. Philip Neri, Sts. Dominic and Francis). Human nature does not understand very well how to compromise or temper the accidentals which may lead to holiness but not always and at the same time keep to essentials which usually lead to holiness (prayer, sacraments and the like). A similar problem occurs with missionary movements unable to separate Christianization from Europeanization. Or, working with the poor, instead of subordinating human development to divine salvation, we find the exponents of radical liberation theology subordinating the very notion of the Gospel itself to the legitimate and sometimes confusing demands of the poor. Once again, the part is taken for the whole.



SOLUTIONS APPEAR TO BE MORE PROBLEMS FOR SOME IN AUTHORITY

When there are unusual crises in the Church and needs to be met, certain men and women will arise (not always on time however) to meet those needs (post-Tridentine religious communities, the rise of active women's congregations). Unfortunately, they may not always be understood by the hierarchy, nor their lifestyle accepted for many generations to come (St. Angela Merici), if ever, and perhaps never understood (St. Benedict Joseph Labre). This clearly happened with St. Joseph, the husband of Mary who took care of the special needs of both Jesus and Mary and nearly wound up in oblivion and still is on the fringes of day to day Catholic life.

It is never easy to face problems head on, analyze them and try to get something done creatively which moves others (Msgr. Escriva's words on mystical wishful thinking are on target here). The vast majority of the leaders in the Church tend to keep to the standard ideas and methods or worse, keep their heads in the sand (the

Church just before the Reformation) by compromising (some bishops today who may be silent before radical dissent, thinking it merely to be a subtle argument among a few theologians).

Contrary to the illusions of some, no one religious family can be said to be the last word or the most important group in the life of the Church. Many are very much alike and we can easily find elements common to all. New religious or lay families (*Opus Dei, Communion e Liberatione*) rise up by the power of the Holy Spirit as old ones decay or as new founders see new solutions to old needs (St. Dominic, St. Ignatius, St. Vincent de Paul, St. Louise de Marillac, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, Mother Cabrini). Because of the sins and blind spots and eventual irrelevancy of those leading and living within the older institutes, newer communities find a means of touching the world's problems in more original ways (Mother Teresa, Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus who follow the spirit of Charles de Foucauld). Sometimes, these newer (and alive older) religious communities discover a simpler way to reach both God's heart and mankind's conscience (Little Sisters of the Poor, early Dominicans fostering the rosary).

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

Because human beings are so unique and the mysteries of Christ are inexhaustible, there have been and will be many different schools of spirituality flowing either from religious communities or individual saints (whose followers sometimes compete against each other rather than complement each other by their differences of outlook). These schools emphasize different aspects of Christ (the heart - Eudists; the sufferings - Passionists and Redemptorists; the Eucharistic presence - Society of the Blessed Sacrament Fathers; the prayer of Christ - the Carmelites) or Mary (Servites, Marianists) or Joseph (Oblates of St. Joseph, Josephites), and different ways of prayer (meditation, contemplation, affective, vocal, liturgical, etc.). They differ as flowers differ, using slightly different or even sometimes major different means (fasting for purely contemplatives, obedience for Jesuits, study of sacred doctrine for Dominicans) to achieve growth in union with God. Or, they may approach the same means common to most with a few different ideas in mind (from the Eucharist for the Pink Sisters and the Liturgy of the Hours for monks). Whatever the case may be, all schools eventually meet with what is the primary end of all: to grow in deep union with God by the supernatural

theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. But each religious family or association will emphasize certain other moral virtues differently with varying nuances (love of poverty for St. Francis, love of fasting and abstinence for the Minims), depending upon the secondary goals of the works of the apostolate (fraternal charity for handicapped in Jean Varnier's *L'Arche*), whether they be the corporal or spiritual works of mercy.

SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY IN SEMINARY TRAINING

By now it should be evident that the study of spirituality will always be necessary in the life of the Church because there will always be individuals in the Church who thirst for holiness and want to give themselves completely to God but find the process confusing. But ignorance of this science in whole or in part will usually be rampant among the clergy which in turn will permit many of the Christian faithful to have false beginnings and continue into faulty projects for the salvation of souls. The ordinary Church administration will rationalize and claim that it wants to save as many souls as possible as a higher priority than help a certain few achieve holiness. The thinking is best summarized in the following manner: it is God's business to raise up saints and give them extraordinary graces and it is our work to help the rest (the silent majority really) who really are not all that interested in developing the perfection of theological and moral virtue. Spiritual theology, therefore, will always appear to be a luxury as most people do not want to know how the saints found, pleased and grew in the love of God, much less study the theologians who have analyzed their writings. They may simply be satisfied with their own comfortable (and sometimes unsuccessful) way of avoiding grave sin.

Likewise, it will usually seem to be better to those in lower levels of authority that clerical candidates preferably study who and what God is, what grace is and who and where to get it, and finally, what are the fundamental principles of morality. For those in religious life, it is also generally thought better to preoccupy the younger members in formation with the history, customs and skills of the apostolate. But in both cases of clerics or religious the more important questions of how to advance in the art of prayer, and how to give oneself to others and advance in the virtues may often be given a low priority. Many formation directors in general may tend to think the latter questions will take care of themselves if the former are

pursued. Contemplation is for contemplatives, ordinary prayer is for the rest. The less one is absorbed with the indwelling of the Trinity and the providence of God, the more one can be preoccupied with the problems of solving the world crises, doing the works of the apostolate, effectively and efficiently. Yet the history of the Church shows that some of the most creative and original apostolates came from those who occupied a goodly part of their lives in contemplation (St. Catherine of Sienna, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, and St. Vincent Ferrer). Notwithstanding all these resistances, spirituality, the crown of theology, will usually be more than a course of studies in a seminary but relegated to a minor position.

OBSTACLES AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS AMONG APOSTLES

There is a catch in the above two paragraphs. If priests or religious become interested in mysticism, prayer and conscious union with God, they may become absorbed in spiritual means and become less and less interested in the works of the apostolate. The joys of prayer, liturgy, study, and spiritual conferences may paradoxically smother their desire for the salvation of souls. Like some ascetical practices, the very delightful means can become an end competing with God Himself. Just as it is usually very difficult to believe that God can communicate his greatest graces in pain, trial and mortification, likewise the consolations of prayer seem to be more inviting than the dark nights of the senses and the spirit. Or, the joys of the routine of the apostolate may keep one from examining his or her own lifestyle for illusory desires. In other words, the true lessons of St. John of the Cross about the cross are easily forgotten.

Another law of spiritual theology's history is that normally, popularity and favor by one's higher superiors do not guarantee the long range success of one's self or institute either in the spiritual life or even the apostolic life. St. Dominic and St. Thomas Aquinas were highly thought of by the Holy See but bishops wanted them and their ideas banned. St. Ignatius was imprisoned by the Dominicans for his novel ways of teaching catechism. St. Pius V (a Dominican) wanted to impose common prayer of the divine office on the Company of Jesus but died probably as a result of the litanies of Ignatius and his company to spare them of becoming like monks or friars. The Church has had her greats (Basil, Gregory, Leo, and Albert), but more importantly, she has had her

hidden ones whom people tended to ignore, much less fawn over or curry their favor. Most of the saints of the last two hundred years seemed to be ordinary, and if they did not have great difficulties or the obstacles of heavy crosses from possessing the offices of priesthood or episcopacy, they managed to turn the daily grind itself into a means of holiness with great enthusiasm (St. Therese, St. Benilde and many Christian Brother saints and blessed).

Turning to the apostolate of catechetics and theology classes, it is always much easier to foster hatred of sin than love of virtue, or to piously tell the Christian faithful what they are forbidden than what they should pursue in a positive way under the specious guise that virtue and self-integration are for the professionals of spirituality. But the trouble with such perspectives is that it leads to sad sacks, depressives and loners hating evil but unable to challenge their world to excellence.

One final observation is in order. It will usually be taught in the great institutes of spirituality and now by the Congregation of Doctrine and Faith (see *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation*, especially footnote #29) that extraordinary charisms, experiencing extraordinary extra-sensory phenomena are not the essence of the spiritual life, nor the heart of holiness but its very occasional periphery (if not most often illusory). However, most people do not believe this, whether they study these treatises or not. Deep down in every one of us is a disorderly desire for the unusual and the extraordinary. When and if we may witness others who claim to be filled with these things (private revelations, bleeding wounds and the like), it brings to us the pleasure of consolation and fascination regardless of the reality. It takes great discipline of mind to look skeptically at them and if one is inclined to want such phenomena, a very courageous strength of will to renounce such desires. A similar problem occurs in art where the artistry of the performer may cause such admiration of the technique in the beholder that it dims one's real appreciation of the beauty of the product, be it music or painting.

FINAL OBSERVATIONS

Any cursory study of the history of spirituality shows the rich positive fruits of holiness in the life of the whole Church. It also points out the negative results of abandoning the discovered laws of growth found in

the lives and writings of the approved authors and saints. Knowledge of this science should help us acquire a more sober and thoughtful approach to the Tri-personal God. A firm and lived grasp of its principles should not cause us to jettison its conclusions too quickly, nor leave us comfortable with ourselves, nor stonewall a movement of repentance or apostolate (from within an institute of consecrated life, diocese or from the Christian faithful) that may very well be from Holy Spirit. While authentic spiritual movements are always based upon the received faith of the Catholic Church, at the same time, there is also a certain depth of humility, reverence and obedience

to the hierarchy on the part of those prophets among us. Normally, if ever, they hardly think of themselves as special or much less apart from or higher than the Christian faithful. They see into the same faith something new as well as ancient that others have yet to perceive. On another level, even bishops and priests as the leaders of the Church are not exempt from these rules of humility, obedience and reverence as they try to apply the living faith to their people. They must see in Peter's successor someone else besides themselves who is called to preside and govern over them as well as be their brother.

