

## Spirituality, charism, mission

Jules Chevalier was more than a man of action. He was certainly a very active man and any account of his life must be largely concerned with what he did. There can be a danger that in seeing his works, we lose sight of the man and we do not want to do that. To understand what his work was all about, we have to try to understand something of his inner motivation and spiritual strength. Only these deeper realities will explain what appears on the surface in a very striking way. What appears is firstly a serenity in his faith that, no matter what happens, God will be forever with him<sup>1</sup> and secondly a calm confidence that he is called to a special mission in the Church.

Occasionally only, very occasionally and under severe stress, would this confidence waver and even then his serenity would be undisturbed. For he knew that while he could be mistaken in his ideas about what God's will was for him, his trust in God could never be misplaced. Furthermore, his confidence in his mission was unshaken by great external difficulties such as the French persecutions. On two occasions only do we see any hesitancy: firstly in the long years when Fr. Piperon was his sole companion and others did not join him; secondly in the later period of internal crisis in his MSC Society.

No man can get to this steadiness in faith and fidelity to God's will without many gifts of grace and without his own

generous cooperation. Certainly, in his own temperament, Jules Chevalier had received a large quantity of determination. But here we see a man who has gone far beyond his own natural qualities, to be totally given to Christ in a spirituality which was strong and self-less. If we see how that spirituality was forged, we will better understand the spirit he tried to breathe into the various groups which came into being as the result of his inspiration.

#### SPIRITUALITY.

One can say that a spirituality is formed. One might say more truly that the spiritual man is forged under the different influences which are brought to bear on him, so that he is fashioned into an instrument of God's will. We shall consider briefly this forging process in the life of Jules Chevalier. Firstly, however, let us note that a « spirituality » is never worked out coolly and calmly at a desk, putting nice spiritual patterns together. Personal experience is a decisive factor — what a man lives — so that a central intuition and a lived experience take hold of his mind and heart, transforming his life.

When this happens, nothing essential to christianity is excluded from the 'spiritual way'. The essentials are common to all spiritualities or schools of spirituality. Different schools result from a special accent given to one or other of the common elements - as for instance, St. Francis' stress on the imitation of Christ in his poverty.

Then, when a personal experience or central intuition comes into a man's life, it transforms, under its special light, all things else that make up the whole of his spiritual life. Nothing is taken away that was of value, but the value of other things is now relative to the principal and dominating value in his life. Rarely is a man's spiritual experience an isolated event in his life, disconnected from other factors. It builds onto what has gone before; and what has gone before is, under God's providence, by way of preparation.

The whole process is like that of kindling a fire. The spark, or the flame, is the energising and characteristic element. But it is not lit in a vacuum; it is applied to materials already gathered and built up. Once it comes alight the flame creeps back, transforming and diffusing its light and energy over the whole.

The transforming spark came into Fr. Chevalier's life with his discovery of devotion to the Sacred Heart. However, this discovery should be seen, not as something isolated from his previous spiritual experiences, but as taking up and transforming much that was already there.

Already there, in the life of Chevalier, was a quality of fidelity to God's demands and to his own vocation, in a measure which was certainly out of the ordinary. This comes out in his generous response to all that he considered as demanded by his vocation to be a priest - a vocation which, in spite of obstacles, he never doubted. He was resolute in the practice of prayer - not because of any great light received therein but because he believed it was something he should do. For what must have seemed a very long time he worked as an apprentice, studying in his spare time and waiting for God to provide the occasions which he felt must come. He kept himself apart from his comrades and their good fun, despite their insistences, for he judged that he was thus more sure of being faithful to his vocation.

Fidelity, generosity, single-mindedness: these are fine qualities when they are put wholeheartedly at the service of Christ. That they were is clear from his own statement to his relatives when he was a seminarian: « I am becoming a priest to be in the service of God and not of my family; to gain souls for Jesus Christ and not to enrich my relatives »<sup>2</sup>. His seminary companions also testified to this dedication.

In classical spiritual literature, it is customary to speak of the forging into a solid spiritual way as « a second conversion ». The process is so called from its parallel with the

first conversion to the faith. It is a renewed self-giving to God and his will. To merit the name it must be generous, decisive, firm and constant. Whether it comes about suddenly or gradually, there are certain factors which, together or singly, are usually present in the process. Three of these factors mentioned in treatises on spirituality<sup>3</sup> find their particular application to the life of Fr. Chevalier. It will be therefore useful to mention them and then to see how they were verified in his life. These are:

- a) A sudden revelation of the nothingness of human things, together with the accompanying realization that God is all. Such, for example, was the experience of St. Francis Borgia at the grave of Isabella; and it can bring about the decision to give one's life totally to God.
- b) Similarly, a conversion to God can come after a more difficult victory over self - a victory which is sometimes accompanied by a strong light and movement of grace. A striking example of this is St. Francis of Assisi. It is not hard to see why this should be: a generous self-renunciation for God's sake is a gift of self to God and can involve the soul in a very deep way.
- c) A retreat, with its time of silent and serious reflection and prayer is also (as S. Ignatius insisted) often a time of grace and conversion.

Now, either Chevalier was a more difficult man to « convert » than most, or his was a slow conversion not quite corresponding to the approved theories - for all three of these experiences featured in his spiritual life in his seminary days. The first — a sort of revelation of the nothingness of human things before God — came to him after a fall down a cliff. Other seminarians have fallen down cliffs before and since. But if the annals of seminarians' cliff-falls were written, that of Chevalier would certainly feature among the most interesting.

It was a day in winter, probably 1842 when Chevalier was still at the seminary of Saint-Gaultier and the students went

for a walk along the banks of the river Creuse, near the chateau of Conives. Three of 'the more audacious' decided to take the steepest way down a mountain. Their feet slipped on the snow; two managed to save themselves by clinging to some bushes about thirty or forty metres above the ground. Chevalier kept on going, and when they picked him up at the bottom, « there was no sign of life; he had all the appearances of death, so much so that the priest who was the leader of the outing thought he could not be given absolutely. Everyone thought he was a corpse. He was taken to the nearby chateau, where they lit two candles beside him, while those who watched by the 'body' said their beads for the repose of his soul »<sup>4</sup>. The rector of the seminary was notified of the 'death' and terribly saddened; he sent a doctor with a carriage to bring back the 'body'. But then the 'corpse' heaved a great sigh, startling the mourners, and was carried back alive to the seminary. The poor rector meanwhile had assembled the students in the study hall where they recited the « de profundis » and he read a passage about sudden death. Hearing the noise of the approaching carriage, he went out to receive the body of the student he believed dead, deeply moved by the whole affair. He was utterly startled when he heard Chevalier call out that he was not dead at all. The poor man was sick for several days; *he* was the only real casualty of the whole incident.

Such were the humorous twists of the whole affair that one would hardly have expected the experience to startle Chevalier into total conversion. Nevertheless, it was a profoundly moving experience for him and, since he had seen death so close, he became thereafter more serious, living more by faith<sup>5</sup>.

A further important step was that he was called to make a generous self-renunciation. Externally the incident would appear as minor, did not Chevalier himself attach great spiritual importance to the event. It was merely a question of renouncing a particular friendship with a fellow seminarian. It was an ordinary enough friendship; however, Chevalier felt that his preoccupation with his friend was pre-

venting him from being totally possessed by his effort to grow closer to Christ and to progress in the virtue required for the priesthood. And he regarded it as a grace of God that he saw it best to renounce this friendship before it became a serious obstacle to his vocation<sup>6</sup>.

His next noteworthy grace he regarded as being given him during a retreat at Bourges, preached by Fr. Mollevaut of Saint-Sulpice. « His words, simple but ardent and full of faith made a profound impression on my soul. I came out of these exercises *converted* and desirous of being an exemplary seminarian »<sup>7</sup>.

Prepared by these and other incidents, as well as by the graces of which they had been the occasion, Jules gave himself generously to the will of God, his soul open to the divine influence. At the same time he was formed in the *French School of spirituality* practised and taught by his director Father Ruel as well as by the other Sulpician Fathers who staffed the seminary of Bourges. This spirituality was essentially christo-centric and sacerdotal, seeing Christ the High Priest as the one who, par excellence, rendered glory to God and carried out his Father's will. A strong accent was put on the virtue of religion (Christ was even called « the perfect religious of God ») and the worship given to God. The work of a priest, as Jules was called to be, was essentially to share in and continue that work of Christ. Christ should take possession of him and live on in him. In this way a priest should forget himself, die to self, letting Christ live in him and work through him, so that his whole life and activity was directed to the glory of God. His life should be centred on the Eucharist and the sacrifice of the Mass. For it is here that Christ principally continues his work of giving glory to God and accomplishing the work of man's redemption.

Much stress was put on the effort to reproduce in oneself the « interior states of Christ » in the different mysteries of his life. Two favourite texts of Scripture were:

« I live, now no longer I, but Christ lives in me »<sup>8</sup>, and

« Then I said, just as I was commanded in the scroll of the book: God, here I am! I am coming to obey your will. »<sup>9</sup> If Christ is to live in us, we must die to self. In this, Christ is again our model, emptying himself in the Incarnation, sacrificing himself on the Cross and in the Eucharist.

Centred on Christ the High Priest and Mediator, this spirituality must, of necessity, consider the two-fold aspect of priesthood: Christ giving supreme glory and adoration to God, and Christ giving life and salvation to men.

Its specific method of prayer was also very Christ-centred, being summed up in three steps: Christ before our eyes - reflective meditation; adoration; Christ in our hearts - our affective response; communion; Christ in our hands - union with Christ in action.

The thrust of this method of prayer was that we might be united with Christ in his adoration of the Father and in his work for the salvation of men.

Through all his life Jules Chevalier loved those texts of the epistle to the Hebrews (12,2 and 3,1) which tell us to fix our eyes on Jesus, apostle and high-priest of our religion. We can sum up the « forging process » in the life of Jules Chevalier in this way:

- a) His own natural temperament and family training had given him a sense of duty and constancy. He showed generosity and fidelity in developing and directing his natural qualities in the service of God.
- b) The fall down the cliff had given him the perspectives of God's supremacy and the total dependence of creatures.
- c) His generous renunciation of a natural friendship had given him a great detachment, setting his heart free to be given to God.
- d) The special retreat had given him the grace of strong supernatural dedication, making him ready to respond completely to the demands of God's will.

- e) Saint Sulpice had given him a Christ-centred, self-forgetful spirituality strengthening his desire to live and work with Christ for the glory of God and the salvation of man.
  - f) For natural and supernatural reasons, he had developed a deep concern for people afflicted by the « ills of modern society ».
  - g) Then he was to discover devotion to the Sacred Heart which was to be the spark giving fire to his life, transforming it and giving it unity and purpose.
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