

CHEVALIER'S SPIRITUALITY.

A charism expresses itself in living the whole of christian spirituality. While it gives a special colour to one's view of the christian mystery and brings certain emphases and priorities to the practice of christian virtue, it must embrace the whole. It can not exclude anything which is vital or essential to christian spirituality. For novice-masters and educators in the spirituality of the Institute it is necessary to spell out all the details. But it is not necessary, nor is it possible, for us to do that here. Furthermore, as one spiritual author has said, there are as many spiritualities as there are men. Even within a religious congregation, each person will bring his or her own spiritual gifts to the living of the spirituality of the Institute. Therefore, any attempt here to draw out all the consequences for a spirituality resulting from Chevalier's charism would be either repetitious or restricting.

There are, however, some special points which it would seem worth treating briefly. Firstly the question of

Mission.

For his own Institute of men, Fr. Chevalier chose the title Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and it was not chosen lightly. In rejecting other possible titles, such as Priests of the Sacred Heart, he was trying to express a particular insight into his own charism. He did not use the term in the restricted sense of a mission to those who had not yet heard the gospel, or to churches in other lands. This more strictly missionary work he had in mind even from his seminary days ⁴ and it has always been regarded as a specially important apostolate of the congregations which he founded. However, he used the term missionary in the broader sense of being sent to those in need, to bring to them the « treasures of love and mercy of the Heart of Christ » ⁵.

However, I refer to an insight into 'mission' which regards Him who sends the missionary (for 'missionary' means 'one

who is sent'). Here, I believe, Fr. Chevalier had a certain intuition of a truth which is being stressed by post-Conciliar theologians of the active religious life.

« Each apostolic community should be grounded in and patterned after Jesus' own fulfilment of the mission he received as the Father's Son » ⁶.

Apostolic religious are, like Christ, sent by the Father united with Him in prayer and action, moved by His Spirit ⁷.

Fr. Chevalier had written:

« He (Jesus) is the first Missionary of his Heart... He was the first to make known to men the love he had for them... Everywhere, always, in all his actions, he is concerned with the mission he has come to fulfil on earth » ⁸.

While considering his call to the apostolate, Fr. Chevalier looks to the origin of his mission - the mission of Christ in which he is called to share. For him this was more than a theoretical theological truth. It was a consciousness of reality into which he grew.

He began (as many of our contemporaries begin) with a deep concern for men in their need of faith, and love and christian values. But for some time he could not see how to respond effectively to their need. Then he discovered a Christ who was compassionate and who, more deeply than he, had lived a concern for mankind. And whereas he saw that his own concern for men was powerless, ⁹ he saw that the love of Christ was redemptive:

« His love has saved the world, his blood has purified it, his grace has changed it, and his tenderness conserves it » ¹⁰. His own feeling of powerlessness was removed by a realization that he was called to work as an instrument of Christ's saving power, to be sent as He was sent, in the power and love of the Father.

« This is what Jesus Christ does for the conversion of souls; he calls us all to *write our efforts to his* so that we may *work with him* to convert the souls who have gone astray » ¹¹. In this way we rise above merely human effort. « We strive

to reproduce in our hearts the sentiments of the Heart of Jesus... it (the interior life) forms Jesus Christ in us ever more fully; it makes us live with his spirit and his life »⁸⁰. This is not merely for the personal life of the individual, but also for the ministry of the apostle where « it is not the man, but God himself who acts, speaks and sanctifies »⁸¹.

Most of these truths were a carry-over from what he had learned in the French School of spirituality. They gradually fell into place in his spirituality of the Heart of Christ. And thus his *human concern for mankind was transformed into mission*. This human regard for others, the desire to do something for their welfare is itself a gift of God. But easily enough it can remain a too-human preoccupation fraught with anxiety and dissatisfaction and even discouragement when we do not get results. For Chevalier, the realization of the truths we have just quoted transformed his human concern through his appreciation of the nature of the mission of Christ, in which he was called to share. He saw that if Jesus had ever ceased to live His close personal relationship with his heavenly Father, His 'apostolic work' would have been useless. His work was salvific because, united as He was with the Father in living Sonship, He drew men to the Father by drawing them to Himself. It was only through His union with the Father that He would be a giver of the Spirit. Any apostolate is a sharing in the apostolic action of Jesus, from the Father, in the strength of the Spirit. And, even active religious need whatever measure of prayer and contemplation is required to keep them in constant living contact with the source of their 'mission'. Otherwise, while they can be independent operators, they can not be missionaries in the real sense of the word.

True to his Sulpician tradition, Fr. Chevalier knew that if his Missionaries wanted Christ to work through their hands, they must, through prayer and contemplation, have Him before their eyes and in their hearts. Only then could they feel confident that they had entered into his mission, letting Him love through their human hearts, letting His care for mankind shine out through their human kindness.

Therefore, he would write that his missionaries must « unite themselves with this divine Heart, be penetrated by its sentiments, cooperate as docile instruments of its designs of mercy... »⁸². Speaking of his own mission, Christ had said: « He who sent me is with me, and he has not left me to myself... I am not alone, because the Father is with me »⁸³. For Fr. Chevalier now the need not to be left alone, the need to have Christ with him, was vital to his whole idea of mission.

As he got to see the length and breadth of the redemptive love of the Father revealed in Christ, the Person of Christ (seen through the evocative biblical symbol of the heart) dominated his vision in a new way. This did not mean that people came to matter less, but that Christ came to matter more. His concern for others did not diminish; but he was less anxious, knowing that Christ's concern overshadowed his. His confidence increased, for he saw now that what he had felt, was *only a share in Christ's concern for mankind*; and what might have been a too-human preoccupation was converted into mission. For he saw it as the call to let Christ love through his human heart, and to work, and live and pray that others might see how God loved the world.

He was now ready to look for others to join him. For included in his Founder's charisma was the urge and the ability to get others to share his vision and respond to it. He was unshakable, even against the opposition of Fr. de Champgrand his first benefactor, that his call was to found a *religious society*, not just a group of priests. Here, I believe, is contained one element of the double intuition he had in insisting that his was a society of missionaries. On the one hand (as he was to insist against complaints from one member) we « are missionaries, not contemplatives ». On the other hand (as theologians were to insist later) religious profession is a « consecration for mission ». He wanted companions who were *more than men of action*; he wanted men who would let themselves be drawn to Christ, to share in His concern for others, so that their own desire to help others, and their human concern could be *assumed by God*.

My Reason to Consecrate Myself to the Mission of the Holy Spirit is that I have been called by God to be a witness of His love in the world.

Consecration happens through always to Consecration.

and converted into mission. Their concern and urge to action would thus be purified and strengthened, consecrated as it was by religious profession. « Consecrate them in truth... As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world, and for their sake I consecrate myself that they too may be consecrated in truth » 91. It is truer to say that, at religious profession, God consecrates us to him, rather than that we consecrate our lives to his service. Similarly, in the question of mission, while we can say that we are sent by Christ, it is more exact to say that we are made to share in His mission in love from the Father - so that our mission is real to the extent that Christ lives in us and works through us. It would seem that it was in this perspective that Fr. Chevalier saw his own mission and that of the members of his missionary society.

It appears that there were two successive stages in Chevalier's spiritual view. (Let it be noted immediately that they are complementary and not contradictory). In the first stage, it is the concern for men, the preoccupation with the 'mal moderne', which seems to dominate. In the second it is « Devotion to the Sacred Heart ». In this second stage, at times he gives the impression that he feels more compassion for the forsaken shepherd than for the lost sheep!

« The Sacred Heart of Jesus, source of Light, of Truth and of Life, is not well enough known, is not loved enough ». It is natural that Christ will dominate the life of any real apostle, as he dominated the life of Paul. This does not make him less an apostle. It is not that people come to matter less. It is just that Christ matters more. And the complementary character of the two stages is evident if we remember that the Christ who dominated Chevalier's vision was the Christ who had compassion on the crowds, Christ the Good Shepherd, the Christ whose Heart was filled with love and mercy for mankind. Now he is urged less by his human preoccupation - but he is urged, inexorably, by the « caritas Christi » to spend himself for the cause of Christ.

Spirituality, charism, mission

The urgency of this thrust comes out in the very choice of words, and their italicization, in this text which treats of the characteristic note of the MSC Society (words which, by reason of familiarity may have lost their force):

« a true and sincere ever burning love of the Word Incarnate (italicized in text), which while it will be the seal of their sanctity for the individual members, will lead them to participate to them the operative charity of Christ for men, and specially that immense mercy towards the lost sheep » 92. In a fervent response to the Gospel, any love for Christ must lead to concern for men; and any christian concern for men will bring one closer to Christ. This is why I think that one can take two views of an MSC spirituality - and eventually it will be seen that the two views are really one.

The first would begin with the text of St. John: « We have learned to recognize the love of God in our regard and have made it our belief » 93.

The second is a response to St. Augustine's exhortation in his Confessions: Return to your own heart and find him. From the starting point of St. John, one could set out an MSC Spirituality in four different aspects of belief in God's love:

1. We have believed in the love of God for us personally. This is a living faith-experience which has provoked the gift of our own hearts to Christ. From this flows a life of personal dedication to Christ and his Kingdom.
2. We have believed in the love of God for all men - a love which would give their lives meaning and purpose, if they would accept it. And here is the source of all missionary and apostolic effort.
3. Because we believe in this love of God for all men whom he wills to be saved and come to the knowledge of truth; because we believe that this love will work through those who consecrate their lives to him, we are confident that, if we work with courage and perseverance, God will give the increase.

4. And if we are a group that has come together because all its members « have believed in his love », a real fraternal charity will reign among us.

These truths are easily enough enunciated. They can be lived in superficial fashion; but they can be part of a strong and satisfying spirituality only if we, too, have taken the trouble to « ponder these things in our heart ». With St. Augustine we must have returned to our own heart to find God; and we must have listened to the cries of every human heart, to the deep human needs of man: the questioning, the anxiety, the desperate need for meaning, for a love that is real, ennobling and uplifting. We need to have understood how doubt and darkness can often lie heavy on the human spirit.

And when we say that we have learned to believe in the love of God manifested in Christ, we express the conviction that this love is able to give meaning and purpose to all human life; that it can answer man's deep questioning and quiet the restless human heart.

This implies that we live what I would call « a spirituality of the heart ». This means that:

- a. We have to go down to the depths of our own soul in a realization of our profound personal needs of life, of love and of meaning.
- b. We must find, through faith and reflection, the answer to our own questioning in the Heart of Christ, i.e. in the depths of his personality, where man's yearning and God's graciousness meet in redemptive incarnation.
- c. Then, fashioned by these forces, our own heart will be an understanding heart, open to, feeling for, and giving to our brothers and sisters in Christ.
- d. We will not be *disheartened*, or discouraged in the face of difficulties. We follow Christ who « loved with a human heart » as Vatican II reminds us; he shared our humanness that we might know that over us all is the everlasting love of the Father. In God's good time the omnipotent love

of God will have its way. It is *this* love in which we have learned to believe.

Courage:

« Courage, strength, constancy », these Chevalier regarded as virtues of the Heart of Christ, for they express the very qualities of love. He himself had the courage to undertake difficult enterprises for the cause of Christ - a courage based on 'belief in his love'. For example, invited to accept the vast mission of Micronesia and Melanesia he wrote to Fr. Jovet, replying to objections from Fr. Gayot, on June 25th, 1881:

« Our Religious... without being either eagles or saints... are far from being inferior to others in devotion, obedience... We will accept this mission... because the good God always blesses and rewards obedience and sacrifice ».

He had the courage to be *constant* and to *persevere* through the multiple difficulties met with in the course of his life.

He had the *courage to hope*, even when others did not, even when others thought there was no future for religious life, at least in France. On April 4th, 1906, he wrote to Fr. Carrière, Provincial of France. « ... the faith is not dead... Where did Fr. Meyer get the idea that the Religious Orders have had their day, or that they can not be built up again? He forgets then that the life of perfection is an essential part of the Church... ».

« Obedience and mutual charity »

This juxtaposition of ideas is rather unorthodox. Consequently, those with a passion for tidier classification have sought to improve on Chevalier's text by considering obedience under the vows, while leaving the mutual charity as part of the spirit of the congregation, or part of community living. Doing this takes away a lot of the strength of what Chevalier was trying to say. For him obedience was closely connected with his charism and 'obedience in mutual charity' a strong point in his view of religious life.