

## PRAYER AND SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY

Today I wish to point out some of the challenges to contemporary spirituality, and how we as theologians might contribute to relating more successfully to these challenges. In general I shall initiate this reflection in the areas of personal and social integration of theology with other disciplines, and finally in the context of charismatic renewal and prayerful discernment.

### INTEGRATION

As an introduction to this particular problem we may quote:

This "distance" or lack of integration is part of man's lot. Perfection for Jesus, as for all men, was overcoming the forces of disintegration, the forces which tend to make communion with men and God impossible. Man's incompleteness, his situation of imperfection is one in which there exists forces of evil and sin; that is, forces which tend to man's disintegration. Man's existence is a constant struggle to overcome these forces and to attain a union, a harmony, an integration with himself, with his fellow man, with nature, and with the world which is the place where he realizes this process.

For the Christian the more he comes to live the Paschal mystery, the more he attains integration. And in order to attain it, he must enter with Jesus into an attitude of "consecration" by a total renunciation of the forces which tend to his dissolution. In this way the Christian accepts the call of renunciation of self and lives in a very personal way the death and resurrection of Jesus. With Christ he thus reduces the distance between himself and the Father. It must be noted here more explicitly that the aspect of renunciation (death) for the Christian operates only in function of his perfection or integration (resurrection). A renunciation which is practiced apart from this spirit is neither Christian nor humanly of value.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas this lack of integration will always remain a challenge for

<sup>1</sup>R. Pelton, "Contemporary Religious Spirituality and the Signs of the Times," *Review for Religions* 32, No. 1 (1973), 29.

the Christian man it is so in particular at this moment in the context of Christian friendship. The extremely rapid developments in the field of contemporary psychology in this area call for a deeper spiritual integration. One instance of an effort to appreciate this relationship is to be found in the recent study on the spiritual renewal of the American priesthood.<sup>2</sup> This needs to be carried much further, and I encourage you to contribute to that process.

A further area for a more integrated growth consists in the necessarily broadening relationships between theology and other disciplines, and this in particular in terms of bringing to birth "a new humanism."<sup>3</sup>

Personal integration should be related to a social one since individual shortcomings are carried over into the social order. Structures and systems tend to embody man's corporate failures and shortcomings. The Latin American Church, particularly at Medellin, is endeavoring to strengthen this relationship.<sup>4</sup> The Church in the United States can learn from this example, and is at the same time developing its own program.<sup>5</sup> However, lest theologians fall into a type of "purist spirituality," they too must actively contribute to this integration so evidently needed in our times particularly in the face of various contemporary examples of corporate irresponsibility in the United States.

#### PRAYER

Our efforts to grow in a life of prayer are challenged by an increasing secularization. This can result in a lessening of the quality of our lives of prayer, or it can encourage us to seek new and more meaningful forms of prayer life.

<sup>2</sup>E. Larkin and G. Broccolo, eds., *Spiritual Renewal of the American Priesthood* (Washington: USCC, 1973), Chap. 3, pp. 32-38.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 55, where the Council speaks of "the birth of a new humanism where man is defined before all else by his responsibilities to his brothers and to history."

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Second General Conference of the Latin American Bishops, *The Church in the Present Day—Transformation in the Light of the Council* (1968). English translation: Latin American Bureau, Washington, D.C.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Publications from the Division of Justice and Peace, USCC, 1312 Mass. Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

There is within the United States at this moment a significant effort to grow in the life of prayer through the movement entitled charismatic renewal. This effort has been subject to doubts, criticisms and, at the same time, an increasing success.<sup>6</sup> One question which must be consistently raised is whether the movement does in fact tie in to the on-going social realities of our times as we have mentioned earlier in our observations about the need for a socially integrated spirituality. Even though there is an increasing proof of such integration the question itself needs to be raised regularly.

Another development in the area of spiritual theology is the growth in the use of the discernment process.<sup>7</sup> This is becoming very popular, almost to the point of being a fad. As theologians we need to encourage sound emotional and human preparation for this experience. Otherwise there can easily occur manipulative experiences which will be all the more frustrating in view of the increasing spiritual expectations of our times.

Finally, the action of the Holy Spirit is being particularly felt in our times. We are being moved to a much greater awareness of the charismatic dimension of the Church. One aspect of this is exemplified through the movement of charismatic renewal. During the proceedings of the recent International Conference on the Charismatic Renewal in the Catholic Church held at Notre Dame University, one of the speakers, the Reverend Harold Cohen, called upon the leaders of the movement to seek theological counsel so that the growth of this effort would reflect accurately an authentic and living Christian tradition.<sup>8</sup> This also reflects the spirit of the earlier statement of the Committee on Doctrine of the NCCB.<sup>9</sup> Father Cohen also requested that the bishops themselves take more leadership in the charismatic effort. A very clear challenge to

<sup>6</sup>Report of the Committee on Doctrine of the NCCB, November 14, 1969.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*. J. Futrell, "Ignatian Discernment," 2 (April, 1970), n. 2; J. Toner, "A Method for Communal Discernment of God's Will," 3 (September, 1971), n. 4; J. Futrell, "Communal Discernment: Reflection on Experience," 4 (November, 1972), n. 5.

<sup>8</sup>The entire text of this address will be published by the Conference officials.

<sup>9</sup>Report of the Committee on Doctrine of the NCCB, November 14, 1969.

contemporary theologians is to explore in a reverent way various allied questions such as the time for Confirmation, the fuller meaning of baptism in the Spirit, etc. Without such efforts, the movement itself could easily go astray. There could be repeated what has happened in Christendom before: that which began in the Spirit resulted in disharmony, separation and frustration due to man's lack of initiative. We spiritual theologians are being called upon in a particular way to take positive and creative steps. To dispose ourselves to receive the Spirit for that important responsibility we should take seriously the words of Cardinal Suenens spoken at the conclusion of this year's Charismatic Conference:

... Is there a secret to make absolutely sure that we receive the Holy Spirit in the easiest way? My answer is, there is a secret. And the secret of our unity with the Spirit is our unity with Mary, the Mother of God. When the angel was present, when the annunciation came from Heaven, Mary said, "How could we do that?" And the answer came, "The Spirit of God will overshadow thee." And Christ is born out of the Spirit and by the cooperation of Mary, and on the Day of Pentecost the Church was born in the same way: Mary was there, helping the Apostles to receive the Spirit of God.<sup>10</sup>

May we theologians also be like Mary—open to the fullness of the Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>The entire text of this address will be published by the Conference officials.

<sup>11</sup>Among the principal points which emerged in the discussion were that discernment if properly used can assist persons in appreciating and accepting God's will for them; and that participants in the Charismatic movement can be assisted in their development by being even more aware of the findings of clinical psychology.