

MORAL DILEMMAS

IV: Spiritual Maturity

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THE following article is concerned with discovering a basis for a more mature spiritual life, especially in the case of men. Three different viewpoints are successively adopted, from each of which man's development is traced from childhood, through adolescence to complete maturity; at each stage far-reaching changes are seen to take place, and about the age of forty to forty-five a crisis normally occurs, which we shall have to discuss in some detail.

A child is utterly self-centred, though his charm and simplicity prevent this from shocking us as it would in a grown-up. In his actions he always aims at getting his own way, which to a large extent means satisfying his physical needs.

As he grows into a youth he enters into fuller possession of his mental and physical powers. He is haunted by the spirit of adventure and by vague ambitions (ambition itself, less generous, comes only later), for there seems no limit to what he is able to do. But for all his openness of heart he remains somewhat self-centred; it is the things that will allow him to live his own life, with his own personality, that he is striving after.

Only when he reaches manhood does he begin to live for other people as much as for himself. This is not necessarily due to heroic virtue, but simply to his situation in life, for usually he has a family to look after, and works for others at his job. The very situation prevents his living only for himself; and while this makes his life more prosaic, it makes it at the same time more real.

But though this situation arises naturally by the mere fact of growing up, it must be accompanied by an equally mature faith and inner life, which will only happen when the

interior movements of his soul are also directed away from himself and towards others. Of course, this remains an ideal which few people actually attain. A man does not reach spiritual maturity until his activities, no longer determined merely by his environment and upbringing, spring from a spiritual centre around which he has integrated his whole being. This is the ideal of St Thomas' teaching on the moral life, based on the two great virtues of charity (directed to our last end) and prudence (concerned with the means to this). Another way of looking at the process would be to speak of our gradually taking command of our own personal kingdom, and making of it a kingdom of God by overcoming self through the conscious possession of self. Unfortunately so many men seem to think that when they cease to be children under discipline, they are no longer called on to practise any self-control, other than those that social conventions require. Religious instruction can help very greatly here, so long as it is presented as something making real demands on us.

So a grown man can do what is still impossible to children and adolescents, not yet escaped from outside influences; he is, or ought to be, a fully responsible person, able to create his own personal relationships, and to be appealed to or relied on in any situation. He has a place of his own in society, whether it be at his work, within the Church, or on the broad field of history, for he has learned from experience what he is capable and desirous of doing. He can be counted on to follow a settled policy, and overcome the difficulties that may arise, without impatience.

Hence education for a mature Christian life really means the discovery of a person's true place in the world and in the Church, with the responsibilities towards God and men which this involves. His activities may well be unromantic, even drab, but they will be real, springing from tried convictions, from genuine knowledge of himself and of his position in society. Catholic Action has thus proved an effective means of adult education for many people in our time. But there is a sad lack of suitable reading-matter to correspond. Lives of saints and similar writings are still marred by distortions and exaggerations, by a false romanticism that may

well work on the generous enthusiasm of childhood, but which appears unreal and even downright silly to a grown man. What we need is books where the way to sanctity is shown through simple actions set in real situations. The great success of Catholic reform in the sixteenth century was largely due to the practical men who opened schools, taught the catechism, nursed the sick, founded societies, and had, in short, thoroughly realistic aims.

We shall now adopt a rather different point of view, in which growing-up appears as progressively greater participation in one's environment. The child lives entirely through others, especially of course through his mother; in her womb first of all, but for many years afterwards she continues to be his refuge and support. He puts complete trust in his parents, who satisfy all his needs and to a large extent shape his life. We should remember that God demands precisely such an attitude from all of us towards himself, as our Lord indicated when he said, 'of such is the kingdom of heaven'. But it must be also remembered that St Paul said: 'Brethren, do not become children in sense: but in malice be children, and in sense be perfect' (1 Cor. 14, 20).

As a boy grows up and finds out what he is capable of doing, he ceases to depend on others for support. Indeed quite naturally he rebels against all authority that tries to push him in a direction he does not wish to go. But despite his real inner need to be different, a boy has very few ideas that he has gained from experience and made genuinely his own; he gets them instead from the various group-activities in which he takes part, from political clubs, youth organisations and so on. It is the age of belonging to 'movements'; of talking, camping with other members of the group; the age in which it is so easy to be taken in by the well-sounding promises of party leaders.

A man, with his own family and his own job, with no one to whom he can refer his difficulties, instinctively assumes full responsibility for his own life, and resists any attempt at interference. Newman remarks, in the *Mission of St Benedict*, that children live by imagination, young men by reason, the old by experience. As he passes out of adolescence, a man ceases to take his opinions from other people, and,

to a degree that depends on his character and position in society, acquires his own personal convictions through experience.

Unfortunately this development, good and necessary as it is in itself, raises many difficulties for the Christian life. A man who has successfully gained his independence in the world will find it very hard to maintain that childlike trust in God which faith demands. Religion, he says, is all very well for women and children, but not for grown men. And it is difficult not to sympathise with him when Catholic devotions are described with a degree of naïvety that would seem to merit St Thomas' condemnation of those who draw on themselves the *irrisio infidelium*.

We must go more deeply into this question. Throughout life we have got to remain faithful to the consequences of certain basic decisions: to the occupation we have chosen, the family we have raised, the country and civilisation that we have accepted. Above all the Christian must rest true to his faith, and in special cases, to his priesthood or vocation. Now in a sense (as Péguy pointed out) this is never done more vividly, more authentically than at the very beginning. In a sense, we are never nearer to Christ more than we are on the day of our first communion, our ordination, our religious profession; we are never more united as man and wife than on the day of our marriage. Yet how much more truly we are a priest after twenty years of faithful service; how much more truly man and wife after twenty years of sharing the trials and joys of married life. The great thing is to have remained faithful to what was chosen so long ago, even after all its romance has disappeared. In the truest sense a man is a priest, a husband, a patriot when, purified by the trials of many years, he sees things just as they are, yet maintains more firmly than ever the choice he has made. Spiritual maturity is the result of similar purification over many years.

Undoubtedly there is a risk of destroying belief altogether in putting it to the test in the attempt to make it more authentic. Rash criticism, or experience of the bitterness and deceptions of life, must have left many people with nothing but the empty shell of their faith. Another type of person

will remain a child in the faith, never questioning anything, content to take appearance for reality. Both errors must be avoided before true maturity is attained.

It has never been easy to grow up. In the order of faith, as in that of life itself, it is far easier to see what is wrong than to effect a cure; but direct diagnosis is at least something.

From yet another point of view, we may say of the child that he finds it difficult to distinguish the real from the imaginary; the visible and invisible are on the same level for him. Most of us, no doubt, can remember seeing the shadowy figure who haunted the bushes at the dark corner of the garden. So a child simply does not think of material objects as solid and unchanging. This is why his witness has no great value, however sincere it may be. He does not see the difference between day-dream and reality, so that it is impossible to rely on him. But he readily accepts a world of symbols, and has no difficulty in supposing that the child Jesus is in the tabernacle or in seeing him in the host at the elevation. He accepts and lives the faith quite naturally, for it corresponds exactly to the way in which he thinks. The kingdom of heaven is for those who become like little children. But it is dangerous for religion to remain infantile, as it does when God and the sacraments are thought to operate by a kind of magic, and it is surely a primary duty of priests to educate people out of so immature a state.

Adolescence is dominated by the search for techniques, whether of thought or of creative activity. At what is rightly called the age of reason there is a real hunger for the rational, which soon becomes a burning need to find explanations and to avoid being deceived. There are no limits at this age to what the boy knows he can do; it is the age of large generalisations, eager discussions, generous ambitions; the world has taken on a definite shape for him. Perhaps in some ways he will never be so happy again.

A man learns to know the world as it is, in all its harsh reality. A knowledge it is well to have, but which often leaves a bitter taste in the mouth. We may now consider the important topic of the 'crisis at forty-five', which though less obvious than the crisis of adolescence is as profound and

perhaps harder to overcome. The one arises when the boy first enters a new world of exciting possibilities; the other when as a man he begins to realise he must leave it. The question is no longer what new things there are to discover, but what old ones can still be kept.

At this age a man begins to doubt whether he has really followed his true vocation, really run his life on the right lines. Life is obviously fading a little, and he realises he will not do any better than, or much differently from what he has done till then. The naval man will be known as 'Commander' to the end of his days; the business man will be haunted by his memory of one false step; the father of a family is disappointed in the children he has idolised and spoilt; the apparently successful man is unhappily married, and so on. Each one sees the goal he once hoped to attain still just as far beyond his reach; he has no illusions now about the future.

And so he turns to some easy consolation; he takes up fishing, or potters about the house, or finds satisfaction in the exercise of authority at home; there is every sort of escape for the disappointed, in which they may please themselves without fear of getting hurt. Another type of man will react rather differently, hanging on grimly rather than giving way, but the iron has entered his soul.

The first necessity, as is so often the case with moral problems, is a change of mind. It is no use their making efforts of will until the whole way in which these people look at things has been modified. The most sincere resolutions often come to nothing because of a smoke-screen of uncriticised moral platitudes between them and the action that should result. Only when this has been removed can the situation be accepted realistically, which does not mean admitting defeat and giving up the struggle; it means basing our hopes on a knowledge of what is genuinely possible, renouncing the dream-world we have been living in, and facing the facts, however gloomy, with the aid of reason and experience. For the Christian it means leaving the whimsies of popular devotion, the months of Mary and Joseph, and living by bare faith under our cross.

At this time of life a man must begin to acquire some

detachment; not losing his taste for the good things of life, but drawing back slightly from them. He accepts in a fuller sense what is genuine in them by renouncing more superficial pleasures and interests. When St Teresa of Lisieux was pained to see some favourite chestnuts being felled, she reflected: 'it would not have worried me in the least if they were being cut down in some other convent. . . . When John the Baptist saw that everyone was going to Jesus for baptism, he said, "A man cannot receive anything, unless it be given him from heaven. You yourselves do bear me witness, that I said, I am not Christ, but that I am sent before him. He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, who standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth with joy because of the bridegroom's voice. This my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3, 27-30).' This spirit of purity and detachment corresponds to man's full maturity, the age of crisis indeed, but also the time of life in which he can at last get out of himself, and seeing the world objectively, have a critical appreciation of his own position in it.

It is here that religion has an important part to play. For example, a man who is a little intoxicated by his material success can now, if he will, enter more deeply into the service of God in love and fidelity. He will come up against the reality of the cross, and begin that purgation which, we believe, will be completed after death as the earthly load that keeps us from God is slowly lightened. Experience will be a great help to him in his trial. By forty-five he should have learned to do his duty without fuss, and be content with his obscurity; he should have understood the importance of faithfulness in little things, and his sense of values should be more solid.

But the spiritual advice that we have to offer him must be equally mature. Religion can be clothed with a certain romanticism earlier on, but by now it is essential to provide something fit for grown men. If the books, imperfect in many ways, of Carrel and Lecomte du Noüy have met with such success, it is because the background of their spiritual teaching is a factual science, history, psychology, archaeology, which contrasts favourably with the rather puerile

idealisation of certain Catholic authors. There is a primary need for authentic and enlightened spiritual teaching, in which absolute values stand out because they are set against a real background. Realistic preaching does not need to be less supernatural, more journalistic; but it must correspond to man's true needs, and be centred on the objective facts of nature and grace.

Once again it is easy to diagnose, hard to produce a cure. We hope that these remarks, far from discouraging anyone, will help all Christians to know themselves more fully, so that when they reach the time of life in which they can view their future realistically, they will enter with renewed vigour the service of that God who searches the reins and the heart.

JUDGMENT OF DEATH¹

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IT has for long been a source of disquiet to the public conscience that Great Britain is among the very few western countries which find it necessary to retain the death penalty. This policy is only a continuance of a curious national tradition of ruthlessness about executions, for although England had always made a minimal use of torture, and was a pioneer in prison reform, she retained on her statute books until well into the nineteenth century more capital offences than any other civilised country. For Catholics, teaching on the morality of a death sentence is clear. As Mr Hollis points out in his admirable contribution to Messrs Paget and Silverman's book, 'It is certainly the teaching of the Christian religion that life is sacred, that it is God who gives life, and therefore only reasons of absolute necessity could justify the taking of life'. The Church has never condemned capital punishment as such; in practice it connived at or even demanded its use by the secular arm for heresy, sorcery, and other offences, and when the popes held temporal power it was in operation in the papal states.

¹ *The Report of the Royal Commission on Capital Punishment, 1949-1953.* (H.M.S.O., 12s. 6d.).

Flanged—and Innocent? By R. T. Paget, Q.C., M.P., and Sidney Silverman, M.P., with epilogue by Christopher Hollis, M.P. (Gollancz, 12s. 6d.).