

SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

A. DANGERS OF OUTWARDNESS IN TIME OF DISMANTLEMENT AND RAPID GROWTH

What are the qualities required for the leadership of a religious community? It hardly needs saying that what is especially required - along with competent overall, financial, and crisis management, insight into social and psychological factors, knowledge of the societal and ecclesiastical context of a community etc. - is pastoral competence to accompany the individual members of the community on their faith journey. This is especially the case when its members are confronted with sickness and death, processes of breakdown and vulnerability, or the challenges of new options of engagement and service. Leaders of religious communities, it seems, must first of all be competent to do things for others. They must have the ability to inspire their community by word and example in authentically interpreting and practicing the charism of the religious institution in question. They must be leaders on the spiritual journey which flows from the institution's foundational charism and is mapped out in its rule and constitutions. They must create a religious context such that all the members of the community can make their own journey within it.

Leaders of religious communities are chosen and appointed on the basis of generally valued qualities and capacities. But the question is: are these qualities of religious leadership and is there such a thing as formation for «spiritual leadership»? In many cases the choice is made in a hit-or-miss fashion as well as on the basis of a variety of motives which are usually respectable and well-considered. The premise of this essay, however, is that in leading religious communities the central task is «religious leadership» of a very specific kind. The voting constituency and the person elected fail to do justice to each other unless this relation is based on thorough reflection on the specific nature of religious leadership. Certainly, schools for and courses on spiritual leadership exist here and there. Like pastoral formation, so also spiritual formation is rightly making increasing use of new social and psychological insights. But since spiritual leadership in the past was frequently moralistic and coercive in character and aimed at a

soothing conformity of everyone to a fixed pattern of religious life, the spiritual message of these leaders in fact bore no relation to the lived spirituality of the individual members, a spirituality which, as we may recall, was narrowed down to the private domain. Leadership restricted itself to drawing up documents and the creation of frameworks, to generating inspiring dynamics, decisiveness and optimism, but hardly ventured into the depth-domain of religious «*attouchement*»¹ and life conduct. The actual spiritual journey of the individual religious was left to the confessional or spiritual guidance. Spiritual intimacy was screened off on the one hand by shame and modesty, and by respect and aloofness on the other. The spiritual journey of the individual was hardly ever shared with anyone else. In many communities it only rarely formed the topic of communal reflection and fruitful exchange. Anniversary sermons and memorial statements were rarely occasions at which communities paused to reflect publicly on the spiritual journey of a person. Frequently both forms felt somewhat uncomfortable and were usually limited to a recital of memorable facts. Mention of risks, periods of stagnation, and ambiguities which marked a person's spiritual journey only became interesting in the context of a beatification process behind closed doors, while the public genre of hagiography was limited as a rule to the description of the good example and the depiction of the ideal self. A spiritual journey only became socially accessible and could only be shared in an idealized form and as a genre, not as lived spirituality and as a struggle to release oneself to God. While the depth and radical nature of this process was presupposed, it was not shared.

Within this culture of spiritual aloofness, combined with the external formalism of community structures and communal life forms, liturgy, the breviary, and activities, the practice of giving leadership did not have to become a spiritual experience. It was a task that went with a position, not a vocation and a journey. The crisis in Church and society of the past decades and the resulting decrease in vocations, aging, and the unrecognizability of the religious life as such, now confront us with the inescapable question of the quality of religious leadership. After all, the leader of a religious community must be more than a perfect manager and economist, a specialist in ecclesiastical law, a sociologist and psychologist. We must, accordingly, again pose

¹ Dutch: «*geraaktheid*»; French: «*attouchement*». It is the state of being touched by God's grace and Spirit in the depths of one's being: a mystical experience. But I know of no precise English word for it [*Translator*].

the question: What is the nature of the spirituality of religious leadership? In what does the spiritual journey of leadership figures consist and how can it be fostered? What are the pitfalls which manifest themselves on this journey and what are the potentials for growth which present themselves? Does responsibility for the religious life of the community not require that leaders live uniquely in terms of the inspiration of the religious vocation? Is not the fulfillment of this responsibility a special vocation? Is it not necessary for leaders to have achieved great spiritual maturity for them to be able to fulfill this task well? How do they exercise their responsibility as a team for the spirituality of the order or congregation, of a province or community? What must they do to foster this spirituality? Is it their task to enhance the possibility that individuals will live authentically in light of their religious vocation, or is it sufficient for them to see to it that the individual religious function well and to be happy when tensions in the communities are manageable and the tasks of their community are properly fulfilled? Is it not imperative for them to be deeply imbued with spirituality and to have thoroughly appropriated it? Or is it perhaps sufficient for them to be efficient CEOs and managers who know what their community is all about, but leave responsibility for spirituality to the experts concerned: those responsible for formation, committees on spirituality, or other functionaries in the area of spirituality? Is it enough for them to ask themselves how they can best foster the well-being and spiritual health of religious?

Are spirituality, well-being, and spiritual health identical? As a rule well-being is associated with physical health and ecclesiastical/societal functioning, and spiritual health is associated with psychological well-being. In the case of religious the experience of spirituality and psychological well-being are in the nature of the case interwoven. Must not religious experience good health psychologically in order truly to interiorize the spirituality of which they think that it is theirs and to which they can perhaps give beautiful verbal expression? That is, must they not so appropriate it that it constitutes the lived spirituality in terms of which they spontaneously live because they cannot do otherwise? Could it also be the other way around, viz. that both a person's spirituality and psychological health suffer when the spirituality of the order or congregation has not been interiorized and is therefore permanently and on some unconscious level at odds with one's own ends and behavior? Then, too, we ask: what, in all these cases, is the task of those who give leadership in the religious community, what precisely should they foster, and how must they do it?

In the situation of many provinces today one could more specifically ask: how are those in charge confronted with spirituality in an aging community with few or no new vocations? Is not spirituality more suited to processes of construction and periods of religious creativity, to young communities which design the future? In other words, is not spirituality rather a feature of the novitiate and a period of formation, while it is enough for the «settled» religious who are fully «in touch with things» to limit spirituality to the annual retreat and a few privileged moments of reflection and faith? Is it not true that with respect to spirituality the older members can «live off» the past, at the same time having a chance to catch up on what they have neglected for years? In other words, is not spirituality something for young people and young provinces, while old provinces, like old people, can on the one hand live off the past and on the other sponsor renaissance-research for the benefit of new countries?

In this essay we expressly distance ourselves from such attempts at compartmentalization. Lived spirituality can never be farmed out to others. We can, admittedly, be unavoidably dependent on creative forms and new initiatives, on research and instruction, on old and new interpretations and models, etc. Lived spirituality belongs to the personal domain of every religious. No one can consider himself or herself exempt from it without ceasing to be religious. This means that concern for spirituality inevitably belongs to the responsibility of the people in charge in every religious community. This responsibility only ends at death and at the dissolution of the community. Up until that time all those who fulfill the function must account for their obligation to exercise spiritual leadership.

Implied in this view is that the question concerning the spirituality of religious leadership cannot be considered an incidental luxury. This spirituality, after all, will always again be under pressure in less favorable circumstances, although as a result also new possibilities will present themselves. How, for example, does a person experience spiritually a task with so few challenges in the order or congregation, inasmuch as one is consistently occupied much more with cutting back structures and provisions and the care of the elderly, than with the making of new plans for the future? Leadership teams frequently consist of the more vital members of the order or congregation, but does not this task of serving an aging community require that they must also personally train themselves in the spirituality of aging people? For, almost more than these aging people themselves, those who are giving leadership consciously experience that in the confrontation with an approaching end they themselves are found

standing with empty hands. Indeed, may we limit our governing task to a purely internal sequence of events and to that which is purely a caretaking activity, while from without, in church or society, an urgent appeal is being made to religious, not so much to provide personnel, but - for as long as it can still be done - to make available expertise and funds for the building up of a self-conscious and worthy church and a more just society. Is it not imperative that those in charge, in the name of their order or congregation and on the basis of a matured consciousness of the charism that is peculiar to it, spend much of their time on this ecclesiastical and societal engagement? Is this in fact a new and intense form of the experience of this charism, or is it a subtle flight away from one's own drab existence in which one can no longer play any role of significance, and the time of achievement is past?

This is the kind of questions we could pose in relation to the spirituality of religious leadership in provinces which are becoming ever smaller and older. In young provinces, where the opposite situation frequently prevails, there also exists the danger that the religious leadership loses itself in urgent tasks which flow from the necessity of forming adapted structures for formation and training and the creation of work and life situations. Here, too, there is a temptation to concentrate, on the one hand, on external and material management and, on the other, on the creation of social and psychological conditions for the development of their youthful members. In both cases one has to pose the question concerning the spirituality of the religious leadership. How can those in charge grow in this spirituality while devoting themselves to tasks which must be executed as soon as possible? The characteristic nature of the spirituality of religious leadership is above all fidelity to the essential values of the religious life in situations which first of all demand that it give attention and time to external circumstances and favorable conditions for a life characterized by its orientation. The religious life unfolds as the giving of external form to an inner journey. Because the concrete shaping of life and endeavor demands great care and attention, the spiritual journey of individuals and communities is easily overshadowed by it. Spiritual leadership must be an example to others in the search for a healthy balance.

It must therefore give specific attention to the spiritual health of fellow brothers or sisters. This means that the leadership needs to foster spiritual processes which make it possible for them to get closer to their religious vocation. It is easier for the leadership of a community to be familiar with explicit and perceptible current problems than

with the interiority and spirituality of people. This is especially true when many of the older members have their roots in a culture in which one spoke about such matters only with a confessor or spiritual mentor. The advancement of spirituality by the religious leadership is easily reduced to the promotion of «knowledge» through fresh studies and the retrieval and renewal of one's own tradition, and to the organization of possibilities for spiritual deepening. Do those in charge feel up to the accompaniment of intense and sometimes shocking processes in which people on the one hand seek to free themselves from immature and oppressive forms of spirituality which they have been mistakenly talked into by others or by themselves, or in which, on the other hand, they embark on a search for the uniqueness of their own religious vocation in a manner which still has to be invented and easily evokes resistance in others?

How does one deal with spiritual processes in which senior members of a community, as a result of the cessation of certain activities and bouts with illness and death, find themselves with nothing to do? These religious, after all, must discover their vocation in a new way because they can no longer escape into activities and effort for others, into achievements and the appreciation they received from them. Must religious leadership confine itself to giving attention and care to the sick and the dying, or do current leaders bear a special responsibility to foster and call forth new spiritual processes in these aging people? Is aging an uninteresting phase of dismantlement after a fruitful life, or does it create hitherto-unknown chances to experience one's own spirituality fundamentally and on a deeper level, and to translate one's own charism in a new way in this radically changing phase of life? Do not aging people, in a way that is peculiarly their own, undertake a process of recovering the sources of their own spirituality in circumstances which were absolutely unknown before? In this phase of life, must the religious leadership see to it that no one has any reason to complain and that physical and material care is perfectly organized? Should people, experiencing these painful forms of processing grief, be comforted by the greater closeness of these leaders and a listening ear, or is it above all the task of superiors to see to it that aging fellow brothers or sisters be aided in accepting this new spiritual challenge consciously and maturely and so grow into the fullness of their religious vocation? May they permit older members of the community to slowly sink into eternal sleep as in this final phase of life they remain stuck in the status quo of the spirituality of their youth or middle age and in old habits which are so soothing? Or should they be above all creative and foster the idea that

older people should take a fresh look at themselves at their vocation, and at unforeseen challenges to the spirituality from which they have drawn hope and energy throughout their life? Should not superiors, in an intense way, promote the ideal that seniors should become ever younger spiritually? This is not a totally unrealistic wish. On account of the experience of having nothing to do (being left with «empty hands») they can be gradually freed, after all, from every form of curving back upon themselves? As a result they can become ever freer to accept the ultimate implications of their religious vocation. In the case of many religious, is not aging in fact a dazzling development toward a really mature spirituality? Does such a development occur accidentally, on the basis of foundations laid at some time in the past, or is it the task of the religious leadership to foster such a development? It is possible, after all, that many chances remain unutilized. Is not this the true closeness which is required of religious leadership and do we not too readily confuse it with a demand for an affective and caring presence because we ourselves are afraid of this step into the dark?

The leadership of an aging community must resist the temptation to lose itself in excessive care, while that of a young community must not lose itself in the solicitous creation of possibilities for self-development. In the history of the religious life enthusiasm and the success of rapid growth have always been dangers which led rather to external conformism than to the interiorization of spirituality. Are we building our house on a strong foundation with the requisite depth or are we content with quantity and external show which evoke the appearance of «success»? Again, therefore, we face the crucial question: how can religious leadership be practiced in such a way that it is expressed in fidelity to the basic values of the religious life? How do we progressively become religious in the «detached» exercise of leadership and thereby into leaders, in the transparency of an intensely experienced religious «*attachement*».

B. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A SPIRITUALITY OF RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

Hidden behind this seemingly simple question is a host of questions which for us constitute a challenge to reflection. I shall attempt to answer the question «how those in positions of leadership, in orders and congregations, can foster the lived spirituality of the religious entrusted to their care» on the basis of reflection on the term «spirituality».

For this purpose I will proceed from the working definition of spirituality as it has been designed at the Titus Brandsma Institute at Nijmegen² and reads as follows: «Spirituality is transformation in God». With the aid of this definition I will try to reflect on the role of religious leadership in relation to the spirituality of the religious.

In the first place «God» presents himself in the sphere of one's personal life as the Unconditional Transcendent or Absolute, who touches a person. God attracts people or sets them in motion. That always happens «from the other side», as Dag Hammarskjöld³ puts it. That is, it happens suddenly and without mediation as an absolute and unconditional claim or invitation. This «touch» takes place from without or from within, is not bound either to place or time, nor to human patterns of ideas. It manifests itself as an ever-receding track, is free from all fixation, and resistant to every previously posited limitation and is therefore experienced as the suspension and «annihilation» of every human perspective. The Unconditional who is encountered tolerates no delay and inevitably evokes the reaction of an unconditional life. In that sense spirituality is the sphere, the receptive space, in which the Hidden One can assert himself and be heard.

When we reflect on the spirituality of religious leadership, this means, on the one hand, that giving leadership must itself originate in the encounter with the divine reality. A community cannot be properly accompanied on the path of its religious vocation unless this vocation is experienced in light of the «*attouchement*» sparked by the unconditional divine claim which underlies the personal religious vocation of those giving leadership and that of fellow brothers or sisters. When religious leadership confines itself to perfect organization and great helmsmanship but ignores the essential nature of one's religious calling, viz. openness to the voice of God, it reduces this community in practice to something purely interhuman. Granted: community as people's orientation to each other and as a perfect human organization is as such something very good and desirable. But in a religious community people are not brought together by friendship and interest in each other. Within this evangelical context only the «*attouchement*» by the Unconditional establishes communion. The Unconditional who does not coincide with any of the persons belonging to it forms the center of the religious community. People first of all share this «*attouchement*» with each other and on that basis friend-

² KEES WAAIJMAN, *Wat is spiritualiteit?* (TBI Studies I), Nijmegen 1992, et seq.

³ DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD, *Markings*.

ship springs up. Giving leadership to a religious community requires great sensitivity to the layer of the religious «*attouchement*» and the skill to see it at work in people.

Despite a fundamental readiness and good will on the part of the leaders, being sensitive to the divine layer in another person is no easy assignment, because these leaders themselves have as a rule also undergone a marked development in relation to their religious experience and their God-image. Consequently, they sometimes sense within themselves powerful resistance to a language which sounds too matter-of-course in its reference to God. They have grown up in and been shaped by a critical attitude toward a devotional, ascetic, and dogmatic religious culture. Though they are contemporaries, the leaders and the members of a religious community sometimes live in totally different cultures. In that case a temptation exists to offer one's own language and ideas (possibly secularized and critical of society) as a valid alternative or in subtle ways to impose it on people. In so doing, a person replaces one religious thought system or worldview with another, while the Ineffable absolutely eludes every attempt at human definition, even that of the religious leadership. Drawn along in the tracks of the ever-receding, we can only stutter as we search for words. Although we may believe we have arrived at clear concepts and formulations, all our talk of God is still by definition imperfect and ambiguous. However well-intended, the propagation of an enlightened and modern religiosity may rob people of their roots in the tradition and of their contact with moments of intense «*attouchement*» by God. Religious leadership must foster religious growth and the deepening of one's spirituality, but if «we» may no longer speak in our own language and images about «God», how then can they teach us continually to forsake God for God's sake.⁴

The religious life, after all, is never a closed system or a world of safe ideas which give us something to hold onto and status. Ever anew we need to forsake the God whom we ourselves have invented and who coincides with our own experience for the God who as unconditional claim explodes all the logic and language of our own and ever and again relates us to a Center outside ourselves. When we throw in our lot with God, we inevitably get ever farther away from home. In speaking of the Ineffable, modern «secularized» linguistic puritanism is just as dangerous as the moral and ascetic perfectionism of the past. Instead of dragging religious out of a fixation upon themselves, their

⁴ Id., *Markings*.

incessant self-preoccupation, by relating them to the irreducible otherness of the Unconditional, we leave them ever more stuck within themselves. God breaks through all frameworks so that we never really know where we will end up. This leads to the danger that we will fixate on our own credibility and the relevance of our life form. Since this was always one of the dangers of the religious life, it is precisely what our religious leadership should arm religious against.

On the other hand, it is of great importance for religious leadership to help us by challenging us to continually allow the above-mentioned divine «*attouchement*» to happen to us. Since, in the nature of the case, this belongs to the personal intimacy of every religious, superiors must keep a respectful distance from it. Still it is part of the responsibility of the religious leadership to persist in confronting religious with their own vocation and to challenge them to continue their inward journey toward ever-unknown distant horizons. For this purpose the people in charge need not approach or accompany them all personally. But they must create the conditions which make this inward journey possible. These conditions include observable forms of religious culture such as liturgy, formation, buildings, institutions, etc. These cultural forms need not be so structured as to be soothing and comfortable, corresponding to the personal needs of the religious and to the status quo of the present development of the person.⁵ On the contrary, these religious institutions must be structured so as to make religious restless in the face of the unremitting confrontation with the Ineffable. They must not ensconce the religious in a safe haven of their own - regardless of whether it is traditional piety or a progressive struggle for freedom - but expose them to the merciless interior workings of the Unconditional who ever and again presents himself in ways that are totally different from what we expect. Religious leadership bears great responsibility for these forms of religious architecture, not in the sense that - as in the past - it must impose them on the community, but because it has been chosen to give creative and stimulating leadership to a common search. The religious culture of the community can never be left to the free enterprise of the individual's experience as that spontaneously and haphazardly presents itself. When superiors refrain from guiding the for-

⁵ They may not accept all sorts of excuses, such as «I am not yet ready for the liturgy», or «for the time being I'd rather not speak about God, because I can't do anything with that concept». However true such statements may be as a description of experience, they fail to do justice to the absolute divine claim which constitutes the basis for a religious vocation.

mation of a religious culture - however thankless such a task may be - they have in fact tacitly decided on a shutdown of the order or the congregation.

Religious leadership must, on the one hand, see to it that this architecture is in fact the expression of the lived spirituality of the religious. Consequently superiors must be in continual dialogue with practicing religious, listening to their experience and struggles. On the other hand, they must be conscious that religious architecture shapes experience, gives focus to it, and opens up avenues of discovering, in ever new ways, the face of the Invisible. The fact that the religious architecture is fundamentally different from individual and personal experience, i.e. from its otherness, not only constitutes a form of alienation in the sense that this culture- and time-bound form does not fit present day experience, hence constitutes a violation of the spiritual health of the individual. On the positive side, this distance -in a Freudian sense - creates the optimal frustration needed for individuals to develop into psychological and spiritual maturity. When religious leadership bears responsibility for the adherence of the religion to their vocation, it must be careful not to make them sick by insisting on all sorts of needless frustrations which have no other meaning than that they are repetitions of what used to be, but must also see to it that the architecture of the community continually challenges them to step outside of themselves in order to encounter the other. The purpose of religious leadership is not to soothe, not even to be reelected, but to ensure the continued radicalness of the religious life. Perhaps we have to say that in many countries the great problem of the religious life is not the shortage of vocations, (i.e. in others), but that many religious have forgotten that they themselves are the vocation. The truth is that when religious fully exemplify the radicalness of their vocation, there is vocation and that in abundance. Real vocation from God either exists or does not exist, is heard or refused, but can never be the object of human calculations, statistics, or predictions! A vocation is not counted but heard! Inasmuch as a divine claim is not an object of human observation the response of people or the lack of it definitely also eludes our arithmetic or models of calculation. Vocation is not a matter of quantity but of quality which is mirrored in unconditional receptivity to the divine claim which fundamentally transforms a human life.

It is not up to the religious leadership to judge whether people think or speak correctly about God; its task, rather, is to foster the spirituality which breaks through one's own logic by its reference to the unconditional reality of God. The result of this is that the fixations

and mental fortresses which shield us from God's claim upon us are blown apart. Spirituality, accordingly, forms the atmosphere, the space and receptivity in which the Hidden One can assert himself and be heard. For its space spirituality needs institutions where the encounter between God and humans - an encounter no one can organize in advance - can take place. Religious must be continually challenged and thrown into confusion in order not to become deaf and blind to the Unseen and Unheard by ensconcing themselves in their own comforting ideas, regardless of whether these ideas are traditional or modern, secularized or critical of society. Nevertheless, superiors may not canonize their own radicalness, nor impose the heroics of a moral choice on the members of their community - somewhat as a membership card proving they belong to the group which has the clout and knows what it is talking about. This would only be a new fixation, which keeps a person from growing up. This would of course be a modern version of the earlier submissiveness which subjects one person to another without contributing to the «obedience» (from the Latin *oboedire*, to listen to) we owe to the voice of God.

In the second place, on the level of the religious community the unconditional reality of God presents itself in the form of values. The consequences triggered in the life of religious by the divine «attouchement», after all, are captured and mediated in formulations, modes of conduct, institutions or spiritual models. The religious experience of the founders is distilled in the charism of the order or congregation which as a result becomes a socially accessible form for new members. Thus, on the one hand, spiritual tradition becomes a lifestyle, an atmosphere with a peculiar redolence of its own, which appeals to the subjective intuitiveness of the individual who is called; on the other hand, this tradition takes the form of a spiritual architecture or value system which as an objectivizable and registrable reality can be passed down in texts and testimonies to which new members can in turn be introduced by processes of formation. In this manner the value system of an order or congregation can be sustained and ever further developed by the lived spirituality of its members, but at the same time it presents itself as an objective culture one can opt for and appropriate, and in which it can gradually grow into spiritual maturity. It is precisely these values which are normative for the development of the religious architecture of a community. In its shared value system a «community» becomes visible as a spiritual space. The religious leadership, accordingly, bears explicit responsibility for the authentic perception and practice of these spiritual values and needs to create the right conditions for them. Naturally this is impossible if leadership fig-

ures have not immersed themselves over a long time and in depth in the central values of the religious community, have not personally appropriated them, and have not, by a process of faith communication, made these values into a common point of departure of their religious leadership. Those who are called to positions of religious leadership need to be leaders and models in the shaping and deepening of the spirituality of the community.

Also, in order really to be able to speak about spirituality, superiors must see to it that the values which are handed down and appropriated do not become an ideological system that offers a place of security in which people can make themselves at home and is used as a fortification against unconscious needs which are inconsistent with or contrary to the values confessed. It is not the primary task of the religious leadership to make certain that the value system remains intact as a soothing factor and that the ideological identity of the order or congregation is preserved, but that these values serve as the space in which God can be encountered. This space, in the nature of the case, belongs to no one, since we can never use God to champion our causes. While values mark off the playing field, they do not exempt anyone from playing the game. The concern of superiors, accordingly, should not be the preservation of common values as static data; their business is to see to it that these central values will present themselves in the life of the religious as an unconditional appeal, hence as a deregulating factor which exposes a person to God's transforming power. The task of the religious leadership is not to ensure the physical continuance of the community, but to preserve the interior vocation in every person who is confronted with God's unconditional claim. At issue, after all, is the space in which God can be encountered, not human togetherness, intimacy, social and psychological well-being. Religious leadership needs to vouch for the space which it cannot create, preserve, or organize, since it originates only from within God's gratuitous claim upon us.

True spirituality is system-resistant; it can be defined as a countermovement. This is not so much the case because it takes shape in ecclesiastical or social protest movements, but because authentic spiritual values consistently subvert all human systems. Granted, true spirituality takes shape in the experience of concrete people, but it derives from the shocking and deregulative touch of God. This oppositional character applies as much to the religious community itself as to the ecclesiastical and societal context. True spirituality in an authentic religious community is never a safe haven, a soothing system, a «conservative» bulwark where humans are in charge. On the contrary, it is

the open space in which humans are mercilessly exposed to the divine logic which turns everything upside down.

In spiritual values, therefore, there is constant tension between the logic of the unconditional love of God (which asserts itself so forcefully that it deprives the human perspective of its validity) and the human experience which permits itself to be carried along in the tracks of the Unconditional and yet remains itself. God, who touches and disorients people and nevertheless keeps himself inevitably out of our grasp, at the same time asserts himself within the framework of human thought and speech. The Ineffable, after all, is discussed in the framework of the human language which attempts to express this inexpressible experience in descriptions of the spiritual journey and of spiritual values within the framework of the order or the congregation as a school of spirituality, within the celebration of the liturgy, within processes of formation, etc. Religious leadership has the responsibility to organize these objective and socially accessible forms in the interest of the community, but at the same time has to make certain that these forms remain an open (and blank) space in which the voice of the Ineffable remains audible.

The need for security and rest, pious inwardness or sense of community, a clear engagement in pastorate or liberation struggle, may never persuade religious to organize their life according to the bourgeois logic of individual responsibility, personal achievement, success and societal relevance. However central these values may be in our modern culture, in following this logic we make ourselves the cause of our own existence. This is perhaps understandable and warranted, but if religious leadership wants to be responsible for the authentic perception and practice of the religious vocation, it must continue to stir up unrest and call attention to the deregulative claims of the Unconditional. Leadership may never acquiesce in the status quo of the religious experience people have acquired, but must continue to foster the growth of that experience into spiritual maturity. Leaders, accordingly, must see to it that within the current individualized and fragmented context no single group succeeds in seizing control - for their own ends - of the spirituality of either order or congregation, and that spirituality does not become the arena of an internal power struggle. On the contrary: they must create the conditions necessary to ensure that the absolute claim of the Unconditional will affect the position and security of all humans without distinction. Religious leadership cannot force people to continue to grow but must certainly create the conditions that are conducive to continuing spiritual growth.

Subject

When speaking of lived spirituality, we have to observe that it is always sustained by a person or group. Even though the initiation of spirituality does not start with ourselves but with God who, as unconditional reality and in an unfathomable way, starts a relation and as the source of its intensity permeates everything, we must at the same time assert that this relation is always entered into with a living person existing in time and space. In interplay with the two other poles of spirituality, viz. God who «touches» people and the values which give direction to human experience, the human person introduces himself or herself as the third pole. Spiritual experience is colored and shaped by the concrete history of this person as it is present in this person's consciousness and inwardly directs this person from within his or her psyche. It is always a concrete human being who is touched, drawn, and moved by God and who, based on this appeal, enters into the encounter with God and subsequently commits him- or herself.

Religious leadership is responsible for the order or congregation as a school of spirituality - the spiritual culture and spiritual architecture of the life form in question -but cannot and may not bear responsibility for the interior life journey of individual religious. It may not demand obedience with respect to the lived spirituality, for that would lead to submission to the arbitrary insights or spiritual experiences of those temporarily in charge. As was so often the case in the past, spirituality would then become a straightjacket which prevents rather than fosters growth. Those in positions of leadership may only be people «who walk ahead of us» in faith and in the authentic perception and practice of the spirituality of the order of the congregation - never tyrants.

It belongs to the specific charism of the religious leadership of the order or congregation, the unique vocation of leaders to have so interiorized that spirituality that they are instinctively able to inspire religious to enter into the confrontation with the unconditional reality of God and to endure the tension of that engagement. As for the persons entrusted to their care, leaders must in turn entrust them to their own spiritual journey and the guidance of God. In a religious community it is possible to give guidance only on the basis of an unshakable trust in God's guidance. The spiritual structure of the vow of obedience is solely aimed at making sure that superiors are obliged to foster a state of affairs in which the will of God will take shape in the life of every religious belonging to their community. This is true even when the will of God - tested in a careful and critical process of discernment - impels this religious in a direction which is unrecog-

nizable or incomprehensible to those in charge. Although this is a thankless task, religious leadership will have to entrust religious to their own destiny, their own confrontation with the Unconditional, and their own spiritual journey. This is not to say that all individuals can go their own way and act in light of their own needs and insights, for religious live under the claims of their vocation. Freedom from compulsion can be far removed from inner freedom. It is the task of the religious leadership to talk in a most penetrating way to religious about their own vocation and original inspiration. This mode of speaking can be very painful and confrontive but this makes religious free to remain faithful to themselves in situations in which the original layer of their religious vocation threatens to be swamped.

Religious leadership is called upon to organize a great many things, but the subject of spirituality, i.e. the person who in a slow process proceeds, step by step, to interiorize this spirituality, cannot be organized. The house can be built but the inhabitants can only genuinely reside there when God touches them, suddenly and unexpectedly. The subject of spirituality will often be imperfect and immature, and he or she will perhaps not - or only in part - meet the demands posed in light of the central values of the spirituality. Nevertheless, it is not the task of religious leadership to lay down the rules for a spiritual perfectionism or for an ideal religious community which makes a strong impression on bystanders and interested parties. This temptation may exist but such solutions remain stuck in fine appearances and undermine the spiritual health of the religious group instead of fostering it. In relation to the subject of spirituality, accordingly, the religious leadership of a community has only a limited task. It can create favorable conditions and foster growth, but it cannot extort or demand, nor can it take over from individuals the process of interiorizing the lived spirituality.

A relational process

Spirituality is realized in the interaction among the three poles listed above. God presents himself in his unconditionality as «touch» and «personal address» vis-à-vis this person. He or she in turn becomes conscious of this unconditional appeal, reacts to it, and «opts for this being chosen». This consciousness is subsequently expressed in a system of values which on the one hand is handed to the person in question and which he or she then gradually appropriates and interiorizes. Thus spirituality occurs «in the center», i.e. as a vital relation and incessant dialogue among the three poles. Spirituality is not «something» demonstrable, but the «way» or «journey» one travels.

Often this journey takes place in the dark and in an unknown country, beyond the boundaries of one's own safe world. Spirituality is the lived relation to God and the shaping of life in light of this relation. By means of spiritual values and evidences of spiritual experience a personal life is transformed in all its layeredness. Religious leadership must develop eyes and ears to be able to perceive this subtle spiritual process. To this end the leaders themselves must live spiritually and expose themselves to the indissoluble field of tension that is integral to spirituality. They themselves must travel the journey which they want to foster in others. Good leadership gradually grows in the direction of the capacity to «look» the spiritual process in religious into being, without feeling the need to interfere with it. In that sense I would wish to say - in my terminology - that good religious leadership is in essence contemplative, because it learns to «see» how God «works» in people. In that case superiors do not merely give guidance to the observable and «organizable» exterior of the religious community, but acquire the ability to see the things that are invisible and undoable because it lies totally outside of our reach and does not fit within the boundaries of our human logic. Good religious leadership, therefore, liberates persons and gives them access to their own deepest layers, i.e. the layers of God.

Context

Spirituality as tri-polar dialogue is realized within a concrete context. It is inevitably shaped also by historical events and influences, material, social, economic and political circumstances, the experience of one's own corporeality and psychological factors, culture, the character of one's own country, and the associated self-awareness and possibility of expressing one's experiences, by community and society, and the manner in which people concretely interact with each other. In that sense spirituality is always contextual, i.e. interwoven with life in its concreteness and all its attendant circumstances.

Conversely, spirituality is not only influenced by its context but also creates this context. It does so because intense experiences of encounter with God and the values which flow from these experiences are expressed in behaviors and institutions, in culture and language, as well as in a style of living. Spirituality is neither an ideology nor an abstraction, for as lived spirituality it is always incarnated. It is never available by itself. In spirituality we give shape to our relation to God as we live it in the structures of our visible and tangible world. It brings this relation into the light of day, so creating the possibility of sharing it with others through a process of communication. This

explains why this living tripolar dialogue is always staged within an already pre-existent spirituality which is handed down from within the culture, from earlier generations, or an earlier phase of the life of this particular person. Once formulated, the spiritual model can accompany others on their spiritual journey, so that they can begin to discover it as a form which at a very deep level is already theirs. In spirituality they recognize their own basic nature, the experiences of their own past and environment, but in their spirituality they also begin, with longing, to journey toward a future which they then receive as a gift.

Religious leadership, while not creating the context in which spirituality takes shape and to which it is oriented, has the task of making the community conscious of it and of the possibilities inherent in this process as a spiritual model. In this way the spirituality handed down is not preserved as pure idea or inwardness but can incarnate itself in the totality of human existence. A spirituality that is detached from a present context, after all, loses its necessary contact with its source of nourishment and field of operation. When the ties between spirituality and its context are neglected, this usually means that spirituality begins to live a life of its own in people's heads and in stories, while the religious no longer have ways to integrate it concretely in their activities and life forms. People then, while speaking in inspiring ways about spirituality, do not live it in inspiring ways. Sometimes we note that religious are most creative in dreaming up formulas in which the integration of spirituality in human life is verbalized. This is by no means a guarantee, however, that this «theory» is being interiorized on the level of lived spirituality.

Precisely because the adaptation of spirituality to the context of the world in which we live leads to divergent and mutually contradictory interpretations, it is part of the task of the religious leadership to give responsible guidance to the process of «ressourcement»: the retrieval and recontextualization of founding documents. Not only must spirituality be continually adapted to changing situations, other cultures and societies, after all, but these changes in turn prompt us to again think through one's own tradition of religious form-bestowal. It is easier, on the basis of new ideas, to start a new order or congregation - and in the past this is what often happened - than to track down the initial inspiration and to give it fresh chances in the present. The latter is frequently done in inadequate ways because in the case of active congregations their uniqueness was located more in activities and tasks than in their origin and buildings; more in customs and schedules than in the conscious living out of their own

charism and spirituality. In the formation of members those responsible for it tended to confine themselves more to common Christian spirituality and the spirituality of monastic vows than that they got around to reflection on their own charism. In the case of many congregations their members primarily lived out their spirituality with their hands and on their feet. It was not something they talked about; people simply did it and did it as something very obvious. Few religious in fact occupied themselves with the verbalization of their own spirituality. This was largely left to outsiders who were called in to help for this very purpose. In the crisis of the last several decades, moreover, frustrations from the past were so dominant that many felt relieved to leave certain things behind them. Because - generally speaking - there is inadequate knowledge of one's own tradition and because the original inspiration was handed down in a distorted form, misunderstandings and prejudices stand in the way of picking up the thread again in a creative manner. Because nowadays we have an aversion to rules, both the basic and the secondary rules, we cannot imagine that the first rules and constitutions can be an important source for the retrieval and renewal of spirituality.⁶ These kind of texts, therefore, usually remain unknown and inaccessible because they seem unattractive and not very inspiring. But who will attend to this tradition if the religious leadership doesn't? In most cases it is not enough to hand over these texts to historians and archivists for conservation. This only means that one's spiritual legacy is kept as a «trial» for later generations when the order or congregation has disappeared from the scene. Why should we take pains to preserve a spiritual legacy if no one lives out of it any more? Is spirituality no more than an artifact in a culture-historical museum for which a historian, functioning as conservator, is responsible? The ressourcement of one's own spirituality is absolutely necessary if for no other reason than to do justice to the countless older religious who have, in a very authentic way, lived out of their vocation. The religious leadership is not just responsible for the physical care of these older members but must also take steps to ensure that in the final phase of life these religious get a chance to experience the new situation in the light of their spirituality.

⁶ Cf KES WAAIJMAN, *The mystical space of Carmel, A Commentary on the Carmelite Rule*, in «Fiery Arrow» 1, Peeters, Louvain 1999.

Transformation

Spirituality presents itself as a concrete «form». It exists, on the one hand, as a comprehensive whole, a system of values, or a spiritual lifestyle which is determined by one or more central values or dominant symbols, such as poverty in the case of St. Francis. On the other hand, spirituality is composed of a multiplicity of specific values and formal elements which function within a given style as units and give expression to them in variable ways within a context marked by pluriformity. If a form of spirituality is to remain an authentic expression of a certain «spirit» or «mindset», it has to remain in contact with the interior perception and practice of this spirituality, i.e. with the spiritual journey made by concrete religious as members of a community.

The form of spirituality, accordingly, is under pressure from various directions. It is imperative that a person who opts for a certain form of spirituality allows him- or herself - continually and in an intangible way - to be so touched by God that the historical form of it is ever and again called into question. It is imperative that the unconditional appeal or claim that comes at him or her from the values break through the security of the system of values once formulated. It is imperative that this spiritual form be incarnated in the subjectivity structures of this particular person by a process of interiorization in which ever more layers of the person are involved. In other words, as a result of the interaction among these factors the spirituality in question, lived by the subject in all its intensity, inevitably sets in motion the - achieved and handed-down - form of it. At the same time it is necessary that the influence of the - pre-given - subjectivity of the «founders», the so-called founding charism, continually comes through in the concrete spiritual model which is taking shape as «spirituality». In this manner this form of spirituality is realized as a living dialogue between different generations of religious who lived in orientation to the Ineffable. A spiritual form, furthermore, always exists in a tension-filled relation to the world in which it is taking shape here and now. That is, this form can be creative, system-resistant or system-affirming.

It is important for spirituality always to present itself as a beckoning perspective which sets religious in motion and toward which they are journeying. The form of spirituality which we bring about with some degree of success in our life is only a provisional attempt at giving expression to the implications of our divine vocation. In the actual encounter with God this form will always be «annihilated» and

«unformed» in order that, in a process of «transformation»,⁷ we may grow toward the «form» of God which manifests itself in us as «non-form». However good and spiritual we may be, we never coincide with our own spirituality. We never «have» a spirituality, for we only tread the path of an approach to God. The same is true for an order or congregation, for historical continuity is no guarantee for the living of spirituality. A person may formally and in all legitimacy belong to an order or congregation and still remain a stranger to the spiritual experience of its charism. Neither membership nor profession guarantee a lived spirituality, for nothing can take the place of the concrete spiritual journey of the individual religious. A beautiful book about, and a clear formulation of, the charism is insufficient. Furthermore, what does it mean that, on the basis of an analysis of texts and testimonies, experts arrive at a formulation of this spirituality, if individual religious or actual provinces have ceased years ago to give hands and feet to this spirituality or are, only, by trial and error and by complicated detours, on their way to it. One can indeed speak, for example, of a Franciscan spirituality but no one «has» it. Spirituality is realized as a spiritual journey, i.e. as a road which is ever traveled anew in an «unknown country». Spirituality has to happen, has to be realized. Spirituality is this - always new and unknown - road we travel and can never be safely stored in a bookcase. Because the Unconditional challenges us and asserts an inescapable claim on us, spirituality is always a journey from form to form, an ongoing process that is realized in the field of tension between an old expression of it and a new expression of it, between a human possibility and a divine reality. In that sense spirituality is always self-transcendence. This inevitably ends in the mystical «annihilation» in which we are clothed, in emptiness, silence, and wilderness, with the «form» of God's unconditional love. In that way the Unconditional traces a line of unconditional living that continues to impact our actual life and conduct, in the way we look at reality, the way we think and love others, the way we labor for a cause and work at this world.

Religious leadership must take care of spirituality by promoting the «ressourcement» of this spirituality and the ever-creative practice of it in the here and now. Those in positions of leadership must especially seek to ensure that religious remain «in motion» and travel the road - one step at a time - of their own spirituality, but they must guard

⁷ KEES WAALJMAN, *Transformation. A Key Word in Spirituality*, in «Studies in Spirituality», 8 (1998), Peeters Louvain, pp. 5-37.

against mapping it out in detail as though that road were known. Religious leadership in fact fosters spirituality when religious are constantly challenged to remain faithful to their vocation and initial inspiration, that is, to God who touches them in an intangible way.

C. RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP DEMANDS SPIRITUALITY

When the religious leadership neglects the perspective of spirituality, this task runs the danger of being reduced to practical management. The result of such a reduction is that the experiential aspect of the lived encounter with God is brushed aside as unimportant and as belonging to the private domain. However the concrete clients of the leadership within an order or congregation are the religious who encounter God in their personal life. How this happens and how authentic or intense this experience is are questions of judgment which the religious leadership does not need to raise, but, based on everyone's personal religious vocation, the religious leadership is bound regularly to call attention to this vocation and to talk to religious about it. This interrogation and confrontation is by no means without strings but must introduce criteria of discernment which foster growth. When the leadership stops taking this lived spirituality seriously and promoting it, it loses contact with the vital core or «seedbed» of the religious community. Lived spirituality is the community's pulsating heart which may never be neglected. But if the leadership does neglect it - out of indifference, love of ease or fear of conflict - it has in principle taken the decision to dissolve the community.

The spirituality of a given order or congregation recognizably articulates the presence and working of God and thereby makes it present in the human consciousness. At the same time it is the case, however, that the divine touch which eludes every human definition can never be verbalized in a spiritual model. A specific spiritual tradition, while it creates a language in which people can think and talk about the encounter with the Ineffable, does not itself produce the experience of the divine touch. Jerome states somewhere that to read Scripture is to hoist one's sails for the wind and working of the Holy Spirit. Along the same lines one could say that an order or congregation as an institution, organization, or architecture creates the conditions for the encounter with the unconditional reality of God in the sense that it makes religious receptive to the divine, and furnishes a language and cultural forms in which one can think and speak about

it. At the same time the arrangements of a religious community and the interventions of the leadership on the level of perceptible forms and relations are inadequate. They do not create a lived spirituality, for the encounter with the divine breaks through every human framework and can never be conceived or planned in advance.

The rapid secularization which is felt on various levels also within orders and congregations easily leads to an inability to still discuss one's «*attouchement*» by God. Add to this that many religious no longer understand the language of their own religious tradition, and all too few attempts have been made to retrieve and renew this seriously antiquated inheritance or even to begin to reclaim it. The first victims of the absence of a common language are the less talented or creative members of a community. Giving up on expressly religious frameworks, on liturgy in which to celebrate God's *attouchement* and on language to give stammering expression to it is in fact to shut down the religious community. While such an attitude and intervention may be well-intentioned as an attempt to bring religious up-to-date, it also easily silences them. Depriving a religious community of «*natural forms of expression*» is disastrous and inevitably leads to unfruitfulness. However vulnerable and ambiguous our discourse about God may be and however necessary it is to apply the criteria of discernment to it in order to unmask and stop mixing it up with our self-preoccupied individuality, yet it is only in the concrete encounter with God that we can travel the hard journey from selfhood to otherness. Religious leadership is not responsible for the «*truth*» of spirituality but must create conditions conducive to processes of spiritual growth which in «*truth*» help us to draw near to God in his irreducible otherness.

There is a danger that the spirituality of the past - in the sense of lived relatedness to God - makes way for substitute activities in which people attempt to give shape to religious life. In the absence of the perspective and language of spirituality people easily stumble into activities which depend on ourselves and of which we ourselves are the center. While they may be an extension of the original charism and are justified by it, and probably arise from an authentic experience of being touched by God, they may nevertheless be the opposite of authentic spirituality. As a result of the secularized starting point, which has trouble with the religious language in which one may speak about God, it is sometimes very difficult to integrate the spiritual tradition and these new activities into a meaningful and intelligible whole that may rightly be called a continuation of the congregation's own spirituality. In a number of cases this has not led to renewal and deep-

ening of one's own vocation but to mutually adversarial groups each of which claims authenticity for itself and accuses the others of unfaithfulness or a failure to engage the needs of the day.

From this inability to adequately address the issue of spirituality - an inability which as such is understandable and justifiable - springs the danger of pushing spirituality into a strictly private domain on the margins of life. In that case spirituality is reduced to a subjective, non-rational inwardness in which the experience of individuals who happen to meet is always right and can without hindrance be put on the agenda. This leads to the deformation of spirituality in two ways: on the one hand, lived spirituality evaporates into something that is very vague, something devoid of real content; on the other, it becomes something achievable, something people can get their hands on by an array of ingenious forms of methodical practice. In the guise of attention to the spiritual we place ourselves in the center. We then forget that the self-transcendence induced by an encounter with the Unconditional is an essential characteristic of spirituality.

Sometimes we see religious escaping into various forms of spirituality which do not belong to their own spiritual tradition or are even diametrically at odds with it. If at home one can no longer pick up signals which refer to the congregation's own original inspiration and nourish it, one goes elsewhere in search of substitute forms which are usually limited to the life of the individual. Religious are known to go to Eastern or New Age gurus for that which they no longer find at home, or about which they may no longer speak or which they have never really learned to know. In all these cases they live in two spiritual worlds. Central here are values which belong to two distinct social and religious circuits. Thus in many orders and congregations we encounter these spiritually rootless and homeless persons. It even happens on occasion that such people are burdened with formation. Sometimes we see an entire community accepting a different spirituality and in extreme cases this leads to splinter groups breaking away.

Another dangerous consequence of the marginalization of spirituality is that attention to the transforming effect of the working of the Unconditional gives way to a dualistic spiritualization. Spirituality then turns into world flight or into an idyllic island as a result of people's losing sight of the ongoing transformation of the whole person. When spirituality withdraws itself from the experiences of ordinary life, the subjects cut themselves off from the radical dialogue with God which touches them here and now and from the values which make an unconditional claim on them. People refuse to enter upon this encounter as an ongoing transformation within the concrete con-

text of their life. In that case, the encounter with God is «used» for sanctification as a human project but not lived in prosperity and adversity, in pain and joy, in the concreteness of the encounter with an ever-changing «otherness».⁸

In order to exercise the religious leadership of an order or congregation well, it is essential that those who are in positions of leadership themselves live from within the spirituality of the community. It is on this basis that they must give content to their task. A governing team need not consist of experts in spirituality but it must at least foster the practice of spirituality by individual religious, communities, the province, or the congregation. Religious leadership must be very careful to create the conditions for it, inasmuch as it must give guidance to a concrete form of religious life. It is its task regularly and consistently to question religious about the authenticity of their religious vocation and to challenge them to remain faithful to that vocation and original «*attachement*».

You will be without law, but not without me

In a play written by the Italian author Mario Pomilio, *The Fifth Evangelist* («*Il quinto evangelista*»), the dialogue, which takes place in a kind of role play, concerns the question who Jesus really was. At a given moment, toward the end of the play, a heated exchange occurs about the ambiguous role of Pilate. Suddenly the fifth evangelist introduces a new element, i.e. a saying that is not recorded in the four gospels, but about which Caiaphas testifies that is authentic: «You will be without law, but not without me». By this saying the sacred rights of the state are definitively relativized. Over and over people in positions of power appeal to a kind of divine mandate by which all their subjects are obligated to obedience. The fifth evangelist, however, explains that God himself transcends all laws.

This pronouncement, «You will be without law, but not without me», is much more than a negation of the old law. It is meant as an aid to consciences that will not submit. It lays down a principle of absolute and permanent contradiction vis-à-vis every law and external obligation which is aimed at oppressing us and keeping us from being what God wants us to be. By pronouncing these words, a higher court of justice is called into being which makes a mockery of human courts

⁸ HEIN BLOMMESTIJN, *Initiation into Love: The mystical Process according to John Ruusbroec (1293-1381)*, in «*Studies in Spirituality*», 2 (1992), pp. 99-126.

of justice. Introduced here is the right of noncompliance every time the judgment of the tribunals of this earth is at odds with the principles established by God. In this pronouncement we find that, for the first time in the history of humankind, distrust is introduced with respect to power and to the institutions through which this power is exerted. This is the basis of the idea that the law can be unjust and that the state itself - though often experienced as a kind of sacred entity - can be lacking in this sanctity.⁹

The human exercise of power - however much it may be aimed at an ideal society - can never be identified with the will of God. In Christ humans are freed from the law, as Paul says.¹⁰ Peter, accordingly, reminds people of another unrecorded saying of Jesus: «Blessed are they who are free with respect to the law, and woe to those who are only good in terms of the law».¹¹

The fifth evangelist opposes this Christian liberty to Hegel's view concerning «the ethical state»: «The state which presents itself as absolute or as God, which, by attaining the identity of political power with ethical values, makes humans conscious of their being and purpose. This, therefore, must be obeyed as the so-called universal good».¹² The law, the state, the fatherland, the social order, though important human values, never possess an absolute value, for they are subject to God. No human being, accordingly, may ever demand absolute obedience from another human being, not even in the name of God. The law can never exist by itself but must refer to God who transcends it. Freedom of conscience has to do with this tension between God himself, the absolute, and all relative human symbols and forms. When the game becomes serious, and Pilate wants to arrest the fifth evangelist as subversive and dangerous, the latter replies: «The Christian always has two kinds of fatherland. He refuses to give to the emperor what is God's, rules out that the state is master over one's conscience, and only recognizes God as absolute. The idea of the precedence of conscience over law, of the will of God over the will of the state, is an axiom, a kind of dogma, to the Christian».¹³

⁹ MARIO POMILIO, *Il quinto evangelista*, Milano 1986, p. 89.

¹⁰ Rom. 7:6.

¹¹ Cf POMILIO, *ibid.*, p. 90.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

God escapes every human framework

In the Church and the religious life as well obedience has always been regarded as an important value. On the one hand, it is the basis of the community which without it would fall apart into a number of individuals who would believe and act as they pleased.¹⁴ On the other, it is much more a spiritual than a social principle in which people inwardly attune their life to the gospel and interiorize it. Also on the level of religion and the church law and conscience may clash because God alone is absolute. Here too the rule applies: You will be without law but not without me. Laws and the exercise of authority are always human forms. However much they may be the reflection of God's will and therefore have a divine character, they belong to created reality, a reality infinitely transcended by the Creator. In Christianity this tension is essentially insoluble. Incarnation and transcendence simply belong together, like the creature and the creature, without ever coinciding. The conscience, accordingly, can never be reduced to laws. The conscience learns to know the will of God in an immediate encounter. This creative moment can never be fully laid down in subsequent and necessary objectivizations and institutionalizations. God escapes every framework, though he gives this framework to us as guideline.

The Original Orientation to God

Human life, according to mystics, is naturally «good» when it remains faithful to its original focus on God. The danger exists, however, that it curves back upon itself and in self-will becomes its own end. When that happens we lose the simplicity of our originally divine life and wander about, lost in the multiplicity of limited human needs and desires. As a result our life becomes fragmented and ambiguous. Human limitation prompts us to focus on the «minor interest» which forces itself upon us. This shortsightedness necessarily makes us opportunistic. Instead of «receptively» reaching out toward the future as God's gift, we try frenetically to cling to the life we have already received. A risk-filled life is exchanged for «a safe form of survival». By curving back upon ourselves we lose the overall vision of a life oriented to God as our goal. We allow ourselves to be led by fear, caution, and calculation. In this connection we need not immediately

¹⁴ HEIN BLOMMESTIJN, *Jos Huls, Mercy: a calling for life. The heart of religious life according to Joannes Zwijsen* (Ad Fontes, 4), Titus Brandsma Instituut/Valkhof Pers, Nijmegen 1998.

think of sinfulness in the traditional sense of the word, but this orientation to the shallow self quickly becomes a turning away from our deepest self and, thus, from God. This truth was concisely formulated by the Liège mystic William of Saint-Thierry (ca. 1085-1148) as follows: «This [natural] state turned away from God becomes folly when it is excessively turned back upon itself and so wild that it will not or can not be governed».

However, turned to God this natural state becomes «holy simplicity», that is, this will remains constant in its attachment to the same object, as was the case with Job who was «a simple, upright, and God-fearing man». «For, properly speaking, simplicity is a will that is wholly turned toward God, seeking one thing from the Lord with all earnestness without any desire to disperse its energies in the world».¹⁵

The contrast suggested here is not between «goodness» and «sin» on the level of concrete and limited action. The reference, rather, is to a fundamental contrast between the total orientation of one's deepest self toward God - the One who brings humans to essential unity - and the fragmented focus on «this» and «that» interest by which life falls apart in an endless succession of things. The «problem» is not that we humans are evil, but that this orientation to God is not an automatic and stable given. We are not «blindly» led by our instincts, but «called» to realize our life's purpose in freedom. That, besides being our human vulnerability, is our human greatness. By nature we are not «bad» or «sinful», but ambivalent: we can go into various directions. The original orientation of our deepest self must first be discovered by us and become fully conscious in order then to be cultivated and articulated. The only «problem», therefore, is that by nature we are still unformed. Although by nature we carry within ourselves the «good possibility» of speaking a language, this linguistic capacity must first become conscious in us. This happens as we hear other people speak and we subsequently practice the language and get some schooling. Thus the unformed possibility is forged into a coordinated and developed skill. If this does not happen, we begin to stutter or talk gibberish. In children we note a critical transition here: suddenly the language falls into place.

With out orientation to God, things are actually no different. It is neither absent nor corrupt. William of Saint-Thierry puts it plainly:

¹⁵ GUILLAUME DE SAINT-THIERRY: *Lettre aux Frères du Mont-Dieu* (Sources Chrétiennes, 223), ed. Jean Déchanet, Du Cerf, Paris 1975, no. 48-49, 182-184. [WILLIAM OF SAINT-THIERRY, *The Golden Epistle, A letter to the Brethren at Mont-Dieu*, Introduction by J.-M. Déchanet, tr. T. Berkeley, CF 12, Kalamazoo].

this orientation requires formation. «Simplicity is the will fixed on God alone: ... Simplicity then possesses in itself some beginning of God's creation, that is, a simple and good will, the shapeless material, as it were, of what will be a good man, and at the outset of its conversion it offers this to its maker to be formed. For since together with good will it already has a beginning of wisdom, that is the fear of the Lord, from it it learns that it cannot be formed by itself and that nothing is so advantageous for a fool as to serve a wise man».¹⁶

Hence, in principle we bear within ourselves the possibility of the good but this possibility must still be formed and developed. Just as in learning the language we need the help of others who have already been formed in it (because at this point we are still unlearned, i.e. unformed), so also we cannot develop our good possibilities without the help of «others». This by no means implies a negative view of human nature, but rather a developmental-psychological view which looks for possibilities of growth. William of Saint-Thierry is one of the representatives of the Christian humanism that is characteristic for the Middle Ages.

Growth toward spiritual maturity

Within this concrete framework of spiritual growth obedience plays its role. This obedience, therefore, is not a value by itself which curtails humans in the exercise of their independent possibilities. The case is rather that since we simply cannot form ourselves we must temporarily lean on the services of others.

Accordingly it [the simple and good will] submits to a man for God's sake, entrusting to him its good will to be formed in God, in the feelings and the spirit of humility. Already the fear of God is beginning to develop all the plenitude of the virtues: justice, because it defers to a superior; prudence, because it does not trust in itself; temperance, because it refrains from deciding for itself; fortitude, because it submits itself wholly to obedience, concerned not to judge but only to do what it is bidden.¹⁷

In obedience we submit to the authority of another person, but never to the other's arbitrariness and lust for power. It is not submission to another person as such. The perspective of «obedience» here is clearly «to be formed in God», i.e. to be cast in the form of God's existence. When we are transformed in God, God's form

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 49-50, 184-186.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 51.

becomes the form of our life, our whole way of being. What must first grow in us is the consciousness of God's form. We must begin to understand this manner of existence from the inside. In this process the other person must help us. The other person may never impose his own form on us, however good it may be. This form is always a human formation and hence a created reality. In the formation process our human form must be attuned to the divine «original», the basic form of our existence with which we can never completely coincide. By becoming conscious, with our intellect, of this basic form, our life is concentrated on it. A «wise person», one in whom this consciousness has already become a reality, can help us discover our own divine form. This person temporarily compensates for our lack of insight in order that by our formation we ourselves may grasp the «science» of it (conscience). The clay that is destined to become a dish needs the slight force of the potter's hands to find this form. The person whose task it is to form another person cannot callously claim to be the inventor of that person. Like the potter, this person must be «obedient» to the peculiar laws of his or her material, and the maker of that material is God. Humans are created in God's image and likeness. Formation and obedience always occur in the perspective of this fundamental dynamic, this original orientation. To it we must all be obedient. Both the person being formed and the person responsible for this formation, the subject as well as the superior, has this fundamental duty to be obedient.

A human must not only be made and molded, but must also receive life. For, first God formed him. Then God blew the breath of life into his face so that he became a living being. The formation of a human being is moral nurture, while the love of God is his life.¹⁸

Divine love, accordingly, is the basic movement, the original dynamic form of a human being. Only when we become conscious of this and acknowledge the working of this love within ourselves do we really come alive. Obedience can prepare us for this by preparing the body which can be awakened to life by God. Obedience or formation which becomes an end in itself is merely a dead body. To it must be added the animation of the breath of divine love. We begin to discover that we only really come alive when, no longer imprisoned in our own human activity, we are animated by the love of God at work in us. This is not simply within our human reach. The initiative for this animation rests with God: it is the Holy Spirit, God-love, which animates us

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 169, 278.

and sets us in motion. It is a fact, however, that we have been created after the image and likeness of God, that is, we have been created with a view to this working in us of divine love. Even though we cannot autonomously exercise control over it, the natural purpose and goal of our life is for God's love to be kindled within us. To this end all human formation must be attuned and to it all human obedience must be subordinated.

Now the will is set free when it becomes love (*caritas*), when the love of God is poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us. And then reason is truly reason, that is a disposition of the mind ready to conform to the truth in all things. For when the will has been set free by liberating grace and the spirit begins to be moved by a reason that is free, then it becomes its own master, that is, it obtains free use of itself.¹⁹

This is how we truly achieve self-consciousness.²⁰ Conscious of our origin we are oriented to the good.²¹ Formation in obedience does not estrange us from ourselves in a kind of infantilism, but leads to true maturity. We really become ourselves. Not in a kind of autonomous self-will in which we remain enclosed within our own little circle. We become ourselves because we have been freed from all the alienating compulsions which are imposed on us by fear, greed, needs and longings. In this new consciousness our deepest needs are exposed and activated. We discover the true dynamic of our nature, a dynamic which is love. By it we are released from the pathological prison of our solitariness and can burst into bloom by entering into relationship. We then begin to participate in the dynamic of God's love, at the same time becoming conscious of it as our own. We do not become God, but with our whole being we become «what God is»,²² i.e. love. According to William Saint-Thierry, this divine love is the reason for our existence.

God's movement gets free play in us

The rational conscious human being (*rationalis animus*) is created by God toward himself, in order that his or her entire orientation may be toward him. For it is from this goodness that we are good. To God's image and likeness, after all, we have been created.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 201.

²⁰ Latin: *animus*.

²¹ That is, we become a *bonus animus*.

²² *Ibid.*, n. 258, 348.

As faithful image he hastens to attach himself to this likeness with him. He, after all, is himself an image of God. For the fact that he is his image enables him to understand that he can and must attach himself to him whose image he is.²³

In the consciousness of our own deepest being we passionately desire increasingly to become ourselves by participating in the dynamics of divine love. For that reason we want to attach ourselves to and in God. Increasingly, the image of God, the fundamental movement of God's being, now no longer hindered by the self-willed and recalcitrant movements of the human spirit, is reflected in us. We increasingly begin to turn around the real center of our life and no longer revolve around our own axle: the «ex-orbitant» desires of the megalomaniacal «I» which fancies itself the center of the universe. Thus we find our true form. We feel liberated and lighter, for we no longer have to walk on tiptoe and overtax ourselves. We may now surrender ourselves to the natural movement of our existence. We allow ourselves to be carried along in God and thus settle down in ourselves. Good conduct, then, is no longer a toilsome and onerous duty which bows us down. It is no longer a self-chosen goal which we have to reach by virtue of our own efforts. When our consciousness is concentrated on God we forget ourselves, our own little desires and aims. Now God is in control of the movement. He holds the rudder of our life. In our movement it is God who moves us. Despite stubborn resistance the flame automatically draws upward and the stone automatically falls downward. Only the barriers need to be removed. By nature we are divided between the illusion which makes us focus on ourselves and our truth which causes us to move to our true center: God. We can perhaps prepare ourselves, but it is absolutely an illusion to think we can by our own energies free ourselves from our delusions. For this purpose we need a fixed point of reference in the reality outside of ourselves, in the real One who shapes and molds us. Needed is an intervention from without so that our true «movement» gets free play.

When the object of thought is God and the things which relate to God and the will reaches the stage at which it becomes love, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of life, at once infused himself by way of love and gives life to everything.

The movement of divine love, far from violating us, fits itself harmoniously into the dynamic structures of the human love which thus attains its full development. God's love is present not alongside of, still

²³ *Ibid.*, n. 208, 209, 314.

less over against us (sinful) people, but pours itself out in us. God delivers himself up to the risk of human love which is thus lifted past its own limits. From this point on the Holy Spirit, the God-love, takes over the initiative of this human level. The result is not some sort of blessed feeling or a so-called «mystical experience», for in that case God would become a pathetic part of our limited human «I». On the contrary: we become broad like God. In self-forgetfulness we lose ourselves in a focus on God, on the neighbor, on the reality surrounding us. We move along in God's movement, out of ourselves. Along with God we create the world, call it into being, and love it. Not because we «ought» to do this in an ethical sense, but because we can no longer help ourselves.

For the man who has his heart raised on high, perfection of the will consists in making progress toward God in unity of spirit with God. No longer does it merely desire what God desires, not only does it love him, but it is perfect in its love, so that it can will only what God wills.²⁴

When that happens, formation and obedience do not lead to the accommodation of the human will to the divine will as an objective given, an objectivizable rule or law, which we can contemplate outside of ourselves and follow. On the contrary: we become conscious of the will of God as our own deepest will, something that occurs in the «movement» of love. When we really love, we become aware that this is possible only when God loves in us. There is now no longer any mention of a human achievement, for we cannot help ourselves if God liberates the basic movement of our being by his love-filled intervention: «God kisses us open». We look about us in a daze, not understanding what is happening to us. It is God himself, after all, and that - fortunately! - is not a possibility. Yet, yet ... and like so many other mystical writers William speaks of it as follows: «Now to will what God wills is already to be like God, to be able to will only what God wills is already to be what God is; for him to will and to be are the same thing. Therefore it is well said that we shall see him fully as he is when we are like him, that is when we are what he is».²⁵

What else is God but love? What else are we but love when God gains free rein in us? Obedience with the help of the other who forms us, therefore, necessarily issues into a mature love in which, true to our own deepest self, we become conscious of the spiritual grandeur

²⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 257, 348.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 258, 348.

of our human and religious vocation. Every attempt at detracting from this vocation - even if it be on the basis of sacred principles - is to do violence to God himself.

William of Saint-Thierry wrote his letter to a group of young Carthusians of Mont Dieu near Rheims. These readers now belong to a distant past. His words, however, are addressed - over their shoulders - to us, modern readers, just as over many centuries they served as a blueprint of the religious life. Religious leadership may never confine itself to issues of organization and management, but bears responsibility for the subtle invisible processes in which the religious entrusted to their care are transformed in God, so that they have nothing left to do but «to will what God wills» - without being able to will or do this and without even understanding it. We may rightly say, therefore, that religious leadership is a vocation which must be formed and cultivated in order to develop in the direction of God's personal claim. It must learn to read this Claim in the face of every religious entrusted to its care.

HEIN BLOMMESTIJN, O.CARM.

[traduz. dall'olandese in inglese di John Vriend]