

## **Spirituality, Christianity, Religious Life, and Formation**

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### **1. Introduction**

"We have become partakers of Christ," we are told in Hebrews 3:14. But although we are sociologically baptized and practicing Christians, are we actually in a state of "Christification"? Are we living according to the Spirit of Christ?

According to former General Councilor of the De La Salle Brothers Timothy Coldwell, some fifteen years ago, a particular distinction between spirituality and religion emerged in American culture, expressed by the sentence "I'm spiritual but not religious." This suggests that there is a better chance of a meaningful, perhaps even transformative, encounter and experience with God outside the context of the beliefs and rituals of the official Christian religion and its organizational life. The authority and tradition inherent in Christianity are suspected, using the words of Saint Paul, of "quenching the Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

In many people's minds, spirituality and religion have been separated. In a context of secularization, rediscovering and restoring the mystical sensibility present in spirituality has become an essential mission, particularly for our Institute, whose Founder is described as a "mystic" in action.<sup>2</sup> Timothy Coldwell is right: "Today, in our postmodern context, you have to be either a mystic, someone who has a direct and personal experience of God, or a 'nothing at all' as a religious." How can we help young people, thirsty for a mystical life, to experience God directly and personally? They need to be led to prayer, to a direct and personal encounter with God. To understand this need for mystical life in today's context, we need to shed light on the relationship between Christianity and the secularization of society.

### **2. The Question of the Spirituality of Our Christianity and Religious Life**

#### ***2.1. Secularization and Loss of the Spirit of Faith: For What Salvation Are We Working?***

Secularization pushes societies toward a secular salvation due to organized work, to the technical hold on the world that avoids pain and effort. It engages them all in a race for power over the world. It promises individuals a life of comfort and leisure—happiness on earth, in short. It tends to assimilate our Lasallian educational mission to a social, philanthropic, or humanitarian work. The Christian faith finds itself progressively evacuated or flattened on purely earthly realities. Having no longer any prophetic, critical, and liberating force, and having become useless, faith seems in this context to be absent from a world that it leaves indifferent.

Under the pressure of secularization, we become worldly and lose the taste for spiritual things, the sense of eternal life.<sup>3</sup> Our concern, legitimate at the beginning, to transform the world and improve living conditions, ends up being corrupted into an attempt to escape the fact that we humans are vulnerable. The pursuit of a consumerist life of pleasure and comfort naturally leads us to avoid suffering.<sup>4</sup> Our ability to face suffering with courage is constantly diminishing. Souls are finally thrown down by secularism. Living simply means surviving as pleasantly as possible, not suffering or dying. We religious, who are supposed to fight secularism but are dragged along by it, become its victims, or even its accomplices, if we do not know exactly for what salvation we are working.<sup>5</sup>

## ***2.2. The Mystery of Incarnation, Principle of Secularization***

In the secularized world, governed by the race for power and the need for security, vulnerability seems to be a necessarily negative reality, to be protected if not concealed. We need to keep in mind that the mystery of incarnation expresses an “acceptance of the world by God in his Son.” In this sense, the incarnation represents “the most radical freedom given to the world in itself.” The principle of incarnation becomes precisely the principle of secularization.<sup>6</sup> In Jesus Christ, true man, God says yes to vulnerability, accepts the carnal condition as something good, with all its limitations. Christ, the heart of Christianity, speaks to us of a God who, while we believe him to be all-powerful, chooses vulnerability, in utter contradiction to the logic of power and might that prevails in our secular world.

Blaise Pascal explains that

not only do we know God only through Jesus Christ, but we know ourselves only through Jesus Christ. We know life and death only through Jesus Christ. Outside of Jesus Christ, we know neither our life, nor our death, nor God, nor ourselves. Thus, without Scripture, which has only Jesus Christ as its object, we know nothing, and see only darkness and confusion in the nature of God and in our own nature.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus, through the Gospels, presents the face of a Father God who asks us to save Him in our hearts<sup>8</sup> so that He can save our humanity and our world.

## ***2.3. Human Rights, Religion, and the Spirituality of Vulnerability***

The autonomy of the world and of the human being in relation to God advocated through secularization gives of the human being the image of a kind of universal lawgiver aspiring to omnipotence. This autonomization of man in relation to God has led to a new religion, that of human rights. But this new religion is all the more difficult to embody authentically as it tends to mask, neutralize, if not evacuate all vulnerability. It makes us feel the urgent need for an incarnated spirituality, i.e., a spirituality of vulnerability. What must be saved, that is to say safeguarded, in our time is quite simply our very humanity. Here we find one of the major teachings of Chiara Lubich.<sup>9</sup> She says,

As we turn back our thoughts to our brothers and sisters who do not believe in God, we are convinced that the Crucified One to be presented to them is not the one who was

shown in the past to the so-called pagans, because neither salvation, nor resurrection, nor the world matter to them. What must be presented is a cross on which Christ appears only as a man. . . . They must be able to meet Christians who know how to love them to the point of experiencing in themselves, like Jesus abandoned, what it means to lose God, so to speak, out of love for men. Christians who know how to make themselves “lawless with the lawless [of God]” (1 Corinthians 9:21), in order to save their own brothers and sisters . . . ; who know, in other words, how to be living crucified. Then our brothers and sisters will gradually sympathize with these simple and honest men. From sympathy comes dialogue and from dialogue comes communion. The divine then penetrates, unnoticed, into them and into society.<sup>10</sup>

Secular society has made Human Rights its new religion. It remains at its core “atheistic” in the sense that it wants to be secular. Nevertheless, like any society that aims at constituting itself as a community with a relative cohesion within itself, it needs to generate and maintain within itself an imitation of “religion.” The members of this “religion” are recruited beyond the visible boundaries of already constituted and recognized religious institutions. A faith, without an official creed, animates the members of this unofficial religion who, in one way or another, believe in life but also in the human being. A religion of this kind has no specific creed or rites in the technical sense of official religious institutions, but it is nevertheless celebrated in the invisible sanctuary of the spirits; sometimes it even makes itself visible through movements and associations in civil society. Individuals continue to need religion, that is, bonds based on convictions.<sup>11</sup> This religion allows them to continue to have faith in life in spite of death, in spite of the violence and the injustices lived in society.

In his desire for omnipotence over the world, in his desire for absolute autonomy, man easily misses the moment of gratitude. Thus, our most serious sin, according to Saint Ignatius of Loyola, would be ingratitude. Gratitude consists in being in a certain relationship with one’s own body as a gift. This relationship implies a decision to be oneself as far as in one’s own body, a decision to live the body from within. It is complicity with the existence inside oneself. The body is not simply given in the manner of an object, or of an instrument to be mastered, it is built in relation with others. The humanity that I live with others is indeed dependent on this humanity that I live and build with myself. The question then is to give oneself to existence by living the unity of the body, the soul and the spirit in the flesh. In order to give myself to existence, I must receive and recognize something given. In this case, one turns one’s back to the pretension to pose oneself in the existence or to give oneself the existence. To want to be self-sufficient, to expect nothing from anybody, to hope for nothing and to count only on oneself, to seek to owe one’s existence only to oneself, is to dream of an omnipotence, of an escape from our condition of vulnerability.

#### ***2.4. Transhumanism: The Dream to Escape from Our Human Condition***

The claim of freedom, as pure autonomy, as independence from any nature that would precede it, leads to the very abolition of humanity in man.<sup>12</sup> Aspiring to such freedom, the human being engaged in the conquest of nature, at the same time as he benefits from and draws the advantages of this conquest, is subjected to it. Any new technical progress in the order of the mastery and the domination of nature leaves man both stronger and weaker in front of himself. At the same time

that his power over nature increases, his power over future generations also increases. Faced with this power, they will in fact prove to be weaker and weaker, more and more vulnerable, since they will be technically more controllable and more easily and effectively subdued. So the latecomers in the enterprise of conquering nature, the “last human beings,” will be exposed to being subjugated by a minority that will actually hold the power conquered in the name of man. In fact, every new power conquered by man over nature gives birth to a new power exercised over man by the most technically prepared minority. The last element of Nature still to be conquered is human nature itself.

The desire to shape human nature to one’s liking and to make it a purely cultural construction is the completed form of the rejection of all vulnerability. The final victory, with the abolition of all human vulnerability, will logically coincide with the abolition of the human being himself. C. S. Lewis warns us,

At the moment of man’s victory over nature, it will appear that the whole of mankind is subject to certain individuals, and that these individuals are themselves subject to what is purely “natural” in them, that is to say, their irrational impulses. Nature, which will no longer be hindered by values, will reign over the masters of conditioning and, through them, over mankind. The human conquest of nature will prove to be, in the moment of its apparent success, the victory of nature over man.<sup>13</sup>

It is essential for the human being, if he wants to subsist as human, to preserve from violence this vulnerability. Vulnerability is in fact the condition from which it will still be possible for him to conceive himself, to receive himself in meekness, a meekness that simply means humanity.

## ***2.5. Following the Meek and Humble Jesus***

Meekness is our first experience in this world: the meekness of the mother’s breast and milk. The meekness in which our humanity is conceived and received after our birth supposes an agreement upon the laws defining our human nature and the respect of these laws. The virtue of meekness goes with the will to respect the laws defining our human nature. But that weakness can be converted into strength, that it can be a strength stronger than strength, we hold this a priori from the Christian tradition. Saint Paul argues, “When I am weak, I am strong.”<sup>14</sup> Meekness, in the New Testament, is even presented as the power to obtain land. Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”<sup>15</sup>

If our first step is to want to transform the world, let us ask ourselves if we have not missed the moment of gratitude, the essential moment of welcome. Behind the modern cult of transformation of the world, there is a refusal to welcome the world, a hidden form of nihilism. If we have not welcomed anything, it may be that a kind of resentment exists within us against our limitations and weaknesses, a form of disappointed pride. If we have not first welcomed the world, if the transformation of the world depends entirely on our will, if there is not first on our part the contemplation, the acceptance of a heritage, then our action will end in the devastation of the world. Mother Teresa said that the first thing to change in the world, to revolutionize, is each person, each person with his or her unlimited desire for power. The real action of transformation

is the conversion of strength to weakness. He who is truly strong has a weakness for weakness. Otherwise, he is a barbarian.

The earth is promised to us only with the virtue of meekness. But what does meekness really mean? Under the appearance of weakness, it can still serve as a means of seduction and enslavement. It embodies a power, that is, an ambiguous virtue. Meekness speaks to man perhaps because he remembers that stage of great vulnerability when the sweetness of milk, of the breast, and of maternal care was granted to him freely for his survival. Access to the virtue of meekness, as a quality of being, requires a conversion to God, the meek one par excellence. He teaches us this through the mouth of Jesus Himself: "I am meek and humble of heart."<sup>16</sup> Jesus, despite our sins, our failures, and our weakness, wants us to find rest and peace in Him. In Him, we become capable of more than what we really are. Without Jesus, without divine grace, salvation is beyond our reach. Meekness is a virtue of fighting evil and sin. Without strength, it is no longer a virtue but softness, indolence, cowardice. Without intelligence, it no longer knows how to discern its true enemy, how to counteract evil effectively, how to control its strength and how to order it to the good without giving in to uncontrolled anger. Without grace, man, abandoned to his own will and to only the lights of his reason, finds it hard to escape the drunkenness of the search for power.

## ***2.6. Becoming a True Witness to God, an Affirmation of Jesus Christ***

Meekness and vulnerability consist in being in a personal, realistic relationship with one's own body. They imply the decision to be oneself as far as in one's own body, a decision to live the body from within. They imply a complicity and a solidarity with an existence around oneself that is not always rosy. The body, in this case, is not simply given in the manner of an anonymous object, or of any instrument; it is personalized as a place of compassion and communion.

The humanity I seek to live with others depends on the humanity I live and build with myself. This humanity, with a sense of the other, consists in devoting myself to existence by living the unity of body, soul, and spirit in the flesh. In this case, I turn my back to the pretension to introduce myself in existence, to give myself the existence. If we expect nothing from anybody, if we hope for nothing and count only on our own forces, if we seek to owe one's existence only to oneself, we dream of an escape from our human condition of vulnerability. If we give ourselves over to the desire of an unlimited power over the world, we lose our personality because this desire dissolves us in the game of the blind and anonymous forces of nature.

Gustave Thibon says he likes our time because it is the time of a necessary purification of our will and of the religious feeling. We have entered the era of the end of servile submission to an absolute power that judges, rewards, and punishes, that in short imposes itself on us from outside. Human responsibility is called to grow out of listening to the silent call of a defenseless, comfortless God in his endless human agony. Christ, crucified again wherever vulnerable, voiceless beings are abused and killed, can neither live, because he remains a stranger to the world, nor die, because he remains God. Blaise Pascal emphasizes well our duty of vigilance: "Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world; we must not sleep during that time." And he adds, "Jesus prayed to men and was not heard." Even today, the men of our time, busy praying to a God-Caesar, close their ears to the prayers of a God who is voluntarily enslaved.

Eternal life is the life of another in me. And this Life in me . . . is entrusted to my life! How can I take care of myself? Where to place this self? What interest should I give it? How can I be enthusiastic about my existence if it were not more than myself? It is that I have to save in me: this Life of an Other which is entrusted to my love. This is the treasure that is entrusted to our life, this possibility of tearing oneself away from oneself, of losing oneself in the Other, and of being to the end the affirmation of Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup>

### **3. Conclusion: The Eyes That Save; The Eyes of Faith, the Spirit of Mercy**

On the one hand, we have the eyes of “pure reason,” the eyes that would like to be objective and realistic, and on the other hand the eyes of faith. The objective and realistic eyes, the eyes of reason, overlook everything and claim to be always right about everything. They evaluate, criticize, and, above all, judge. Essentially technical, they always have their own law, those of utility, those of legality and morality. This type of vision is opposed to the vision of faith, a vision that is not without reason. The eyes of faith use the same reason but always maintain an openness out of respect for the sense of mystery, notably that of human freedom. Faithful to themselves, the eyes of faith know how to show mercy and authorize the culture of hope. As we can see from the various teachings of Jesus, everything depends on the way we look at things. It is not the presence of evil in the world that should surprise us most, but the absence or hardness of heart among so-called believers.

Violence comes from the fact that the body, in the secularized world, has become an object of pleasure served by an unlimited will of power. The tendency in such a world is to live in self-compassion, locked in an unlimited and unrealistic desire for self-realization. Everyone is encouraged to develop a phantasmatic sense of the body. Salvation comes only when one accepts to inhabit one’s own limited body and to live in the presence of the other. In short, outside of the encounter with the other, there is no salvation. Being open to the event of the encounter, that is to say, to the unknown, is the first step to salvation. This is the condition fulfilled by the one who allows himself to be encountered, who accepts to expose himself and to let himself be touched by others. To meet the other means to present a vulnerable face and not the mask of a function, of a social position, of a moral perfection. Salvation is not found in a spirit of judgment but is offered in a spirit of mercy. In this world of violence, Jesus warns us, “Whoever welcomes a little child like this for my name’s sake, welcomes me.” We can relate this passage to another teaching: whoever wants to be saved must be born again, that is, learn childhood.<sup>18</sup> While we educate the child in order to create the adult in him, we can learn the spirit of mercy in return from the child.

God enters the world each time in the guise of a newborn child. The Christian faith goes far beyond memorizing a set of dogmas but constitutes a message of hope capable of shaking up our human life. Leaving the creation of the adult exclusively to society is condemning the child never to be truly born; it is endlessly reproduce an old world. Each child that is born represents a grace that we must know how to welcome so that he or she teaches us to be responsible in a different way. From this attitude, we can understand that we do not inherit the earth from our ancestors but that it is lent to us by our children. The hospitality of the world, an indispensable prerequisite for welcoming a newborn child, is incomplete without the hospitality of the heart

that precedes it. The first of all hospitalities, that of the heart, is under the responsibility of us who have already been born. Welcoming a newborn baby introduces us to the torment of a new birth, a process of birth into our own heart, the true place of our conversion to God.

God does not want to save us without us. We cannot save ourselves without Him. God places Himself in our hands in the very form of our humanity, so that our salvation means both His and our humanity. His Kingdom will not be fully established unless the human being fulfills himself as part of it. The fulfillment of the human being is part of the establishment of the Kingdom of God. However, only God can guarantee the outcome and the definitive value of our efforts. Salvation remains a gift from God and our dispositions cannot, strictly speaking, condition the coming of his Kingdom. Once master of the world, man can quite possibly lead it to its doom. This catastrophe would in no way prevent the realization of God's plan. This should not lead us to disengage ourselves because God wants His Kingdom, already secretly present in our heart, to come with the help of human freedom. Against the violence present in our impatience, we must learn to be patient, that is to say, to resist the thirst for immediate results, which leads us to abuse our authority and enslave others.

The tenderness and meekness we show are signs of a faith in God's action. They do not simply reflect our desire for efficiency and results. In our resistance to violence, both within and without ourselves, there is an undercurrent of the dignity we attach to suffering. In everyday language, the term "sacrifice" is used to designate this kind of suffering accepted because we are aiming at a higher good of which we are not necessarily the holders. In that case, by accepting to suffer, we express the value or price we attach to the good we hope to obtain or protect. It is, in a word, a testimony of love. In the virtuous acceptance of vulnerability, love and suffering merge. It's in their way of transforming sufferings into trials that the true witnesses of God are recognized.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Bernard Hours, *Jean-Baptiste de La Salle: A Mystic in Action*, translated by Agnes Fitzgerald (Washington, DC: Christian Brother Conference, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican City, 2013), #93, #95, #97, #98, and #100.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. The fifteen spiritual "ailments," according to Pope Francis, encountered in any community, congregation, and Christian.

<sup>5</sup> Seeking to escape from our vulnerable condition, to hide our human limits or limitations from ourselves.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Raniero Cantalamessa, *Jesus Christ, the Holy One of God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Blaise Pascal, *The Thoughts, Letters and Opuscules of Blaise Pascal*, translated by O. W. Wight (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1859), page 334.

<sup>8</sup> In other words, in Jesus Christ God makes us an offer of tenderness.

<sup>9</sup> Founder of the Focolari Movement.

<sup>10</sup> Chiara Lubich, *Le cri* (Nouvelle Cité, 2000), pages 122-123.

<sup>11</sup> The etymologies commonly received today are *religare*, “to connect,” and *relegere*, “to reread,” or “to gather, to collect.” Let us simply remember that the being or the essence of religion would be to bind, to link. But religion, as a link, also evokes an obligation, a duty, a debt toward a community, between men and the earth, between human beings and God.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (London: Oxford University Press, 1944); *L’abolition de l’homme*, translated by Denis Ducatel (Le [Mont-Pèlerin](#): Editions Raphaël, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> C. S. Lewis, *L’abolition de l’homme*, page 84.

<sup>14</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:10.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Matthew 5:5. The meek will possess or receive the land as an inheritance. The phrase “will inherit the land” shows that it is about a land to be worked. The verb “inherit” or “receive as a share” shows that it is about ownership and economic justice.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 11:28-30.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Maurice Zundel, *Ton visage, ma lumière: 90 sermons* (Paris: Desclée, 1989), pages 146-149.

<sup>18</sup> For instance, cf. Matthew 18:1-7 and 19:13-14.