

Monasticism as a Bridge between East and West and their Common Heritage.¹

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Monasticism, so long as it lives on charity, instinctively throws bridges over many a gulf and bleeding wound. In practice, however, it itself not seldom turns out to be a drawbridge, facilitating communication just as readily as abruptly interrupting it. The problem becomes particularly acute when monasticism is considered as a heritage. In order to ensure their offspring a good start in life parents usually exert themselves to death so as to bequeath them an accumulation of riches, little realizing how quickly a friendship, and even family ties, can falter over an inheritance. So, granted that monasticism is often indicated as one of the common factors inherited from the Undivided Church,² there remains the nagging question: but will the inheritors quarrel over their good fortune?

There is something intriguing about considering division, and human schism generally, as inheritors unable to agree among themselves and profit from their good luck. It proves quite often more difficult to persuade heirs to stop bickering and enter into their new kingdom than to amass that fortune in the first place. A bitter experience which poses a number of questions. Can the higher values of life be inherited at all or must they not rather be acquired by effort? Indeed, can a heritage be effectively possessed in common without automatically creating division, or at least impairing harmony? One is tempted to say that a shared, or common, heritage is a contradiction in terms; and, if it is, will not *koinonia* go asunder on account of its very inheritors? If anything, inheriting seems to have an eminently unifying function: it brings together, in a solidarity of resentment that relativizes all other slights, those less lucky against the heirs, thus isolating them.

- 1 The author has already published a completely different conference, originally held at the First Encounter of Monks East and West, Crete 1989: "Monasticism as a Bridge between East and West," in: E.G. Farrugia, SJ, *Tradition in Transition: The Vitality of the Christian East*, (ed. by P. Vazheparampil & J. Palackal (Rome 1996), pp. 79-109). The present paper was read at the *Third Encounter of Monks East and West*, Canterbury, Aylesford, May 24-27, 1996 and is being published here with slight changes.
- 2 Y. Congar, *Diversités et communion*, (Paris 1982) 35. Against the charge that the Undivided Church never existed and that this talk amounts to no more than romanticism, Congar enumerates the common heritage which derives from the Fathers: the creation of liturgies, monasticism and the seven councils recognized by both the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches.

And there we have our theme. Monasticism, coveted by connoisseurs in both East and West as a centre of human and spiritual *ressourcement*, often enough seems to bring about its own undoing by dwindling into seclusion. While being called upon to function as a bridge and foster unity, it finishes on occasion by digging a ditch and becoming an island. So it might be useful to consider, for a change, the phenomenon of monasticism in terms of the isolation which goes hand in hand with inheriting and to reflect on the resources to cope with that peril, ways and means which, though present in monasticism, unfortunately, are not always activated. More specifically, (1) in the first part, we shall deal with the forces of isolation in the *individual*. (2) The second part discusses the *collective* propensity towards recuperating isolation, i.e. keeping it in check rather than completely eliminating it, as found at the level of the Church. (3) In the third part, attention is drawn to the conjoint individual and collective forces of isolation, however paradoxical that may sound, at work in *inter-Church relations*. (4) The fourth part reflects on what the *remedy* could be like, especially if we look at monasticism at close quarters: within ourselves, but also as reflected in others.³

1. Centrifugal forces in the human

Isolation begins at home. If the first socialization which is up to the family to impart fails, the various forms of loneliness and solitariness are likely to follow.⁴ The fact that, later in life, many judge and act on the spur of the moment under the sheer stimulus of appearances offers a sure sign that they live at the periphery of their better self. Even when this is brought to their attention not a few still refuse to budge and change their behaviour. Abandoning the search for the centre holds obvious attractions; one can foster the illusion of living on an isle of the blest, dependent solely on one's own whim and caprice, beyond good and evil. The phenomenon of centrifugal pressure is not unknown in monasticism, the *gyrovague*, or wandering monk,⁵ being indeed its plague.

3 It is to be noted that, here, monasticism is being used in an inclusive sense, and therefore includes what is known as the religious life in the West. See, on this point, E.G. Farrugia, "Devotion to Life," in idem (ed.) *Devotion to Life. The Cost of Full Religious Commitment*, (Malta 1994) 1-15.

4 On socialization as a psychological phenomenon see K. Danzinger, *Socialization*, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England 1971) 71-89.

5 J. Gribomont describes him as "always on the move, never settles," in his article: "Monasticism and Asceticism," B. McGinn J. Meyendorff J. Leclercq (ed.s), *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century I*, (New York) 1985, 101-102.

1.1 *The phenomenon of isolation.* It would be interesting to ask ourselves what first comes to mind when we think of isolation. Probably, refugees, prisoners, the sick, especially the mentally sick; the derelict, the dejected and the despondent; the dead, the buried and the unburied. The list could easily be amplified. Whoever has a superiority, real or fictitious, to assert, will soon find oneself outnumbered. So many candidates to be put in quarantine, ranging from newly-wed couples in honeymoon, when the masks come unstuck, to so many human sacred cows, or perhaps even mad cows, either qualifying so literally or abusively so labelled by political, ideological, philosophical or even down-the-street opponents; ghettos, minorities, the unpopular; the unemployed, divorcees, and the bereaved. These are but some examples of a list, that actually could be much longer, of victims of various kinds and degrees of isolation. Its essence lies in its potential for physical, moral and religious destruction.⁶ The end result is annihilation.

To cope with isolation one must always adjust to the realism of the situation, which, at best, calls only for greater adaptability, with the birthpangs any growth entails. Usually isolation includes much more, for it also involves a rude awakening to a threatening situation as it presents itself through one all-dominating stimulus. The important thing about it all, however, is that isolation is the shadow of the human: neither can survive without the other. True, as St Thomas says, evil cannot exist without the good, whereas the good can thrive without evil. But the same cannot be said of isolation, which is a parasite of communion and the pale with which communion protects those that are inside from those who are outside, and vice versa.

This would induce us to believe that isolation in itself is neutral, only the circumstances accounting for the human, moral and religious differences which make it good or bad. We human beings are just born in isolation. Birth is a result of separation, a giving up of symbiosis, the first and most universal kind of koinonia; and the newly-born grow, from separation to separation, to the great separation; in love, because the love of parents and children has been called the only one that grows towards separation; in life, because the living move towards the great separation which removes barriers and which goes by the name of death. No wonder that everybody is born and dies alone; in this matter, nobody can take our place, nor can we delegate it to others; here, too, everybody is unique and unrepeatable,

6 In his *The Courage to Be*, (New Haven 1960), P. Tillich has well articulated this subject.

because birth and death are the incoded ontological way of relating to everything and everybody else from a particular vantage-point which by definition can occur only once.

1.2 *No man is an island* Is isolation an isolated phenomenon? Unfortunately not! Isolation is a very diffuse phenomenon, thriving like an infectious disease which spreads rapidly but which forces the victim to withdraw from circulation. Isolation does not, of itself, make us an island. There have been people in prison who have been able to commune with outside reality in a way as to have all subsequent humanity as their platform.⁷ Actually, the spiritual counterpart of isolation is called individuality. And since individuality cannot survive by itself it needs other individualities like so many lamps in the night. The chance of an individual being integrated into community and so become a person⁸ is thus considerable. But nothing guarantees that it will be so integrated and that it will not go on orbiting around itself in complacent self-sufficiency.

Attempts to isolate the human, however, usually result in its re-affirming itself with a bounce. As the great metaphysical poet John Donne (1573-1631) put it:

“No Man is an island, entire of it self; every man
is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main; if
a clod is washed away by the sea, Europe is the less,
as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a
manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man’s
death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind;
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
it tolls for thee.”⁹

John Donne’s eloquent words find as much echo in poetry as in life. Nobody is

7 Boethius with his *De consolazione philosophiae*, and Silvio Pellico, with his *Le mie prigioni*, immediately come to mind. Stefan Zweig has depicted how Mary Stuart and Marie Antoinette leapt the hurdle of their mediocrity and became somebody only in prison.

8 The word “person” is being used here in the modern sense of the word, not in the sense of the Church trinitarian and christological documents of the fourth and fifth centuries. Person in the sense of these documents referred to the concrete subsisting individual, whereas in its modern sense it refers to this individual as characterized by his use of liberty. In this sense, person is only a modality of person in the ancient sense.

9 John Donne, “Devotion upon Emergent Occasions” (1624) Meditations XVII.

deep down an island, but we can become one if our individuality degenerates into spiritual moroseness. Wherever the bridges of the senses are torn down, as with the blind, the other senses are mobilized and rendered more acute. Communion is thus restored. Indeed, when we die, faith induces us into believing that it is actually a piece of death which dies;¹⁰ the I remains intact, surviving according to its moral-religious capacity to absorb. For communion plunges its roots way back into eternity.

1.3 *Going around in circles* No man is an island. But the monk is an island!¹¹ The very word that describes him would seem to betray him as a trafficker in loneliness, “alone with the Alone”, forging out to find his place in the sun, all by himself, while a whole civilization is cloyed to death by self-seeking and lack of alternative models. Without entering into the details of the debate about the derivation of the word “monk,” the Syriac term “ihîdayûtâ,” one of the words indicated, seems to offer a confirmation.¹² This becomes especially evident in the case of the hermit,

10 The passage is so beautiful that it merits to be quoted in full. “Moriatur inquit Dominus, pro omnibus, ut omnes vivificentur per meipsum, et carnem omnium carne mea redemi. Moriatur enim mors in morte mea, et mecum simul, quae corruit, inquit, hominum natura resurget;” Ex Commentario sancti Cyrilli Alexandrini episcopi in Ioannis Evangelium; Lib 4, 2: PG 73, 563.

11 The criterion which distinguishes the encratite (= celibate) ascetics of the primitive Church, who usually continued to live in their family, from monasticism, which developed later, is the latter’s complete segregation in the desert and a fixed abode; J. Gribomont, “Monachesimo II: Orientale,” G. Pelliccia and G. Rocca (ed.s), *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione V*, (Roma 1978), col. 1693.

12 According to J. Gribomont, “Monasticism and Asceticism,” in: B. McGinn J. Meyendorff J. Leclercq (ed.s), *Christian Spirituality I*, p. 90, the term “monk” seems to render a Syriac technical term meaning “sole,” “single.” In *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, Cambridge 1975, p. 13, R. Murray defines it this way: “(1) singleness by leaving family and not marrying: (2) single-mindedness ... and (3) a special relationship to the *Îhîdayâ*, Christ the Only-begotten Son, whom the consecrated ascetics “put on” in a special way.” J. Gribomont, however, points out that “the term *monachos*, in Greek and Coptic, perhaps even before its Syriac correspondent term *ihîdayâ* appeared at the beginning of the fourth century. At any rate, one comes across it in various *loghia* of the Gospel of Thomas, which go back, at the latest, to the fourth century. Its meaning - prescinding from any reference to the desert - seems to have been “solitary, celibatarian”. A. Adam goes so far as to claim that, in Syriac, it originally referred to the very same word which describes Christ as “only begotten” and “only son”, something which would thus entail a mystical dimension through the identification with the Saviour. ... The least that we can say is that this possible meaning of *monachos* has left no trace in the fourth century.” J. Gribomont, “Monachesimo”, *Dizionario di Istituti di Perfezione*, col. 1693 (my translation).

who cuts the most unusual figure of all, apparently an island of one's own accord.¹³ Precisely because of his volunteering to so qualify the hermit can make the other isolation inmates look pale in comparison. To make it worse, the hermit has perfect credentials as far as going back to the sources is concerned. In its birth-hour monasticism went by the name of anchoritism, a word which means withdrawing.

With their sign language, hermits offer a particularly pithy poem on being single in this world. They may perhaps remind us of Leibnitz' synchronized clocks, going off through pre-established harmony and thus giving the impression that they were acting on one another without any real interchange; yet silent sign language can remind us of silent comic-strips as well. Monks are life's comedians, because, by the logic that whoever laughs last laughs best, they are having their last laugh, call it eschatological if you like; a greater wisdom is not known in human annals, only that it seems to live in an ivory-tower. If the deserts were soon peopled after the first hermit had moved in;¹⁴ or, where deserts were none, if young people sought refuge in droves on islands of difficult accessibility; if monasteries were built on forlorn heights, like the Meteora,¹⁵ whence the only exit could very well be in a basket not quite dissimilar to that on which Paul escaped from Damascus: all this indicates precisely that withdrawing corresponds to a human need, a crying human need with existential, political and religious survival overtones besides.¹⁶

It is not enough to point out that the hermit is tied to society by the label of the clothes he wears, by the accent his words still echo in vibrant silence and by the recollection of his dear ones. The hermit himself, too, finds isolation hard to stomach, but his vocation makes it somewhat more palatable. It would be perhaps truer to say that the hermit, and to a lesser extent the monk, represent the descending parabola of man's search for the other. He is a poem on centrifugal flight. He bumps into reality precisely by fleeing from it. Which, of course, need not be a bad thing: we are supposed to shun evil lest it taints us and instinctively recoil before the sublime

13 The hermit is defined, in canon 41 of the Quinisext, Constantinople 692, as somebody who should stay in the desert. Subsequent legislation in the East and West put him more firmly under the control of superiors or the bishop; cf J. Gribomont, J. Rezáč, J. Winandy, "Eremita," *Dizionario di Istituti di Perfezionj* III, (Roma 1976) col. 1153-1155.

14 D. J. Chitty, *The Desert a City*, Oxford 1966.

15 See N. Nikonanos, *Meteora: A complete guide to the Monasteries and their History*, (Athens 1987).

16 See A.J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Abridgement of Volumes I-VI, by D.C. Sommervell, (Oxford 1949) 212-216, 369-370.

before it crashes us, shying off from the all too lofty heights instead of feeling dizzy and tumble down the precipice.

Yet, monks can elude the pressure of the orbiting world and break loose only by hitching their star on somebody else's bandwagon. They can free themselves from enslaving gravity by subduing to a greater - and liberating - force of gravity. In simple terms, this is called imitation.¹⁷ Imitation of a stronger leader helps us break the group or tribal pressure which fetters our creative liberty. But imitation can also be soulless. The real human alternative is either to listen to one's aspirations or ape one's own lower instincts. Many actually fidget about for lack of a model, but not a few, in their perplexity, gravitate towards the monastery.

2. Centripetal forces in the human

No man is an island; and, although the monk may seem to be an exception, he is an exception that proves the rule. It remains to be seen what that rule is. This brings us to the phenomenon of human gregariousness.

2.1 *The phenomenon of gregariousness.* Humans like to aggregate because they are by nature social; souls have to congregate because they need a church. Gregariousness, however, draws the circle around some by way of excluding others. There is no such thing as universal gregariousness, except one mediated through various degrees of belonging, which, by mutual exclusions, wind up with being all-inclusive. There is, of course, such a thing as local gregariousness, and it is from the orbit of local gregariousness that the hermit leaps off. For this reason, Henri Bergson (1859-1941) speaks of the closed and the open society. A closed society aims at preserving the coherence of a group and so resists change, until a moral genius or mystic comes around and upsets the established order. When the ensuing consternation in the bosom of the closed society subsides and the progress reached is integrated into new legislation, the circle has been broken and widened to include new members, yet the new emergent society closes ranks once again to

17 Against a prejudice that imitation of Christ is a typical Western spirituality unknown to the East see I. Hausherr, SJ, "L'imitation de Jésus-Christ dans la spiritualité byzantine," idem, *Etudes de spiritualité orientale* (Roma 1969) 217-245.

protect itself against intruders.¹⁸ Until a new mystic appears on the horizon, and the whole process of social change starts afresh ...

2.2 *No Church is an island* But will gregariousness stop here? Suffice it to draw a comparison. Sects live by absolutizing the principle of gregariousness; they cut a part and call it the whole; in this way, they become real islands. Whereas the sect oversimplifies the problem by abolishing the centre, the Church tries to make the centre more attractive. No wonder, then, that Church life solves the problem of centripetal forces only up to a point, and some of the faithful will sometimes succumb to the temptation of ogling an alternative which seems to tell it all in brief, give it all at once. Something else - something more - is needed.

We can take the example of dreams. When we dream each one of us becomes a sectarian, who can do and undo empires, found and confound Churches. The alarm-clock is for many a dreamer a resurrection from a nightmare. For in dreams we elaborate our own particular world, each in our own way. But when we wake up each has to come to terms with crude reality as it exists outside of our control. And the only way to master it is by way of togetherness. Elaborating reality together - that is Christian community.¹⁹ Dreams are such a Christian reality! Everybody will dream dreams, young and old, slave and free, men and women (cf Acts 2, 17-21), but they must do it in the name of Jesus Christ, the crucified author of life: that is precisely what constitutes Church, solemnly celebrated as brand-new on the day of Pentecost!

In this sense, the Church is the exact opposite of a quarantine! It is poles apart from the private world of single dreamers; the dreams must now be presentable, and, in order to do that, must first be acclimatized to the public ("liturgical") feeling of all persons of good will. But our dreams need a quarantine; and, indeed, most dare dream only under the cover of darkness. Even then, they are a bit wary about speaking out their dreams aloud, the story of Joseph in the Old Testament serving as an apt warning. Christians everywhere need a hearth where they can feel at home away from home, where they can unburden their souls of their dreams with impunity. That centre of human warmth and enterprise is the monastery, the hallowed place where Christians "can let their hair down" while enjoying God's protection.

18 H. Bergson, "*Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*," *Oeuvres*, (Paris 1970) 1154-1156.

19 E. Jünger, *Geistesgegenwart*, (München 1979), 189-191.

2.3 *Gravitating towards the monastery.* No Church is an island, but the monastery is an island! Better, an archipelago of islands!²⁰ Indeed, this abrupt juxtaposition between Church and Monastery can easily give the impression that much of the monastery's appeal lies in its vested sectarian interests. Already the approaches to the monastery are forbidding. Traditionally, monasteries usually went out of their way to be out of the way, and, besides, the quarantine needed lasted the whole year or two required canonically for the noviciate and beyond.²¹ A wall of silence enshrouds the monastery, cordoned off moreover by habits which at face value fly in the face of society's cherished dreams.

It has been claimed, for instance, that the difference between Russia and Europe becomes noticeable in the monastery; once we grant that Russia is what Europe used to be, old Russia is to be found in the Russian monastery. This avowal would hardly have sounded credible if the story of the eye-opening encounter of the accomplished politician with the monk had not been told by the philosopher Thomas Masaryk (1850-1937), the first president of Czechoslovakia, who has written, "Russia and Europe - the Russian monk".²²

Indeed, if there is any one group capable of defying the deadlines of society, that is the monastic group. No wonder that the *Zeitgeist*, so capable of sneaking, like a mischievous cat, through sealed borders and barbed wire, stops shy of contemplative monasteries. Here time stands still, not in the sense that nothing happens, but in the sense that the time with which all other agents deal would profit by stopping here to recharge its batteries. Where this does not happen, feud fuels vendetta, and the chain of violence is wound up again like a time-bomb. But wherever a whole nation stops for a day as if on retreat, hope receives an oxygen-tent and socio-political forces on the brink of collision proclaim general amnesty for a day and go on pilgrimage.

There is nothing more subversive than to dream dreams together. As psalms

20 Indeed, the monastery has even been called a "tomb before the tomb"; Kallistos Ware, "Introduction," St John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (New York 1982), p. 22.

21 Of course, it is different if we go back in time to the origins of monasticism. St. Nilus of Rossano (+1005) seems to have insisted on a noviciate of 40 days.

22 "La Russia e l'Europa - il monaco russo," T.G. Masaryk, *La Russia e l'Europa* (trans. E. Lo Gatto) (Roma 1925) 19-13; II, pp. 494-504.

sung on pilgrimage go to show,²³ it takes time to dream them - enough, at any rate, for Jesus to get lost on one occasion - but, in the process, something new is created. The May First celebration was precisely such a creation.²⁴ A collective memory can easily be created and celebrated. Sects have no memory to them as an intrinsic principle, and the moment they do accept one, they start organizing themselves like a church with a tradition. Precisely because they have a short-wave memory to them, they are usually short-lived, which is why they can proliferate on the teeming principle. Monasteries on the contrary, bide their time, in apparent bewilderment, like an oak. They see times come and go, but it is ultimately monastic time that judges the tide of events, and it judges them precisely through its liturgy, which apparently goes on for ever, and of which its martyrologies, old and new, are but an expression.²⁵ In so doing even the monastery with the highest walls is Everybody's House, wide open to all without exception, for it is at their service that it exists, invisible though this service may be.

No one is more isolated than when abandoned by God to one's own devices. These are the wages of sin, whose most eloquent expression is death. And yet, in death we become a burnt-out offering: failing strength, a rickety frame, criticism from unexpected quarters, betrayal of trust: all these things make us unwittingly a potential Christ-symbol. Maybe nobody understands so well why Christ chose to redeem us by death than a person in agony.²⁶

23 S. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship I & II*, (trans. D.R. Ap-Thomas) (Nashville, USA) I 177, II 107.

24 J. Piper, *Zustimmung zur Welt: Eine Theorie des Festes*, (München 1963) pp. 111-119. Piper points out that May First draws its origin from the protest organized on May 1, 1886 in Chicago, during which a bomb was thrown. When a number of trade-unionists were held responsible and hanged, this soon led to their apotheosis.

25 In his memorable sermon on Christmas morning 1170, archbishop Thomas Becket refers to this tradition: "I have spoken to you to-day, dear children of God, of the martyrs of the past, asking you to remember especially our martyr of Canterbury, the blessed Archbishop Elphege; because it is fitting, on Christ's birthday, to remember that Peace which he brought; ...; and because it is possible that in a short time you may have yet another martyr, and that one perhaps not the last;" T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* (annotated by P. Wenzel and K. Blohm) (Braunschweig 1967) 34-35.

26 Cf Anselme de Cantorbéry, *Pourquoi Dieu s'est fait homme*, texte latin, intr., bibl., trad. et notes de R. Roques, Paris 1963, pp. 386-396; Anselmo di Canterbury, "Meditazione sulla Redenzione dell'uomo," in: *Il Cristo III* (a cura di C. Leonardi) (Firenze 1989) 572-584.

3. *Circumincessio: The phenomenon of interrelatedness*

This brings us to the third level, that on which the Churches coexist and interact in carrying on their mission.

In this respect, one of the most interesting of human phenomena is the way any one major religion soon breaks up into a number of groups each of which claiming to be right, usually at the expense of the others. This holds true not only of Christianity, but also of Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and so forth. Is human splintering unavoidable? The Trinity affords the model of Persons - however much this concept of divine Persons transcends that of human persons - who do not break up although, or rather, precisely because they are constantly on the move, visiting. The word used in dogma for this is *perichoresis* or *circumincessio*, the reciprocal interpenetration of the divine persons.²⁷ If we further employ the term as a model for human relations, any one group must of necessity relate to the other groups, whereby the refusal to relate is itself a form of interrelationship. Again, the various forms of interrelating are themselves further characterized by the kind of centrifugal and centripetal forces, which, as minor or major trends, are discernible at the level of individuals and groups.

3.1 *Block Talk: Drifting apart and drawing closer*

Monolithic groups use the language of drifting apart and drawing closer, a phenomenon akin to the geological phenomenon of the slow movement of continental blocks to or away from each other. The East-West schism conventionally dated with 1054,²⁸ is a case in point: it had long existed, insofar as East and West had by then deep-seated feelings of resentment and mutual incomprehension; on the other hand, the union went on existing on many a practical level, especially inasmuch as other points of contact remained and simple people tended to see the issue (if they perceived it at all) as yet another round in the ongoing tensions between

²⁷ Used for the first time for the coinherence, without confusion, of the two natures in Jesus Christ by St Gregory of Nyssa, St John Damascene extended *perichoresis* for a like coinherence of the three divine persons; cf L. Ott, *Grundriß der Dogmatik* (Freiburg i.Br. 1970) 87.

²⁸ F. Dvornik, *Byzantium and the Roman Primacy*, trans. E.A. Quain (N. York 1964), 124-153.

hierarchs. Drawing the lesson, reunion, when it comes, will not be an all-enmeshing web, least of all a cobweb, but a skein of relationships between individuals, monasteries and local Churches on both sides, enough, at any rate, to permit an East-West rapprochement. The fear remains whether such a comprehensive relationship would not absorb weaker entities.

3.2 *Every island (individual) is a potential continent (Church)*

Spirituality is an object-lesson on unity. Just as a human being is capable of driving a much bigger animal, so too, the spiritual person is a microcosm which "includes more" than the macrocosm: like the Mother of God, he or she is "wider than heaven."²⁹ The Christian privileges a viewpoint with a long-range vista above material creation. Relating must therefore be done on an inclusive principle, potentially, on an all-inclusive principle.

The mystery of Church union is the mystery of such a symbiosis which is in principle all-inclusive, but in practice selective. For this reason, the Church operates not on the basis of just any symbiosis, but of that of *enhypostasis*.³⁰ This term refers to the way in which Christ's unabridged human nature can exist within the one person (*hypostasis*) of the Logos or the Son of God. Applied to the Church with its universal claim, the term indicates the possibility that an individual, or an individual group, or a local Church, may uphold one's individual existence precisely in relation to that of others without prejudicing one's full integration within the new entity.

There are many worlds, even private worlds; some computer programmes are actually galaxies. The world of admirers, as the Little Prince defines the world of the vain person, is one of them. The world of God-searchers is another. The point is: many worlds can exist side by side, like so many radio and T.V. stations, without unduly impinging on one another, but at the same time without hindering free passage, on the principle of *enhypostasis*.³¹

29 In iconographic language, Mary is called "platythera", wider than heaven, because she carries the Child, who in turn holds the universe in his hand.

30 See Ott, *Grundriß der Dogmatik*, 185.

31 H. Bergson had already employed the image of the radio stations.

Christ has left his imprint on the Church. Just as the makeup of the human reflects that of Jesus Christ, whose human nature lives in symbiosis with his divine nature within his divine person, so must this enhypostatic status of his human nature obviously tell us something about future union among the churches. No Church is an island; but the Churches are archipelagoes of swimming continents. From this viewpoint, a member of the Church is an island, but qualifies as a lawfully constituted individual only when he or she puts himself or herself in contact with the whole Church through the local Church. This takes place in communion: when the individual receives the Body of Christ in the eucharist he or she becomes part of the ecclesiological Body of Christ. The whole Church, triumphant and less triumphant, comes for a visit without crushing the individual, but rather with a corresponding exchange of gifts.

3.3 Familiar and estranged: inheriting means relating

Remember the Little Prince with his nostalgia for holiness³² and his gnostic penchant, or nosiness to penetrate mystery, overcome only through spiritual familiarization. If the world consists of acquaintances and strangers, the world is propelled by familiarization and estrangement. This is why the Little Prince can serve as an antidote for our gnostic times. One need not give up one's private world, the universe which one treasures as one's love-story because one has grown familiar with it, just because one relates to others, even, as in our case, to all others. It is this heritage that we bequeath to those who come after us, a heritage which has two keys, birth and death, birth as hope and death as accomplishment. Only, sometimes, this inheritance presents itself as an impregnable fortress; the Little Prince, too, does not want to betray his secrets to just anybody and his rose grows thistles to protect them. But we must penetrate all the same when it is a matter of passing on the spiritual riches of the Churches lest the others starve because of our egoism and shortsightedness.

Monasticism is a creed which through its rugged belief in the sacredness of the individual's way before God holds that there is no spiritual castle, however mighty,

32 See P. Blanchard, *Sainteté aujourd'hui*, (Bruges 1953) 27.

which cannot be taken by storm, by the power of monastic virtue. No wonder that many have found God in the isolation cell of death.³³ And if one meets the living God, can the community lag far behind? The living God is inseparable from the living Church. From this we gather that monastic love must go beyond that of the victim and must become that of the offering: universal and particular at once.

4. *Scaling the invisible ladder*

Universal and particular at once! Celibates are at once centrifugal and centripetal. They attract others precisely because they refuse to enter in competition with them. They can be very useful so long as they remain marginal. Monks, in both East and West, have made themselves famous for their culture.³⁴ But, as Cesare Balbo pointed out, Europe needs more their prowess than their manuscripts. The world could profit from their values as the Church from their virtues.

Among the plethora of those who left an imprint on overcoming spiritual distances the name of St John Climacus (*ca.* 579-*ca.* 649) remains unforgettable through his remarkable *Ladder to Paradise*.³⁵ It offers a key to the heart of Eastern spirituality, indeed, it is a spirituality of the heart. Precisely the enormous influence it has enjoyed suggests we consider it from an angle different from the usual one - namely as a directory for whoever would want to scale the walls that divide Church from Church, walls which, in an expression become justly famous, do not reach up to heaven.³⁶

The modern Western world may be less familiar with Climacus' ladder to paradise than with "snakes and ladders", an indoor game in which one advances if

33 See A. Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften*, (ed. by R. Bleistein) (Frankfurt am Main 1985) 161-176. A commentator on Boethius, Innocenzo Cappa, in his *Consolazione della filosofia*, (Milano 1941) went so far as to express the paradox that, only if mass executions were introduced, could many at least grasp the purpose of their life and discover God in the last hours of their existence.

34 In the West the Benedictines come to mind, in the East Evagrius is a name that stands for many.

35 St John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. C. Luibhold and N. Russell) (New York 1982).

36 Compare this adage with the thoughts expressed by N. Berdjaev, in "God Between Four Walls," in: D. A. Lowrie, *Christian Existentialism* (London 1965) 265-274.

one chances upon a ladder but is thrown backwards if one treads upon a snake. And, if games people play are any index of their souls, it is this added dimension of ups and downs - that only over many failures and a lengthy maturation we move slowly to God, but that we are sometimes heaved up by grace - about which Climacus spoke so much when he laid stress on penance and joy as going hand in hand.³⁷ A step forwards and two backwards mean regress; but one backwards and two forwards certainly spell progress.

4.1 *Climacus and Anticlimacus*

In order to translate this double movement, backward and forward, a double movement which is interrelated and is therefore dialectical - and which, when reformed, bears a certain resemblance to paradox, guardian angel of mystery - we have an especially qualified witness. It is the great Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), who as an epitaph for his tomb wished nothing better than "That individual."³⁸ What Kierkegaard meant by individual was conditioned by his obsession with the all-engrossing presence of the universal in Hegel. Even then, one cannot pass over in silence the criticism, voiced by many, that Kierkegaard, for all the refreshing insight of his protest, wrote the individual upper-case in part at least because of his own predicament.

Kierkegaard is important in this context because he helps give Climacus a modern look. Indeed, he published under his name several books. In order to understand why, we have to keep in mind that, in *Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard introduces the new genre of the edifying pseudonym.³⁹ He thus calls himself as a student, in *De omnibus dubitandum*, Johannes Climacus.⁴⁰ Later on, however, when he had left behind this phase of philosophical maturation, he wrote under the

37 Kallistos Ware, "Introduction", John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Descent*, 14-16.

38 See "Il Singolo," S. Kierkegaard, *Diario I*, (a cura di C. Fabro) (Brescia 1948) 392-394, here 393.

39 C. Fabro, "Postilla," S. Kierkegaard, *Vangelo delle Sofferenze*, (a cura di C. Fabro) (Fossano, Cuneo (without a date))75-76.

40 S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophische Brocken - De omnibus dubitandum est*, (trans. E. Hirsch) (Gütersloh 1981) 190 (comment). The similarity to the real Climacus lies only in the similarity between Kierkegaard's dialectical scale and the real Climacus' spiritual ladder.

pseudonym of Anti-Climacus,⁴¹ not against the real Climacus, but against the assumed personage of Johannes Climacus who doubted everything. Kierkegaard's problem par excellence is "how to become a Christian."⁴² So the Anti-Climacus is the hero of the overcoming of a crisis so typical of the present state of affairs, given more to ruminating than to philosophizing. Kierkegaard's appeal lies in part in his return to the Church of the Fathers.⁴³ We might not like doubt, but we are often unwittingly its prey. Nor do we become its master simply by practising methodic doubt - as the Kierkegaard of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* was to discover. So we had better bring ourselves in line, and ask what can be done. Of course, as for Kierkegaard himself, this will only be achieved in this last-mentioned masterpiece.

Anti-Climacus and Climacus, doubt and faith: they too are eminently centrifugal and centripetal, found side by side in the primitive community of those who witnessed the Ascension (Mt 28, 17). They are a reminder that, even in interrelationship between the Churches, the lonest individual must assert his or her place, but can surpass self-restriction only by opening up to the mystery of the Church, discovered in the isolation cell of total abandonment.

4.2 *The Monk in us and the Monk in others*

Although no man is an island, the monk certainly is one. He is an island because every individual deep down is potentially a Church. Put against the wall everybody quickly discovers the insufficiency of climbing it. No Church is an island, but the monastery is an island, because the monastery is the place where self-rotation ends and becoming humanity's satellite starts. The monk in us comes out and discovers the monk in the others. It is here that the answer lies: how to carry on a correspondence between the monk in us, going up and down the monastic ladder, and the monk in the others, presumably going through analogous movements.

41 Even this pseudonym of Anti-Climacus he later withdrew; see S. Kierkegaard, "1. Beilage: Widerruf des Pseudonyms Anti-Climacus," *Einübung im Christentum*, (Gütersloh 1980) 286-288.

42 C. Fabro, "Introduzione - Italian," in: S. Kierkegaard, *Vangelo delle Sofferenze*, 21. If Kierkegaard criticised monasticism, this was based on a misunderstanding; C. Fabro, *ibid.*, 70-71.

43 See C. Fabro (a cura di), *Søren Kierkegaard: Diario* (Brescia 1948) 121. As an example see Kierkegaard's use of the visions of Hermas in his *Vangelo delle Sofferenze*, 144-145.

Unfortunately, if the monk in us, going down, meets the monk in the other, going down as well, both will drag their feet into the stubbornness of hell.

Actually we have to distinguish the monk in us from the interiorized monk. The latter is anybody, whatever his or her station in life, who responds to the universal call for holiness.⁴⁴ The former is that conditioning which, like a bridge, enables a human being to understand and occasionally wish to be a monk. Thus, the yearning for peace of heart, present in everybody, is a bridge to understand monasticism; and, indeed, one extremely influential type of monastic spirituality has been aptly called “hesychasm” (Greek for “quiet”).⁴⁵

4.3 *Climax and Anticlimax*

Behind the idea of a ladder, a scale, a differentiated approach to spiritual reality as lived in the Churches,⁴⁶ there is the idea of a differentiated spirituality which reaches out to heaven, not with Babel’s hybris but slowly and steadily. If truth and spirituality reflect each other, then to the hierarchy of truths⁴⁷ there must correspond a hierarchy of spiritualities. It is the modern spiritual directory.

The word for ladder in Greek is *klimax*, whence derives the English climax. But English is also sadly aware of anticlimax, characterized by pathos and pseudo-solutions, in a word, whenever great expectations breed their opposite. And rightly so! Following Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* we often think of virtues in terms of being in the middle, away from extremes, whereas we could for once think of them as going up and down a ladder, that is to say, as something with a climax and anticlimax. In this sense, the fast is the climax of the feast, just as the feast is the climax of the fast.

In the list that follows we have some of monastic “virtues” in the inclusive

44 Cf E.G. Farrugia, SJ, “The Common Task and the Uncommon Hope” and “Dialogue in Silence.” in: idem, *Tradition in Transition*, 111-133 and 135-143.

45 On hesychasm see Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London 1993) 62-70.

46 On the various differentiations in St John Climacus’ spirituality see Kallistos Ware’s excellent “Introduction”, in: St John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 1-70.

47 In *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 11 Vatican II spoke of a hierarchy of truths (*hierarchya veritatum*) as a way of interpreting the proximity of any one truth to the central mystery of our redemption through the incarnate Son of God, and not of considering any one truth unimportant.

sense of the “monk in us”. There is no pretence to deduce them in Hegelian manier, but only to show one possible movement from the periphery to the centre. The movement, however, is a spiral which can go not only up but also down, especially if it goes off tangents.

- (a) *War and peace.* Point of departure for discovering the centre is one’s dissatisfaction with oneself, the cute formula for war. Yet, just as courage, as a virtue, qualifies best whoever is by nature timid, so, too, the best virtue of peace is found in the middle of war.⁴⁸ We speak too readily of serenity, but human life goes through alternating periods of both inner peace and tension. The monk is the human laboratory for the experiment. Asceticism means: war can only be postponed, but in the meantime final peace can be anticipated - which is why asceticism has been called crisis management.
- (b) *Pilgrimage and stability.* Stability is not the absence of movement, but having purpose and direction in life. Life is a one whole pilgrimage, to which chastity imparts direction, i.e. one direction, as with an integrated person, rather than several. Instability may also take the form of drifting aimlessly, but Dante, Chaucer⁴⁹ and medieval pilgrims knew why pilgrimage is a station on life’s progress. Unity depends on places of pilgrimage and will come to stay when new spiritual rendezvous are activated.
- (c) *Fathers and children.* Direction does not dispense with a guide but presupposes one. Winning the hearts of parents for their children and the hearts of children for their parents was the task indicated in the Gospel as characterizing the passage from the Old to the New Testament (Mal 4, 6; Lk 1, 17). It is resolved only in the relationship between spiritual parents and their charge.⁵⁰
- (d) *Tradition and traditions.* In a bid at discernment of spirits a guide can try to interpret God’s will in the light of the accumulated human experience, especially of monastics, source persons of wisdom, who live not from Tradition alone, but also from traditions. Yet traditions interpret Tradition, and Tradition interprets Revelation. Inheriting is an example. The monk bequeaths “according to tradition,” therefore everything goes back to the

48 As Hölderlin put it: “Was sich trennt, trifft sich wieder, und Frieden ist mitten im Streit.”

49 On pilgrimages in Chaucer’s time see G.G. Coulton, *Chaucer and His England* (London 1963) 121-125.

50 G. Bunge, *Paternité spirituelle: La gnose chrétienne chez Evagre le Pontique* (Bégnolles en Mauges 1992) 69-75; cf L. Bouyer, “Sagesse et gnose,” *Le sens de la vie monastique* (Paris 1950) 300-313.

monastery.⁵¹ Monastic inheriting is thus spared precisely the manifestation of concupiscence which is division. In the world, empires, patrimonies gradually disappear because they are divided. The monks sing in choir: United we are strong; of this, the world retains only the words.

- (e) *Insularity and communion.* Withdrawing is the condition that allows for advancing. A: Toynbee has interpreted creative personalities as acting on the basis of withdrawal from society only to return with renewed vigour.⁵² This possibility of renewal should not be the preserve of monks alone. That is why Europe needs monasteries more than ever before.
- (f) *Deformed and Reformed.* Deformations not only precede but also follow reformation. The monastery is an on-going laboratory for experiment and counter-experiment, and it calls for human volunteers with a big heart and whose “beautiful corner”⁵³ is reserved for God.
- (g) *Charismatics and Neurotics:* neurosis is healed by charism, but sometimes fostered by it. Well-placed monasteries can function as a thermostat and give what sects cannot.
- (h) *Fasting and feasting.* The problem is to fast in the feast, and to feast in the fast. Then integrity is complete. St Teresa could hold an orange in her hands and wonder at the rarity; in our times of plenty, an ascetic culture could mean trying to keep balance and avoid exaggerations.
- (i) *Service and self-service.* In the icon of the Last Supper Judas helps himself thus reducing service to self-service. The Church itself is the expression of Christ’s availability here and now: that is sacrament, and not the utilitarian reduction thereof into a pretended “service”. Yet, like friendship, things of least immediate use often render the greatest service.
- (j) *Prayer in and out of context:* to pray is to relativize context by taking it seriously. When one neglects prayer, one is out of context.
- (k) *Silence and hubbub:* the psalms make lots of noise, clapping, trumpeting, and, besides, silence can be embarrassing. Silence and hubbub are next-door neighbours.
- (l) *Liturgy timeless and endless:* a liturgy that never ends makes us fidget and remember that we are with 200 others, whereas a liturgy which is mystic and thus timeless, makes us forget whether we are on heaven or on earth, like Vladimir’s ambassadors.

51 “Quidquid acquirit monachus, monasterio acquirit,” as the adage goes.

52 Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 217-230.

53 This is an expression used by Easterners for the place in their home where they keep their icons.

An afterthought: Is Sisterhood what Catholicity means?

One big mistake in ecumenism is to think that all we need is the same creed and unity will follow automatically. That is sheer rationalism. It oversees current talk of "sister Churches."⁵⁴ We forget that their relationship itself must be spiritual, i.e. one of sisterhood. If dogma and spirituality form a unity⁵⁵ then Sisterhood remains an abstraction without sisterhoods. Since the walls of division do not reach up to heaven, everybody of good will should leap over them. In traditional terminology, the word for this collective high-jumping is monasticism. No man is an island and no Church is an island, but the monk in his monastery is the best traffic island which leads directly to the Church. Pushed to extremes the individual lapses into ecclesiality. The monastery is the laboratory where the I disappears and gives place to Christ's I, with a resultant communitarian we.

Ecumenism is about reciting both the Creed and the Confiteor in the plural. Thus, Catholics confess the one holy catholic and apostolic Church. Oneness is a form of holiness, holiness is a form of wholeness (integrity). Catholicity is qualitative oneness and apostolicity harks back to original oneness of origin. The four notes help only if they are not abstract but interrelated, and that makes them spiritual notes. From here we see the justifiability of talk of sisterhood. War ends where fraternization begins. There can only be Sisterhood if there are sisterhoods to back it up: there can only be catholicity if there is monasticism - if the monk in us holds out his hand to the monk in the other.

Monasticism is the future of the Church. Without it the church will relapse into that inner persecution called fratricide. Its antidote is fraternity, its laboratory the monastery. It is too precious a source of human and spiritual energy to be left to the monks. The world misses monastic values. The Church needs monastic virtues. Ecumenism will survive only thanks to monastic virtuosity.

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54 In Vatican II, the Catholic Church made a distinction between "sister Churches" and "ecclesial communities." In order to qualify as sister Churches a grouping has to have the same sacraments and a hierarchy with apostolic succession. In practice this means the Oriental Churches; see *Unitatis Redintegratio* 14, 17. As for the Anglican Church, cf Y. Congar, *Diversités et communion*, (Paris 1982)126-137.

55 According to G. Bunge, *Paternité spirituelle*, 98, spirituality is theology grasped from within.