

[page 1] **WHAT IS BIBLICAL SPIRITUALITY?**[©]

Adapted from an address given to the Assembly of the World Catholic Federation for the Biblical Apostolate in Malta in April 1978 by J. N. M. Wijngaards, M.H.M.

The Lord Yahweh has given me
 a disciple's tongue.
 He provides me with speech
 so that I may know how to reply to the wearied.
 Each morning he wakes me to hear,
 to listen like a disciple
 The Lord Yahweh has opened my ear (Is. 50, 4-5).

This description may rightly be applied to every Christian. For to be re-born in Christ means to be given a new existence, to become a new creation through his Word. Both Christian prayer and Christian action spring from the Word. The man who does not believe, the humanist, the agnostic, seeks his own course through a bewildering universe; he considers himself his own master. The Christian walks in the trail blazed by someone he acknowledges to be master of his destiny.

Joyfully he has made himself a disciple because he hears the voice of love that guides his steps. God has opened his ears.

The Christian life is guided by the Word, and Christian spirituality, therefore, is "*biblical*". What does this come to in practice? Why stress biblical spirituality today? These are the questions I will tackle in this pamphlet and I will illustrate my observations with examples taken from the lives of the Saints. Values are recognised more readily in living persons.

[page 2] **What is "biblical spirituality?"**

Authors use the term "biblical spirituality" in a number of ways. For some, it means the requirements of spiritual life as found in the Bible. Here biblical spirituality is understood as being made up of the virtues and qualities demanded of the Christian by the inspired Word. C. M. Cherian, for instance, lists as marks of "biblical spirituality": receiving the grace of repentance, obedience to the Word of God, a prayerful approach to life, preparing for the way of the Lord, watchfulness when resisting temptation, being personally converted to the Gospel, practising love in the human community, suffering with Jesus and being sent by Jesus on his mission of love and waiting for Christ.¹ Here "biblical spirituality" would be equivalent to "the spirituality demanded by the Bible."

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¹ C. M. CHERIAN, *Meet Jesus in the Bible*, Sanjivan, New Delhi 1974; see also by the same author "Now My Eyes See Thee: The Bible as a Record of Religious Experience", *Review for Religion* 32 (1973/4) 1002-1011. His emphasis on the experiential nature of religion in the Bible is highly commendable.

Since the Bible contains many books, we may then further distinguish between various “spiritualities” found in the Bible: the spirituality of deutero-Isaiah, of the Psalms, of Sirach, of the synoptics, of John, of Paul, and so on.

Obviously, no one can forbid authors to use the term with this meaning. But it seems to me that the practice leads to confusion. I would make the plea that it be discontinued because it obscures a more important meaning of “biblical spirituality.” Spirituality is a way of life, not a list of virtues and requirements. Biblical spirituality should be sought in people who live in the Bible, rather than in its pages. What we find in Sacred Scripture is not biblical spirituality itself, but the inspiration, the ideals, the models, the patterns, the norms and the principles from which biblical spirituality can spring. It is interesting to note that P. M. de la Croix’s book *Spirituality of the Old Testament* was called in the original French: *L’Ancien Testament, Source de la Vie Spirituelle* (The Old Testament, Source of the Spiritual Life).² The title of the original work is more correct than that of the English translation: the author wanted to show how the Old Testament can inspire our spiritual life, rather than construct ‘Old Testament spirituality’! In the same way he did not really write *The Biblical Spirituality* [page 3] of St. John, as the English translation of 1966 would suggest, but *L’Evangile de Saint Jean et son Témoignage Spirituelle* (St. John’s Gospel and its Spiritual Witness).³ In any case, whatever terminology may be preferred by others, in this pamphlet I will never use the term “biblical spirituality” merely as a short-hand term for requirements found in the Bible.

Another source of confusion lies in the multiplicity of spiritualities distinguished by authors. We hear of Ignatian spirituality, Franciscan spirituality, Greek-Orthodox spirituality, Methodist spirituality, Buddhist spirituality and so on. Is “biblical spirituality” another variety, existing next to the other ones as one of the many? Are we to hold with L. Bouyer that there is in reality only one spirituality for Christians,⁴ so that it would be ill-advised to speak of spiritualities in the plural? Where does “biblical spirituality” fit in?

Most authors today are agreed that it is legitimate to speak of spiritualities in the plural. Because spirituality is rooted in actual life, it varies according to the person who lives it. The two main factors that make one kind of spirituality different from another are a person’s character a particular “horizon”⁵ from which he experiences reality. The military temper of St Ignatius and the carefree abandon of St. Benedict Labre could never find expression in the life of a single person. The contemplative orientation of St John of the Cross led him on a different path from the concern for the poor that motivated St Vincent de Paul. It is the combination of one’s personality and the viewpoint from which one interprets life that causes a person’s spirituality to take a distinct turn. Through

² The French original was published by Desclée, Paris; the English translation by Herder, London 1966.

³ The French original appeared with Desclée, Bruges; the English with Alba House, Staten Island 1966.

⁴ L. BOUYER, *La spiritualité du Nouveau Testament et des pères*, Paris 1960 (esp. the introduction); *Précis de théologie ascétique et mystique*, Paris 1960.

⁵ I derive this term from B. J. F. LONERGAN, *Method in Theology*, Herder and Herder, New York 1972, esp. p. 235ff.

their strong personalities and deep convictions, saints have often set a pattern of new spirituality for their contemporaries. But strictly speaking, every Christian has his own spirituality. The Spirit of God rules each person in a unique way and expresses himself in the life of each individual in a manner unique to each.

While allowing for a multiplicity of spiritualities, we should realize at the same time that there is much that all genuine Christian spiritualities have in common. Basic and common to [page 4]all is obedience to the Word of God. We Christians believe that God intervened once and for all in the history of man through Jesus Christ. God spoke his word of salvation to man in Jesus. Whereas non-Christian spiritualities, such as the Hindu, Buddhist, African spirituality etc., represent different ways of searching for the Infinite, every form of Christian spirituality is a response in faith to the revelation in Christ. The Gospel is the ultimate norm and the common inspiration for every authentic Christian spirituality. In this sense, saying that a spirituality is "Christian" or saying that it is "biblical" is stating one and the same thing.

In its most fundamental sense biblical spirituality is the application of the Gospel to one's life, to one's thoughts, actions and prayer.⁶ It is the resonance of salvation history in the life of the individual Christian.⁷ It is the Word of God in so far as it has been conceived and brought to maturity in the Bride.⁸ Biblical spirituality is the manifestation of God's Word through the fullness of the Spirit.⁹

Why stress the biblical aspect of spirituality today?

If being biblical is so basic and fundamental to every Christian spirituality, if biblical and Christian spirituality are synonymous, what use is it to speak of "biblical spirituality"? The objection is well founded. If we were to speak of biblical spirituality as if it stood in opposition to other genuine Christian spiritualities, we would be making a mistake.

The term "biblical spirituality" can be justified only with reference to a pastoral need. The fact is that in past centuries Sacred Scripture was not given the place it deserves. In the lives of many Christians today the biblical aspect of biblical spirituality needs to be highlighted, often almost introduced anew. In the Catholic Church, on account of the controversy with Protestants and for other historical reasons, many have lost the habit of reading the Bible and nourishing their spiritual life with its words. For many Catholics the inspired text has [page 5] become remote. It is no longer "very near to you: in your mouth and in your

⁶ F. VANDENBROUCKE, "Spirituality and Spiritualities", *Concilium* 9 (1965) 1, p. 25-33.

⁷ J. DANIÉLOU, *Vom Geheimnis der Geschichte*, Stuttgart 1955, p. 322.

⁸ H. U. von BALTHASAR, "Spiritualität", *Geist und Leben* 31 (1958) 340-352.

⁹ J. SUDBRACK, "Vom Geheimnis christlicher Spiritualität", *Geist und Leben* 39 (1966) 24-44. On the occasion of the Conference on Spirituality at Indore in October 1975 I even suggested that the term "spirituality" should be replaced by other terms; cf. "Christian Radiance" in *Mission Spirituality*, ed. C. SRAMBICAL, Satprachar, Indore 1976, p. 52-69.

heart''; but high up in heaven and far beyond the seas (Dt 31, 12-14).

Promoting "biblical" spirituality in these circumstances means trying to correct an imbalance, trying to restore Christian spirituality to its true dignity by stressing its source. Just as we stress freedom and independence when a country is oppressed or being colonised and call for a "legitimate" government when usurpers are in power, so we have to promote a "biblical" spirituality only because there are Christians who don't take the Bible seriously enough.

St Basil, a Doctor of the Church and the founder of the first religious monasteries, would not have understood a distinction between living a Christian life and living according to the words of the Gospel. In fact, he wrote a little booklet on Christian living which consists of 573 quotations from the New Testament arranged in logical order. Most passages quoted are from the Gospel: 160 from Matthew, 86 from Luke and 78 from John. Basil draws conclusions from these quotations, many of which concern accepting Scripture as the ultimate norm.

Rule 8. That we must neither doubt nor hesitate regarding the words of the Lord, but be fully persuaded that every word of God is true and possible even if nature rebel. . . That we should not rely on our own reasoning to the point of rejecting the words of the Lord; that we must be convinced that the words of the Lord are more worthy of credence than our own foolish knowledge.

Rule 9. That no-one should be remiss in learning what pertains to his duty, but should listen attentively and understand the words of the Lord and do his will.

Rule 12. That every word of the Lord ought to be received with complete assent. That we should observe everything without exception which has been handed down by the Lord through the Gospel and the Apostles.

[page 6] *Rule 17.* That, having recognised the nature of these present times from the signs revealed to us by the Scriptures, we should dispose our affairs accordingly.

Rule 26. That every word and deed should be ratified by the testimony of the Holy Scripture to confirm the good and cause shame to the wicked.

Rule 28. That we should not be readily and thoughtlessly carried away by those who make a pretence of the truth, but we should recognise each from the sign given us by the Scriptures.

Rule 44. That the yoke of Christ is sweet and his burden light unto refreshment for those who submit to it; that all things alien to the teaching of the Gospel are heavy and burdensome.

Rule 54. That it is not right for us to judge one another in matters which are permitted by the Scripture . . . That the faithful should be instructed in all the precepts of the Lord in the Gospel and also those transmitted to us through the Apostles, as well as all that are to be inferred therefrom. That, when there is a question of something not expressly commanded in Scripture, each should be

exhorted to follow the better course.

Rule 72. Concerning the hearer: those hearers who are instructed in the Scriptures should examine what is said by the teachers, receiving what is in conformity with the Scriptures and rejecting what is opposed to them; and that those who persist in teaching such doctrines should be strictly avoided. That those who possess little knowledge of the Scriptures should recognise the distinctive mark of the saints by the fruits of the Spirit, receiving those who bear this mark and avoiding those who do not.¹⁰

[page 7] For St Basil the demands of the Gospel are absolute. Following Christ means nothing else than putting the Gospel into practice. Being a religious is doing this to an extreme degree by taking the Gospel text literally. This conviction that the Gospel text is the fundamental rule for every religious was restated in Vatican II: "Since the final norm of the religious life is the following of Christ as it is put before us in the Gospel, this Gospel must be taken by all Institutes as the supreme rule".¹¹ This is an old conviction in religious life, beautifully expressed in the preface to the monastic rule of Grandmont (1076 A.D.):

There are various ways that lead towards our heavenly Father, in whose house there are many mansions as God the Son told us. We can choose between these ways, between the routes running in various directions. ... Through them one makes gradual progress "advancing from strength to strength to see the face of God in Sion." Various Fathers have recommended these ways to us in documents called the Rule of St Basil, of St Augustine, of St Benedict. But these are not the source of spiritual life; they are derived from it. They are not its root; they are only the branches. They are not the head; they are no more than hands and feet. In fact, there exists for faith and salvation only one principal set of rules from which all others derive as rivers from their source, the Holy Gospel, which God has transmitted to the Apostles and which they have faithfully proclaimed to the whole world ... In this Gospel can be found without exception all the general principles which give rise to specific commandments, as well as the special evangelical counsels which the Lord has given in view of attaining greater perfection ... If someone asks you to which religious community, which rule or which order you belong, reply that you belong to the first and principal rule of the Christian religion, namely to the Gospel, which is the source and fountain of all rules.¹²

[page 8] In our day we have to remind every Christian that the Gospel is his

¹⁰ SAINT BASIL, "THE MORALS" in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol.9, transl. M. M. WAGNER, Catholic University of America Press, Washington 1962, p. 71-215.

¹¹ "Perlectae Caritatis", no. 2; *Vatican Council II*, ed. A. FLANNERY, Fowler Wright, Tenbury Wells 1975, p. 612 (cf. CTS Do. 359).

¹² *Corp. Christ. Continuatio Mediaevalis*, vol. VIII, 65-67; J. M. P. TILLARD, "Le fondement évangélique de la vie religieuse", *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 9 (1969) 916-955, esp. p. 938-939.

principal rule of life. Promoting biblical spirituality means making people realise this; it means trying to ensure that every Christian turns again to Sacred Scripture and seek inspiration from day-to-day contact with the Word of God itself.¹³

There are pastoral consequences to realising this. Our catechetical instruction should be less content-oriented, more geared towards introducing people to a meaningful use of Scripture. Biblical formation given to seminarians and teachers should provide more than academic courses: it should also teach future priests and catechists the pastoral uses of Scripture. In the liturgy and in many forms of the apostolate the laity should be encouraged to take a more active role in interpreting Scripture and translating its message. Many approaches may need to be revised and many practical steps taken to bring about such a new biblical spirituality in the Church. But first we may need clearly to understand and recognise its principal constituents.

Elements in Biblical Spirituality

i. Experience of God

When we say that every Christian should nourish his spiritual life through immediate contact with God's Word, we do not only mean that he should regularly fill his mind with wholesome thoughts from Scripture. Reading Sacred Scripture or hearing it proclaimed in the liturgy should lead not so much to an increase in knowledge as to an experience of God's presence. The Word of God is not an intellectual textbook, a collection of dogmatic truths and moral principles. The Word of God put us in contact with God himself. It is an instrument through which we can have the genuine experience of meeting God.

[page 9]In our own day we are rediscovering the importance of "experience" in our Christian life. It is not enough to stress orthodoxy in faith and perfection in religious practice: we have to teach our Christians once more how to be sensitive to the living presence of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in our lives. We meet this living God in many aspects of our life: in the sacraments of his love, in our sharing with his brothers and sisters, in his providential guidance throughout our lives. One important way in which we meet him very closely and immediately is in the inspired Word.

It would be necessary here to develop a whole theology of our experience of God. Instead, I will just remind you of one or two passages that will suffice to show how central this truth stands out in the Gospel.

If anyone loves me, he will keep my Word,
and my Father will love him,
and we shall come to him
and make our home with him.

¹³ More about this in my book on *Communicating the Word of God*, Mayhew-McCrimmon, London 1978; Theological Publications of India, Bangalore 1978, chapter 2.

Those who do not love me do not keep my words.
 And my word is not my own:
 it is the word of the one who sent me.
 I have said these things to you
 while still with you;
 but the Advocate, the Holy Spirit,
 whom the Father will send in my name,
 will teach you everything
 and remind you of all that I have said to you
 (Jn. 14, 23-26).

In this text Jesus promises that every Christian will be able to see God at work in his spiritual life. If we listen attentively to the words of his Gospel and put them into practice, the Father and Jesus himself will make their home in us, that is, they will make their presence felt in our heart, bringing the peace, comfort, love and blessing of their presence. Compare the ^[page 10]parallel text in John 14,21: "I shall love him and make myself known to him." The words of the Gospel which Jesus has spoken were not meant for his own times only. They have a fulness of meaning that remains relevant in future eras and new circumstances. They are *living* words because, when we study them in our own century, the Holy Spirit in our hearts explains them to us and tells us how Jesus meant them to apply to our situation. To put it briefly: in texts such as these Jesus promises that when we try to live the words of his Gospel, we shall have the experience of knowing that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are speaking to us in a very direct and personal way.

Another passage from St John's Gospel makes this inner experience of God's presence an essential part of faith.

No one can come to me
 unless the Father who sent me draws him to me;
 And I will raise him to life on the last day.
 The prophet wrote, "All men will be taught by God."
 Everyone who hears the Father
 and learns from him
 comes to me.
 This does not mean that anyone has seen the Father;
 he who is from God
 is the only One who has seen the Father (Jn. 6, 44-46).

In this passage Jesus wants to explain why the Jewish leaders did not believe in him. The reason is that they failed to acknowledge that it was God (the Father) who was speaking to them in Jesus. This personal experience of knowing that God is at work is a necessary element in Christian faith. For Jesus, the "drawing" done by the Father is not only interior grace as scholastic commentators would have it, but a tangible experience of being pulled by God in his direction. In Old

Testament times only prophets had the privilege of hearing God's voice, but in the New Testament "*all* men will be taught by God." Everyone will experience this direct appeal from the ^[page 11]Father. Accepting Jesus presupposes this "hearing the Father and learning from him. "This experience of hearing God speak is not a face-to-face encounter as Jesus, the only Son, enjoyed ("seeing the Father"), yet it is a valid and direct experience of God.

This is the heart of biblical spirituality. *The person who lives from the Bible knows that he has encountered God, that he has actually heard God speak to him.* The experience may "not be as clear and outspoken at every Bible reading, at every contact with the sacred text. There are time of dryness, of academic study and human reflection. There are occasions when our soul is in darkness: we know God's Word is true, but it does not strike a spark in our heart. But every Christian who listens to the Word with devotion and desire will at least on some important occasions in his life have experienced how God addressed him in the sacred text, how he knew that the Father himself, or Jesus, or the Holy Spirit, was conveying a personal message. Regular reflection and prayer on the Bible text is fruitful because it rekindles the same experience, even if in a lesser degree, or takes place in the afterglow of the earlier experience.

An example from actual life may help us at this stage. Charles de Foucauld, the French mystic who was born in Strasbourg in 1858 and died as a missionary in North Africa in 1916, had a great influence on modern spirituality. His humility, his life of poverty, his apostolate through simple witness, have inspired many new initiatives in the Church. What many people do not realise is that Charles's convictions came from daily meditations on the Word of God, meditations which were for him a real experience of hearing God speak. Fortunately for us, Charles recorded what happened during some of these meditations.

One of the methods used by Charles for his interior prayer was the following. After reading the Scripture text with great attention, he would first ask in prayer, "What do you want to say to me, O God?" Forcing himself to silence, and listening intently to God, he would, as it were, hear God put into words ^[page 12]the message contained in the biblical text. He would write down these words as he knew God spoke them to him. Then he would make a declaration in response, "For my own part, this is what I want to tell you." After this, he would remain in God's presence in loving silence, "saying nothing else, gazing on the Beloved."¹⁴

From 1897 to 1901 Charles lived in Nazareth as a servant of the Poor Clares. He slept in a little hut in the monastery garden, did manual work and spent the rest of his time in prayer and meditation. The part of Scripture that inspired him most was the hidden life of Jesus: his manual work as a carpenter, his humility and silent service. In his notebooks of this period we find the following extracts:

O my Lord Jesus, graciously permit me to be you in this meditation. It was

¹⁴ J. F. SIX, *Spiritual Autobiography of Charles de Foucauld*, Clarke, Wheathampstead 1964, p.50.

you who said: "The servant is not above his master," and in doing so you commanded me not to be higher than you in the eyes of men, as far as my life in this world is concerned. How ought I to practice this lowliness? (Jesus answers:) "Be taken for what I was taken for, my child, unlearned, poor, of lowly birth; also for what you really are: unintelligent, untalented and ungifted. Always look for the meanest tasks, but cultivate your mind as far as your director allows. But do it secretly. Do not let the world know. I was infinitely wise, but no one knew it. Do not be afraid to study; it is good for your soul. Study zealously to become better, to know me and love me better, to know my will and do it more perfectly, and also to become more like me, who am perfect knowledge. Be very unlearned in the eyes of men, and very learned in the knowledge of God at the foot of my tabernacle. I was lowly and despised beyond all measure. Seek out, ask for and love those occupations that will humiliate you: piling dung, digging, whatever is lowest and most uncouth. The less important you are in this way, the more like me you will be. If you are thought a fool, so much the better. Give infinite thanks for it to me. They treated me as a madman --- it is one of the ways I offer you of being like me."¹⁵

[page 13] Charles de Foucauld heard God speak to him through Sacred Scripture. He could write: "I think I see my God clearly. Give me full enlightenment, O God, so that I may act in the certain knowledge of doing your will, for this is the food by which I long to live always."¹⁶ He also knew periods of darkness and confusion. "God sometimes allows us to be in such profound darkness that not a single star shines in our skies."¹⁷ This is the ordinary experience of the believing Christian. He has heard God speak, he continues on his journey even in times of discouragement and desolation.

Charles was also a man of action. He went to North Africa because he was concerned about the fate of the people living there.

Next to nothing is being done for the native peoples of our Algeria; for the most part our civilians are seeking only to enlarge the wants of the local population, so as to make bigger profits from them. The military administer them by letting them go their own way, without seriously trying to help them ... The Europeans know nothing of the people's problems, and see them always as foreigners and most of the time as enemies ... In the Sudan, in the colonies in Negro territory, it is even much worse! I have not seen them, but I am close enough here to the Sudan for echoes of what goes on there to reach me. It is clear from the main lines of the stories I hear from those parts that too many there seek only to serve their own low personal interests, and often do not hesitate over the means. Thus in this vast colonial empire,

¹⁵ J. F. SIX, op. cit., p. 65-67.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 19.

acquired within the space of a few years, an empire which could be a source of so many blessings for these nations, there is nothing but cupidity and violence, without any concern for the people's good.¹⁸

But Charles always remembered that his involvement, his concern, his life for the people would be meaningless without his personal contact with the Father.

My God, here I am at your feet in my cell. It is night, everything is quiet, everything is sleeping. At this moment [page 14]I am perhaps the only one in Nazareth at your feet. What have I done to deserve such graces? How I thank you and how happy I am! I adore you from the depth of my heart, my God. I adore you with all my soul, and love you with all the strength that is in my heart. I am yours, yours alone. My whole being is yours. It is yours in any case, whatever I might think, and yours by choice, the free choice of my whole heart. Do with me as seems pleasing to you. "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect," is your reply to me. Very well, O God, make me carry it out as perfectly as is possible, in you, through you and for you. Amen.

What was the manner of your public life, my Lord Jesus? (Jesus speaks:) "I strove to save men through speech and works of mercy, instead of being satisfied to save them by prayer and penance alone as I had been doing at Nazareth. My zeal for souls became externally apparent. Yet while my life became very public, it still preserved some of the qualities of the solitary life. I often withdrew for the night, or for several whole days in solitude to pray. It remained a life of prayer, penance and interior recollection. And apart from the time devoted to preaching the Gospel, it was a life of solitude."¹⁹

Without an experience of God, our apostolate remains sterile. Our life of faith, hope and charity must be lit up by knowing and observing that the Father draws us, that he speaks to us and teaches us, that he explains everything Jesus had said through his Spirit.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 175-176.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 87.

ii. Searching the Scriptures

Revelation is God's initiative. God is the first to speak. But unless we are open, unless we receive his words with readiness and listen attentively, the Word of God will not bear fruit. It is not God who limits the effectiveness of his Word by dispensing graces in smaller or larger measures; it is we who restrict its fruitfulness by offering a barren soil. We do not ^[page 15]receive more because we desire so little. We do not experience God more often because we do not ask for it in prayer.

The French-speaking workshop of the 1974 Synod of Bishops pointed out that prayer and the reading of Scripture should go hand in hand. How could we hope to make progress without the Holy Spirit who alone "searches the deep things of God"?

Our Synod should draw the attention of all those engaged in evangelisation or preparing themselves for the ministry of the Gospel to the indispensable role of prayer, because it is in prayer that we receive, in the Spirit, a certain experience of God ... Only those who pray and read the Scriptures in the glow of the Spirit are capable of discovering the presence and action of God in the lives of men and in the events of history. If this docility to the Spirit be truly lived, the Spirit will be able to achieve a much more efficacious discernment of spirits.²⁰

In practical terms this means that much depends on the attitude with which we approach the reading of Scripture. There is a great difference between an approach to Scripture for the sake of study, or of finding arguments in it to refute opponents, and an approach that sees in Scripture the answers to our actual needs. *To hear God speak we must, so to speak, read Scripture on our knees, listening to the sacred words as a child listens to the words of his father.* We ought to hear the words of Scripture with awe and expectation, with intense longing that they may make us understand God's will for us.

Some people have a very casual attitude towards Scripture. They pay attention to various passages of Scripture as they come to them in the course of the week like the readings at Mass or quotations encountered in spiritual books. I know people who open the Bible at random when called upon to choose a passage: a hangover from the old practice of sticking a knife into the pages! Their justification seems to be that God can speak through any part of his sacred Word. It is better for me to take what comes along than waste time in making a personal selection.

^[page 16]There is some truth in this contention. We should of course listen to Scripture passages as we come across them in the course of liturgy or other

²⁰ Quoted by S. GRANT in "Reflections on a Spirituality for a Ministry of Christian Reincarnation in a Hindu Context", *Mission Spirituality*. ed. C. SRAMBICAL, Sat Prachar, Indore 1976, p. 130.

activities. At times, God can speak to us powerfully through texts we would not have selected ourselves. But, on the other hand, such an attitude may also spring from the lack of a deeply felt personal need. What is missing is any longing, any personal search, any awareness that God can satisfy our personal needs.

So he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day as he regularly did. He stood up to read the lesson and was handed the scroll of the prophet *Isaiah*. He opened the scroll and *sought* the passage which says,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
because he has anointed me.

He has sent me to announce good news to the poor,
to proclaim release for prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind;
to let the broken victims go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and all eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him. (Lk 4, 18-20)

The "*heuren*" of verse 17 does not mean "he found," but "he sought till he found", something many commentators and translators have overlooked. The text which Jesus read, Isaiah 61, 1-2, is so central to Jesus' teaching (and to the themes of St Luke's Gospel) that it is unacceptable to ascribe its selection to coincidence. No, when Jesus was handed the Isaian scroll, he deliberately searched for this passage. This must have taken, some time. If we remember that the scroll was probably thirty feet long and that it had to be unwound from the left spindle on to the right one, that Isaiah 61 is almost at the end of the book, and that in Jesus' time the text had not been subdivided into chapters, verses, or paragraphs, we may well imagine that it took Jesus some minutes before he located the text he ^[page 17]wanted! Small wonder that Luke remarks, "All eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him." Jesus wanted this text and no other, because in his search of the Scriptures he had identified this text as central to his message.

An analysis of Jesus' teaching confirms that he had prepared himself for his mission by searching out key passages from the Old Testament. To stay with our example, the "year of the Lord's favour" spoken of in Isaiah 61,1-2 is a messianic application of the "year of release" prescribed in Deuteronomy 15,1-11. Jesus' preaching is permeated with these Old Testament texts. The injunction that we should always be ready to give whenever someone asks (Dt 15,10) is incorporated into the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5,42; Lk 6,30). In the episode of the woman who anointed his feet (Mt 26,11), Jesus quoted Dt 15, 11 literally: "The poor you will always have in the land." Jesus saw the kingdom of heaven as the proclamation of God's forgiveness of sins, because "the Lord's release has been proclaimed" (Dt 15,1-2; Is 61,1-2; Lk4,18-19). Just as in the law of release Jews were required to forgive debts because God had forgiven them (Dt 15,2), so

the forgiveness of our neighbour in the kingdom of heaven is linked to God's forgiveness of our sins (Mt 6,12-15; 18,21-35). From all this we can see that Jesus searched the Old Testament, that he was struck by some passages more than by others, that he reflected on them and integrated them into his own teaching. This is what Jesus meant by "searching the Scriptures". For Jesus, too, this must have been a deeply religious experience, a realisation that words such as those found in Isaiah 61,1-2 were spoken to him in a special manner.

The example of Jesus may frighten us or seem outside our reach. So it may be useful to show how others, limited like ourselves, "searched the Scriptures". I think here especially of Thérèse of Lisieux, the simple girl who left an example to us, not by great worldly achievements or by martyrdom, but by an extraordinarily intense spiritual life. When she died in 1897 she was twenty-four years old, having been a religious sister for only nine years. Yet her ideal of spiritual childhood was to attract ^[page 18]many to religious life and sanctity. It is instructive to note that this ideal was the outcome of a spiritual need she felt and the answer she received from Scripture.

Thérèse had a great respect for Scripture and often turned to it to find inspiration and enlightenment.

I draw from this rich treasury opened to us by Jesus in his holy Gospel. I dig deeply into these adorable words and can truly say with David: I run in the path of your commandments because you have enlarged my heart.²¹ Sometimes when I read books in which perfection is put before us with the goal obstructed by a thousand obstacles, my poor little head is quickly fatigued. I close the learned treatise which tires my brain and dries up my heart, and I turn to the Sacred Scriptures. Then all becomes clear and full of light ...²²

Thérèse's main insight was the recognition that sanctity does not lie in our human efforts and successes, but in allowing God to do his work in us. This was her way of "spiritual childhood". "To remain small means to acknowledge one's own nothingness, to expect all from the Good Lord as a small child expects all from his father, not to be worried about anything." Thérèse left on record how she came to this important insight. The picture she draws is a classical example of searching the Scriptures for an answer to an experienced need.

I told myself: "God would not inspire me to have desires that cannot be realised. Therefore it must be possible for me to aspire to holiness in spite of my own insignificance, in spite of my smallness. I cannot possibly make myself greater than I am. I have to accept myself as I am, with all my imperfections.

"But I am looking for a means to go to heaven by a short cut, by a

²¹ Quoted in G. M. GARRONE, *Ce que Croyait Thérèse de Lisieux*, Mâme 1968, p.19.

²² From a letter to a missionary brother; P. LIAGRE, *A Retreat with St. Thérèse*, Gill, Dublin 1959, p. 10.

quick, straight and simple route. After all, we live in an age of inventions. In our days there is no longer need to go laboriously climbing up every staircase, rich people [page 19]go up so much more easily in a lift. I would also like to find a lift that could carry me up to Jesus. I am too weak and small to climb the steep ladder of perfection.”

Then I began to look in the Sacred Scriptures to see if I could find a trace of such a lift as I wanted. And I came across these words that proceeded from the mouth of Eternal Wisdom: “If anyone is truly small, let him come to me.” I responded to that invitation. I came close to him, thinking that I had found what I was looking for and anxious to know what you, O my God, would do for this small person who had accepted your invitation.

I continued my search in the Scriptures and see what I came up with:

As a mother caresses her child
so I will comfort you.

I will press you against my breast
I will carry you in my arms.²³

Oh, there have never been words that gave me so much joy, words so loving and tender! The lift that is to raise me up to heaven is your arms, O Jesus. There is no need for me to become great. On the contrary, I will have to remain small, yes, to become smaller all the time! O my God, you have surpassed my expectations. I will always sing your mercies!²⁴

In another passage of her autobiography, Therese refers to the same Bible texts, saying explicitly that it was Jesus himself who revealed his answer to her in this way.

Jesus has been good enough to show me the only road that leads to this divine furnace. This road consists in the surrender of the small child who without fear falls asleep in the arms of his father. “If anyone is really small, let him come to me”, are the words of the Holy Spirit spoken through Solomon. And the same Spirit of love has said in another text that mercy is given to the small. And in his name the prophet Isaiah reveals to us that on the last day the Lord will lead his flock to good pastures and that he [page 20]will gather the small lambs and press them to his bosom. And as if all these proofs were not sufficient, the same prophet, whose inspired vision penetrated the depths of eternity, cried out in the name of the Lord: “As a mother caresses her child, so I will comfort you; I will carry you at my breast and hold you on my knees.” After hearing such words, all one can do is to reply in silence, weeping with gratitude and love ...²⁵

²³ Free rendering of Isaiah 66, 12-13.

²⁴ Quoted in G. M. GARRONE, op. cit., p. 19-20.

²⁵ *ibid.* For another example of how “biblical” Thérèse’s spirituality was, see *Communicating the Word of God*, ch. 12.

It would seem that, with regard to the Scriptures, Jesus' general admonition holds good: "Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Lk 11,9). God will certainly speak to us, but he expects us to ask, to seek, and to knock.

iii. Witness of the Spirit

Although the Word of God addresses itself to each person specifically and so requires a personal response, it should not be thought that Scripture reveals God to us only in solitude or that it can do so without the fellowship of the church. The opposite is true. The Bible comes to us through the Church, through the witness of other persons who share their faith with us, through our communion with the other disciples who believe in Christ.

The angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, "Be ready to set out at noon along the road that goes from Jerusalem down to Gaza, the desert road." So he set off on his journey. Now it happened that an Ethiopian had been on pilgrimage to Jerusalem; he was a eunuch and an officer at the court of the Kandake or Queen of Ethiopia, and was in fact her chief treasurer. He was now on his way home; and as he sat in his chariot he was reading the prophet Isaiah. The Spirit said to Philip; "Go up and meet that [page 21]chariot." When Philip ran up, he heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" "How can I," he replied, "unless I have someone to guide me?" So he invited Philip to get in and sit by his side. Now the passage of Scripture he was reading was this:

Like a sheep that is led to the slaughter-house
like a lamb that is dumb in front of its shearers
like these he never opens his mouth.

He has been humiliated and has no one to defend him.
Who will ever talk about his descendants,
since his life on earth has been cut short!

The eunuch turned to Philip and said, "Tell me, is the prophet referring to himself or someone else?" Starting, therefore, with this text of Scripture Philip proceeded to explain the Good News of Jesus to him.

(Acts 8, 26-35).

The passage has a powerful lesson for us. Although the Ethiopian is anxiously reading the Bible, he cannot understand its meaning without the ministry of the deacon Philip. Philip is sent by the Holy Spirit to disclose its message for him. The charism, the experience, the insight and human testimony of Philip were required to unlock the sense of Scripture.

Scripture does not reach us as an isolated piece of work, floating down from the Almighty as a form of private correspondence. *Scripture comes to us through the Church. It is officially proclaimed in the liturgy. It is explained to us in*

preaching and instruction. It is illustrated for us by the example of the saints and the traditions handed down through the centuries. It is made relevant through the interpretation given by our brothers and sisters who, like ourselves, are searching for its meaning.

There are many ways in which we can listen to the Scriptures in the context of the Church. We can pay special attention to the passages read out to us at Mass. We can focus on those recommended for our reading in the divine office. We [page 22]can read what theologians or spiritual writers remark about various Scripture texts. We can share our reflections about the Bible in a prayer group in which we widen our hearts so that we can learn to understand the Scriptures in the way the Spirit teaches us through others. Being sensitive to this wider context of hearing the message is no luxury; it is essential if we want to receive the fulness of God's Word.

Let the message of Christ, in all its richness, find a home with you. Teach each other, and advise each other, in all wisdom. With gratitude in your hearts sing psalms and hymns and inspired songs to God. (Col 3, 16).

St Bridget, Queen of Sweden, who lived in the fourteenth century, was an active woman, mother of nine children. She travelled widely and gave advice to popes, bishops and rulers. In her own day she was one of the most experienced and capable women of Europe. She contributed much to the spiritual reform of the Church. This devout and great saint absorbed Sacred Scripture through the teaching of a priest called Master Matthias.

Matthias translated important parts of Scripture for her into Swedish, a translation that was interspersed with commentary. This translation of the first lines of Genesis, for instance, reads as follows:

In the beginning God created heaven and earth, not of himself as the Father begot the Son, nor of another matter as a smith makes an axe. The earth was then still void, empty and dark; void, because nothing grew upon it; empty, because neither man nor beast had been created; dark, because there was neither sun nor stars.²⁶

Matthias and Bridget studied Scripture together, trying to find convincing answers to the heresies of their times and solutions to the pastoral problems of the Church. Matthias was a learned man, but was often assailed by doubts. Once he was so discouraged he imagined he saw all the heretics [page 23]standing before him, saying as with one mouth: "You are wrong. We have the truth!" Bridget helped him by her prayers and faith. Matthias on his part built up Bridget's convictions through his knowledge and sincere devotion. It was to Matthias that she owed her knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. It was he who introduced her to her spiritual

²⁶ J. JORGENSEN, *St Bridget of Sweden*, Longmans Green, London 1954, p. 56-57.

contemporaries. It was he who stimulated her to an apostolate that would reach beyond the borders of Sweden. Bridget was to be God's chosen instrument for reform; but it was the priest Matthias who had helped her to meet Jesus in the Scriptures.²⁷

iv. Transformation of Life

While the experience of hearing God speak is vitally important, it happens in vain if it does not effect change in our life. *The ultimate test of biblical spirituality does not lie in a subjective conviction, in the knowledge that God speaks to us, but in the fruits it produces in our attitudes and conduct.* A tree should be judged by its fruit (Mt 7,16-20). Of the two sons it was not the one who said "Yes" to his father, but the one who actually went and worked in the vineyard that satisfied him (Mt 21, 28-32). It is not those who call "Lord, Lord" who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who actually do the will of the Father (Mt 7,21).

It is sad, but true, that in our human weakness we can even use our reflection on Scripture as an escape from putting God's Word into effect. Our prolonged searching in the sacred texts, our endless meditations and prayers, may actually be a ruse by which we delay a much needed conversion. Words and thoughts, even if they are about sacred objects, can be a smoke-screen behind which we hide our reluctance to face up to the implications of the Gospel.

I find that St Francis of Assisi can be our teacher in this regard. We all know Francis's early history: how he was [page 24]converted, how he was struck by the plight of the poor, how he had been expelled from his father's house and how he was going about trying to find a purpose in life. Then, on 24th February 1209, the Feast of the Apostle St Matthias, he heard this text read at Mass:

As you go, proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is close at hand. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out devils.

You received without charge, give without charge.

Provide yourselves with no gold or silver, not even with a few coppers for your purses, with no haversack for the journey or spare tunic or footwear or staff, for the workman deserves his keep. (Mt 10, 7-13).

These words made a deep impression on Francis. In a flash he understood that God was holding out a pattern of life to him and that he should follow it literally. Later on, he referred to this experience with the words: "The Highest one himself revealed to me that I should live in accordance with the holy Gospel." Francis immediately responded to this insight. He said to himself: "This is what I want. This is what I want to follow in my life with all my soul!" When he left the church, he took off his shoes, threw away his staff and cast off his outer garment.

²⁷ ibid.

Francis had found his rule of life.²⁸

When in later years Francis drew up norms of conduct for his followers, he always insisted that these amounted to nothing but a literal execution of the words of the Gospel. His earliest rule, the *Regula Non Bullata*, was little more than a string of quotations taken from the sacred text. And all through his life Francis lived up to this ideal. Certainly, no one could claim that Francis did not take the Bible seriously!

Against this background, two incidents in the life of Francis concerning Scripture stand out in sharp relief. To understand the first happening, we have to know that in the thirteenth century, copies of the Bible were costly documents and that, in order to protect such important property, monks in monasteries were often made to promise on oath never to sell [page 25] books of the community for the sake of the poor. Thomas of Celano narrates the following:

One day the mother of two Brothers came to the saint and, full of confidence in him, asked for an alms. The saint felt sorry for her and said to his vicar, Brother Peter Cathanii: "Can we give our mother any alms?" For he always regarded the mother of one of the Brothers as his own mother and as the mother of all the Brothers. Brother Peter answered: "In the house there is nothing left that we could give her. But we have a copy of the New Testament from which we read the lessons at Matins, because we do not possess a breviary." Then, St Francis ordered him: "Give the New Testament to our mother! Let her sell it and so satisfy her needs. For this book itself instructs us to help the poor. I believe God will be more pleased if we give it away than if we read from it." In this way, the first copy of the New Testament that was available in the Order was given away in a spirit of charity.²⁹

On another occasion, Francis was ill. One of his companions wanted to console him by reading to him from Sacred Scripture. But Francis answered: "It is good to search for the Lord in the Sacred Scriptures. But as far as I am concerned, I have read them sufficiently. I only need to digest them interiorly, that is sufficient for me, because I know the poor and crucified Christ."³⁰

The lives of saints are supposed to be full of *admiranda, non imitanda* (things we should admire but not imitate). Yet I am sure that there is much that needs to be imitated in this attitude of St Francis. Francis could afford to give his New Testament away and abstain from hearing the Bible read to him, because he had integrated the words of Christ into his life. "Sometimes he read the Sacred Books. Whatever he had spiritually comprehended, he wrote indelibly in his heart. For

²⁸ J. JORGENSEN, *St Francis of Assisi*, Image Book, New York 1955 (1st ed 1911), p. 57.

²⁹ THOMAS von CELANO, *Leben und Wunder des heiligen Franziskus von Assisi*, ed. Werl 1962; II, c. 58; quoted in W. EGGGER, "Den Herrn in den Schriften Suchen", *Bibel und Kirche* 4 (1976) 122-125; here p. 122.

³⁰ THOMAS von CELANO, op. cit., II, ch. 71.

him, memory took the place of books. For whatever he had once heard with his ears, could not be in vain because with love and dedication he kept thinking about it.”³¹ In other words: what [page 26] used to be a text in Scripture became part of Francis himself. He could forget about the written text because the message remained anchored in his life.

Conclusion

Having outlined what seems to me the four main elements in biblical spirituality, I will now try to piece them together. I realise that, in doing so, I am laying myself open to criticism. Others will no doubt point out lacunae or disagree with the emphasis laid on particular aspects. I am sure that their criticism will be justified. But by offering a description I hope to make biblical spirituality a tangible reality and to make it possible for a meaningful discussion to emerge.

The question I am asking myself is: How would I recognise a person whose spirituality is biblical? What would such a person’s spiritual attitudes look like? Although in my sketch I will refer to a man, the same description would obviously also apply to women.

He is interested in Scripture, has great reverence for its actual words and is always keen to learn more about it. He will set time aside for reading it. From time to time he will search through the text when, in prayer, work or relationships with others, he has become aware of an actual question that needs to be answered.

He realises that the Word of God does not stand isolated from the present day or from the world in which he lives. He knows that God has a message for him that is relevant to his own life. He approaches the Bible for guidance on basic principles; not to find the solution to specific problems which he knows should be solved by his own creative responsibility, but to receive motivation and inspiration.

[page 27] Because the Bible is a *living* Word, the Word of God in the Church, he avails himself of every opportunity to listen to the witness of the Spirit. During the readings at Mass and during the sermon he consciously opens his heart to benefit from the word of instruction. He is happy when he has a chance to speak with others about their searchings and insights. He listens to them and learns from them. Above all, in all his dealings with Scripture, he is sensitive to the presence of God. He prepares himself for this encounter by recollecting in silence, by cultivating an attitude of listening and by the frequent prayer of desire. He treasures the moments when he knows God is directly speaking to himself, whether this happens in solitude, in a liturgical gathering or in a circle of friends.

His respect for God’s Word also makes him humble and somewhat uncertain of himself. He knows that the Word demands obedience and commitment,

³¹ *ibid.*, II, ch. 68.

that the Gospel should be integrated in his values and attitudes, that to be true to himself he will have to shape his life in harmony with the Word. This is his constant endeavour. "Lord, help me to live according to your will" is a frequent prayer on his lips.

Finally, in spite of his doubts and shortcomings, he feels a great joy and a profound peace of mind. He is immensely grateful to God for having called him by name and by revealing himself. He looks forward to the full communion with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in heaven --- a heaven which he knows will transcend all his expectations. The Word of God fills him with hope and consolation.

Does the above description do justice to biblical spirituality? Probably not, because, apart from everything else, there are large areas of reality that cannot be adequately expressed; each person has a unique relationship to God. When God speaks to a human person we are dealing with a mystery. The reality of who God is, the working of the Spirit in the human heart, the movements that draw a person towards God, are [page 28]beyond the limits of description. While using the description for practical purposes, we shall have to keep the dimension of the personal, the unique, the unlimited in mind.

Now I am revealing new things to you,
things hidden and unknown to you,
created just now, this very moment;
of these things you have heard nothing until now,
so that you cannot say,
"O yes, I knew all this." (Is. 48, 6b-7)