

Leadership in Religious Life (Part 2)

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Abstract

Good religious leadership in its essence is contemplative because it becomes skilled at “seeing” how God “works” in people. Superiors should not merely give guidance to the observable and “organizable” exterior structures of the religious community but should acquire the ability to see things that are invisible and undoable because they lie totally outside of our reach and do not fit within the boundaries of our human logic. Good religious leadership liberates persons and gives them access to their own deepest levels, that is, the divine realms. Religious leadership should not confine itself to issues of organization and management, but should bear responsibility for the subtle and invisible processes through which the religious entrusted to their care are transformed in God.

Context

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

Conversely, spirituality is not only influenced by its context but also creates this context. It does so because intense experiences of encounter with God and the values which flow from these experiences are expressed in behaviours and institutions, in culture and language, as well as in a style of living. Spirituality is neither an ideology nor an abstraction, for as lived spirituality it is always incarnated. It is never available by itself. In spirituality we give shape to our relation to God as we live it in the structures of our visible and tangible world. It brings this relation into the light of day, so creating the possibility of sharing it with others through a process of communication. This explains why this living tri-polar dialogue is always staged within an already pre-existent spirituality which is handed down from within the culture, from earlier generations, or an earlier phase of the life of this particular person. Once formulated, the spiritual model can accompany others on their spiritual journey, so that they can begin to discover it as a form which at a very deep level is already theirs. In spirituality they recognize their own basic nature, the experiences of their own past and their own environment, but in their spirituality they also begin, with longing, to journey toward a future which they then receive as a gift.

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

Precisely because the adaptation of spirituality to the context of the world in which we live leads to divergent and mutually contradictory interpretations, it is part of the task of the religious leadership to give responsible guidance to the process of "resourcement": the retrieval and recontextualization of founding documents. Not only must

spirituality be continually adapted to changing situations, other cultures and societies, after all, but these changes in turn prompt us to think again through one's own tradition of religious form-bestowal. It is easier, on the basis of new ideas, to start a new order or congregation (and in the past this is what often happened) than to track down the initial inspiration and to give it fresh chances in the present. The latter is frequently done in inadequate ways because in the case of active congregations their uniqueness was located more in activities and tasks than in the awareness of their divine origin and vocation; more in customs and schedules than in the conscious living out of their own charism and spirituality. In the formation of members, those responsible for it tended to confine themselves more to common Christian spirituality and the spirituality of monastic vows than that they got around to reflection on their own charism. In the case of many congregations their members primarily lived out their spirituality with their hands and on their feet. It was not something they talked about; people simply did it and did it as something very obvious. Few religious in fact occupied themselves with the verbalization of their own spirituality. This was largely left to outsiders who were called in to help for this very purpose. In the crisis of the last several decades, moreover, frustrations from the past were so dominant that many felt relieved to leave certain things behind them. Because, generally speaking, there is inadequate knowledge of one's own tradition and because the original inspiration was handed down in a distorted form, misunderstandings and prejudices stand in the way of picking up the thread again in a creative manner. Because nowadays (at least in some countries) we might notice an aversion to rules, both the basic and the secondary rules, we cannot imagine that the first rules and constitutions can be an important source for the retrieval and renewal of spirituality (see Waaijman, 1999). These kind of texts, therefore, usually remain unknown and inaccessible because they seem unattractive and not very inspiring. But who will attend to this tradition if the religious leadership doesn't? In most cases it is not enough to hand over these texts to historians and archivists for conservation. This only means that one's spiritual legacy is kept as a "trial" for later generations when the order or congregation has disappeared from the scene. Why should we take pains to preserve a spiritual legacy if no one lives out of it anymore? Is spirituality no more than an artifact in a culture-historical museum for which a historian, functioning as conservator, is responsible? The "resourcement" of one's own spirituality is absolutely necessary if for no other reason than to do justice to the countless older religious who have, in a very authentic way, lived out of their vocation. The

religious leadership is not just responsible for the physical care of these older members but must also take steps to ensure that in the final phase of life these religious get a chance to experience the new situation in the light of *their* spirituality.

Transformation

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

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

It is important for spirituality always to present itself as a beckoning perspective which sets religious in motion and toward which they

are journeying. The form of spirituality which we bring about with some degree of success in our life is only a provisional attempt at giving expression to the implications of our divine vocation. In the actual encounter with God this form will always be “annihilated” and “unformed” in order that, in a process of “transformation,” (Waaajman, 1998) we may grow toward the “form” of God which manifests itself in us as “non-form.” However good and spiritual we may be, we never coincide with our own spirituality. We never “have” a spirituality for we only tread the path of an approach to God. The same is true for an order or congregation, for historical continuity is no guarantee for the *living* of spirituality. A person may formally and in all legitimacy belong to an order or congregation and still remain a stranger to the spiritual experience of its charism. Neither membership nor profession guarantee a *lived* spirituality, for nothing can take the place of the concrete spiritual journey of the individual religious. A beautiful book about, and a clear formulation of, the charism is insufficient. Furthermore, what does it mean that, on the basis of an analysis of texts and testimonies, experts arrive at a formulation of this spirituality, if individual religious or actual provinces have ceased years ago to give hands and feet to this spirituality or are, only, by trial and error and by complicated detours, on their way to it. One can indeed speak, for example, of a Franciscan spirituality but no one “has” it. Spirituality is realized as a spiritual journey, that is, as a road which is ever traveled anew in an “unknown country.” Spirituality has to happen, has to be realized. Spirituality is this (always new and unknown) road we travel and can never be safely stored in a bookcase. Because the Unconditional challenges us and asserts an inescapable claim on us, spirituality is always a journey from form to form, an ongoing process that is realized in the field of tension between an old expression of it and a new expression of it, between a human possibility and a divine reality. In that sense spirituality is always self-transcendence. This inevitably ends in the mystical “annihilation” in which we are clothed, in emptiness, silence, and wilderness, with the “form” of God’s unconditional love. In that way the Unconditional traces a line of unconditional living that continues to impact our actual life and conduct, in the way we look at reality, the way we think and love others, the way we labor for a cause and work at this world.

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

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

Religious Leadership Demands Spirituality

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

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

perceptible forms and relations are inadequate. They do not create a lived spirituality, for the encounter with the divine breaks through every human framework and can never be conceived or planned in advance.

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

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

authenticity for itself and accuses the others of unfaithfulness or a failure to engage the needs of the day.

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

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

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

upon this encounter as an ongoing transformation within the concrete context of their life. In that case, the encounter with God is “used” for sanctification as a human project but not lived in prosperity and adversity, in pain and joy, in the concreteness of the encounter with an ever-changing “otherness” (Blommestijn, 1992).

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

You will Be Without Law but Not Without Me

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

This pronouncement: “You will be without law but not without me” is much more than a negation of the old law. It is meant as an aid to consciences that will not submit. It lays down a principle of absolute and permanent contradiction vis-à-vis every law and external obligation which is aimed at oppressing us and keeping us from being what God wants us to be. By pronouncing these words a higher court of justice is called into being which makes a mockery of human courts of justice. Introduced here is the right of noncompliance every time the judgment of the tribunals of this earth is at odds with the principles established by God. In this pronouncement we find that, for the first time in the history of humankind, distrust is introduced with respect

to power and to the institutions through which this power is exerted. This is the basis of the idea that the law can be unjust and that the state itself, though often experienced as a kind of sacred entity, can be lacking in this sanctity (Pomilio, 1986:89).

The human exercise of power, however much it may be aimed at an ideal society, can never be identified with the will of God. In Christ humans are freed from the law, as Paul says (Rom 7:6). Peter, accordingly, reminds people of another unrecorded saying of Jesus:

Blessed are they who are free with respect to the law, and woe to those who are only good in terms of the law.
(Pomilio, 1986:90)

The fifth evangelist opposes this Christian liberty to Hegel's view concerning "the ethical state":

The state which presents itself as absolute or as God, which, by attaining the identity of political power with ethical values, makes humans conscious of their being and purpose. This, therefore, must be obeyed as the so-called universal good. (Pomilio, 1986:93)

The law, the state, the mother/fatherland, the social order, though important human values, never possess an absolute value, for they are subject to God. No human being, accordingly, may ever demand absolute obedience from another human being, not even in the name of God. The law can never exist by itself but must refer to God who transcends it. Freedom of conscience has to do with this tension between God himself, the absolute, and all relative human symbols and forms. When the game becomes serious, and Pilate wants to arrest the fifth evangelist as subversive and dangerous, the latter replies:

The Christian always has two kinds of fatherland. He refuses to give to the emperor what is God's, rules out that the state is master over one's conscience, and only recognizes God as absolute. The idea of the precedence of conscience over law, of the will of God over the will of the state, is an axiom, a kind of dogma, to the Christian.
(Pomilio, 1986:94)

God Escapes Every Human Framework

In the Church and the religious life as well obedience has always been regarded as an important value. On the one hand, it is the basis of the community which without it would fall apart into a number of

individuals who would believe and act as they pleased (Blommestijn & Huls, 1998). On the other, it is much more a spiritual than a social principle in which people inwardly attune their life to the gospel and interiorize it. Also on the level of religion and the Church law and conscience may clash because God alone is absolute. Here too the rule applies: *You will be without law but not without me*. Laws and the exercise of authority are always human forms. However much they may be the reflection of God's will and therefore have a divine character, they belong to created reality, a reality infinitely transcended by the Creator. In Christianity this tension is essentially insoluble. Incarnation and transcendence simply belong together, like the creature and the Creator, without ever coinciding. The conscience, accordingly, can never be reduced to laws. The conscience learns to know the will of God in an immediate encounter. This creative moment can never be fully laid down in subsequent and necessary objectivizations and institutionalizations. God escapes every framework, though he gives this framework to us as guideline.

The Original Orientation to God

Human life, according to mystics, is naturally "good" when it remains faithful to its original focus on God. The danger exists, however, that it curves back upon itself and in self-will becomes its own end. When that happens we lose the simplicity of our originally divine life and wander about, lost in the multiplicity of limited human needs and desires. As a result our life becomes fragmented and ambiguous. Human limitation prompts us to focus on the "minor interest" which forces itself upon us. This shortsightedness necessarily makes us opportunistic. Instead of "receptively reaching out toward the future as God's gift, we try frenetically to cling to the life we have already received. A risk-filled life is exchanged for "a safe form of survival." By curving back upon ourselves we lose the overall vision of a life oriented to God as our goal. We allow ourselves to be led by fear, caution, and calculation. In this connection we need not immediately think of sinfulness in the traditional sense of the word, but this orientation to the shallow self quickly becomes a turning away from our deepest self and, thus, from God. This truth was concisely formulated by the Liège mystic William of Saint-Thierry (ca. 1085-1148) as follows:

This [natural] state turned away from God becomes folly when it is excessively turned back upon itself and so wild that it will not or cannot be governed. (William of Saint-Thierry, *Epistola ad fratres de Monte-Dei* 48)¹

However, turned to God this natural state becomes “holy simplicity,” that is, this will remains constant in its attachment to the same object, as was the case with Job who was “a simple, upright, and God-fearing man.” “For, properly speaking, simplicity is a will that is wholly turned toward God, seeking one thing from the Lord with all earnestness without any desire to disperse its energies in the world.” (William of Saint-Thierry, *Epistola ad fratres de Monte-Dei* 48-49)

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

Without orientation to God, things are actually no different. It is neither absent nor corrupt. William of Saint-Thierry puts it plainly: this orientation requires formation.

Simplicity is the will fixed on God alone: . . . Simplicity then possesses in itself some beginning of God’s creation, that is, a simple and good will, the shapeless material, as it were, of what will be a good man, and at the outset of its conversion it offers this to its maker to be formed. For since together with good will it already has a beginning of wisdom, that is the fear of the Lord, from it, it learns that it cannot be formed by itself and that nothing is so advantageous for a fool as to serve a wise man. (William of Saint-Thierry, *Epistola ad fratres de Monte-Dei* 49-50)

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

Growth toward Spiritual Maturity

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

Accordingly it [the simple and good will] submits to a man for God's sake, entrusting to him its good will to be formed in God, in the feelings and the spirit of humility. Already the fear of God is beginning to develop all the plenitude of the virtues: justice, because it defers to a superior; prudence, because it does not trust in itself; temperance, because it refrains from deciding for itself; fortitude, because it submits itself wholly to obedience, concerned not to judge but only to do what it is bidden. (William of Saint-Thierry, *Epistola ad fratres de Monte-Dei* 51)

In obedience we submit to the authority of another person, but never to the other's arbitrariness and lust for power. It is not submission to another person as such. The perspective of "obedience" here is clearly "to be formed in God," that is, to be cast in the form of God's existence. When we are transformed in God, God's form becomes the form of our life, our whole way of being. What must first grow in us is the consciousness of God's form. We must begin to understand this manner of existence from the inside. In this process the other person must help us. The other person may never impose his own form on us, however good it may be. This form is always a human formation and hence a created reality. In the formation process our human form must be attuned to the divine "original," the basic form of our existence with which we can never completely coincide. By becoming conscious, with our intellect, of this basic form, our life is concentrated on it. A "wise

person," one in whom this consciousness has already become a reality, can help us discover our own divine form. This person temporarily compensates for our lack of insight in order that by our formation we ourselves may grasp the "science" of it (conscience). The clay that is destined to become a dish needs the slight force of the potter's hands to find this form. The person whose task it is to form another person cannot callously claim to be the inventor of that person. Like the potter, this person must be "obedient" to the peculiar laws of his or her material, and the maker of that material is God. Humans are created in God's image and likeness. Formation and obedience always occur in the perspective of this fundamental dynamic, this original orientation. To it we must all be obedient. Both the person being formed and the person responsible for this formation, the subject as well as the superior, has this fundamental duty to be obedient.

A human must not only be made and molded but must also receive life. For first God formed him. Then God blew the breath of life into his face so that he became a living being. The formation of a human being is moral nurture, while the love of God is his life. (William of Saint-Thierry, *Epistola ad fratres de Monte-Dei* 169)

Divine love, accordingly, is the basic movement, the original dynamic form of a human being. Only when we become conscious of this and acknowledge the working of this love within ourselves do we really come alive. Obedience can prepare us for this by preparing the body which can be awakened to life by God. Obedience or formation which becomes an end in itself is merely a dead body. To it must be added the animation of the breath of divine love. We begin to discover that we only really come alive when, no longer imprisoned in our own human activity, we are animated by the love of God at work in us. This is not simply within our human reach. The initiative for this animation rests with God: it is the Holy Spirit, God-love, which animates us and sets us in motion. It is a fact, however, that we have been created after the image and likeness of God, that is, we have been created *with a view to* this working in us of divine love. Even though we cannot autonomously exercise control over it, the natural purpose and goal of our life is for God's love to be kindled within us. To this end all human formation must be attuned and to it all human obedience must be subordinated.

Now the will is set free when it becomes love (*caritas*) when the love of God is poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us. And then reason is truly

reason, which is a disposition of the mind ready to conform to the truth in all things. For when the will has been set free by liberating grace and the spirit begins to be moved by a reason that is free, then it becomes its own master, that is, it obtains free use of itself. (William of Saint-Thierry, *Epistola ad fratres de Monte-Dei* 201)

This is how we truly achieve self-consciousness (*animis*). Conscious of our origin we are oriented to the good (*bonus animus*). Formation in obedience does not estrange us from ourselves in a kind of infantilism, but leads to true maturity. We really become ourselves. Not in a kind of autonomous self-will in which we remain enclosed within our own little circle. We become ourselves because we have been freed from all the alienating compulsions which are imposed on us by fear, greed, needs and longings. In this new consciousness our deepest needs are exposed and activated. We discover the true dynamic of our nature, a dynamic which is love. By it we are released from the pathological prison of our solitariness and can burst into bloom by entering into relationship. We then begin to participate in the dynamic of God's love, at the same time becoming conscious of it as our own. We do not become God, but with our whole being we become "what God is" (William of Saint-Thierry, *Epistola ad fratres de Monte-Dei* 258), that is, love. According to William Saint-Thierry, this divine love is the reason for our existence.

God's Movement Gets Free Play in Us

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

As faithful image he hastens to attach himself to this likeness with him. He, after all, is himself an image of God. For the fact that he is his image enables him to understand that he can and must attach himself to him whose image he is. (William of Saint-Thierry, *Epistola ad fratres de Monte-Dei* 208-209)

In the consciousness of our own deepest being we passionately desire increasingly to become ourselves by participating in the dynamics of divine love. For that reason we want to attach ourselves to and in God. Increasingly, the image of God, the fundamental movement of God's being, now no longer hindered by the self-willed and recalcitrant movements of the human spirit, is reflected in us. We increasingly begin

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

When the object of thought is God and the things which relate to God and the will reaches the stage at which it becomes love, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of life, at once infused himself by way of love and gives life to everything. (William of Saint-Thierry, *Epistola ad fratres de Monte-Dei* 249)

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

For the man who has his heart raised on high, perfection of the will consists in making progress toward God in unity of spirit with God. No longer does it merely desire what God desires, not only does it love him, but it is perfect in its love, so that it can will only what God wills. (William of Saint-Thierry, *Epistola ad fratres de Monte-Dei* 257)

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

Now to will what God wills is already to be like God, to be able to will only what God wills is already to be what God is; for him to will and to be are the same thing. Therefore it is well said that we shall see him fully as he is when we are like him, that is when we are what he is. (William of Saint-Thierry, *Epistola ad fratres de Monte-Dei* 258)

What else is God but love? What else are we but love when God gains free rein in us? Obedience with the help of the other who forms us, therefore, necessarily issues into a mature love in which, true to our own deepest self, we become conscious of the spiritual grandeur of our human and religious vocation. Every attempt at detracting from this vocation, even if it be on the basis of sacred principles, is to do violence to God himself.

Conclusion

William of Saint-Thierry wrote his letter to a group of young Carthusians of Mont Dieu near Rheims. These readers now belong to a distant past. His words, however, are addressed, over their shoulders, to us, modern readers, just as over many centuries they served as a blueprint of the religious life. Religious leadership may never confine itself to issues of organization and management, but bear responsibility for the subtle invisible processes in which the

religious entrusted to their care are transformed in God, so that they have nothing left to do but “to will what God wills”, without being able to will or do this and without even understanding it. We may rightly say, therefore, that religious leadership is a vocation which must be formed and cultivated in order to develop in the direction of God’s personal claim. It must learn to read this Claim in the face of every religious entrusted to its care.

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Endnotes

¹ The English edition used is William of Saint-Thierry (1971), *The Golden Epistle. A letter to the Brethren at Mont-Dieu*, transl. [from the Latin] by T. Berkeley; introd. by J. Déchanet. Cistercian Fathers 12. Spencer (MA): Cistercian Publications. The original Latin text (and French translation): Guillaume de Saint-Thierry (1975). *Lettre aux Frères du Mont-Dieu. Lettre d’or*, introd., texte critique, trad. et notes par J. Déchanet. Sources Chrétiennes 223. Paris: Cerf.