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Contemporary Man, The Spirit, and Contemplation

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THOMAS O'GORMAN, S.J.

Every now and then there are fads of fashion or of the arts that captivate the general public for a while but live a very short "public life". After a few years they give way to new fads and are enjoyed by only a few devotees. I wonder if the current interest in the "spiritual" is one of those fads. But here we are this evening to spend some moments reflecting on the "spiritual" in terms of today's man. And from the outset I would like to say that my concern is that we consider it from the Christian point of view.

There is a phenomenon existing in the Philippines today that has been known for many years, for many generations. But recently, perhaps in the interests of tourism and in hopes for the much needed income tourism can bring, it has received much popular notice. I am speaking of faith-healing. And perhaps faith-healing is somehow allied (through I am on shaky ground here) with the whole realm of the spiritualist. Even in an age of growing scientific knowledge, the dimension of the spiritual is very much a part of people's lives. There are people who believe in the power of the spirits against the power of guns, the *anting-anting* believers, for example.

Also it is a part of our experience that interest in the occult is growing. The success of the book, *The Exorcist*, is one piece of evidence of this.

Perhaps all of this may sound rather primitive, but the current phenomenon of interest in the world of spirit is not limited to whatever part of society we would call primitive. The educated, and even the very sophisticated elite have recourse to the faith-healer, to the stars (and for some the power here is the power of

the spirits). To concentrate more on the religious level within Christianity, there has been a tremendous growth in the past four years in the pentecostal or charismatic movement within the Church. Just last week I received a letter from a Sister asking me to do some work with a community of men and women who consider themselves to be charismatics. *Time* magazine, I am told, reported that about one of every fifteen Sisters and one of every thirty-eight Priests in the Philippines are involved in the charismatic movement. They are people who believe that the Spirit is at work within them in a special way. Often this shows itself in their speaking in strange tongues or in the gift of healing.

Two years ago a guru from India visited the Philippines and found a very positive response to his observation that man today is more hungry for the possession of the Spirit that gives life than for the technological advance of machines that more often bring death. It was strange, he remarked, that our technology has learned how to destroy the world but has not learned how to improve life in its very core.

I will say nothing here about the present fascination in E.S.P. You have most likely read the articles that appeared very recently in a local daily on the subject. Admittedly it is very difficult to sort out all of these phenomena, and it is never an easy task to find out what is going on in the "spirit" world. I don't even know whether or not to use a capital letter in spelling the word *spirit* so as to be faithful to the mentality of whatever particular group or belief I am talking about.

However we understand these phenomena, I think we are not very much surprised today that man is looking beyond himself more and more in his search for the meaning of his life with all its complications. Perhaps it is precisely because life is becoming more and more complicated that man is looking for something in the world of spirit to help him understand himself. Whenever man experiences some deep change in the pattern of his life there is the likelihood that he will also experience some dislocation within himself. How serious the dislocation will be depends, I suppose, on the significance and the extent of the

change he experiences. For example, martial law changed life for all of us, whether we agree with it or not. But even the President realizes that the changes brought about by martial law have to be supported by something spiritual. He has declared that the second year of martial law is to be a year of consolidation through "spiritual renewal", and we are all being asked, somehow or another, to renew ourselves in spirit so that we can support and sustain the gains or the accomplishments of the first year of the New Society.

And apart from the question of change, contemporary man's life seems not to be as simple as life was before. I suspect that I'm not the only one who finds life quite fragmented. The German in me keeps telling me to put more order into my life, to get things organized, to stop running from here to there and back again; to concentrate, to pull things together. I do experience the need for this more and more as I find myself drawn in so many directions at once.

I mention all these things to provide the context for this evening's discussion. As Christians, how do we understand our own recourse to the Spirit? When, as Christians, we engage ourselves in that contemplation which heightens our awareness of the Spirit, what takes place within us? Is our engagement with the Spirit one that removes us from the cares of the world, or does it plunge us more deeply into the very heart of the world with all of its cares, worries and problems?

There is a type of self-recollection that may sometimes go by the name of contemplation. By a process of relaxed reflection or by becoming more aware of oneself as a being above and beyond all the individual cares and concerns of life, a person can arrive at a state of inner peace and tranquility. He comes to be aware of himself as truly transcending the here and now situation in which he feels himself fragmented. With this awareness of himself he is put into contact with his own spirit reality, and this can be a great help towards the integration of himself.

I have no doubt that this process can be a very effective aid in helping modern man to be more efficient in business, to cope with the pace of modern urban life, to meet demands of office,

home, and whatever other societies make up his total life community. But I honestly do not think that there is anything in this type of meditation (or contemplation, if you wish) that is particularly Christian, and I do feel uneasy when people refer to such psychic self-possession as a religious experience in itself. The Christian is called to a spiritual renewal, to a type of contemplation that goes beyond, far beyond, the self-possession that can be a good and at times necessary starting point for real Christian spirituality.

The Spirit with whom the Christian is to engage himself in his spiritual renewal is found within himself, but it is the Spirit that is given to him, the Spirit of God given to man to help him realize himself fully in the development of his gifts, talents, and capacities. But this Spirit, I believe, is continually challenging us to go beyond ourselves, to find peace not just by concentrating on ourselves but in relationships with our brothers and with our sisters. And this very other-directedness to which the Christian man responds indicates at one and the same time an authentic response to the God who calls man to be united with Him. (We could spend some time reflecting on how the call to go out to the neighbor and the call to unite oneself with God is one and the same call. But let me be satisfied for now with just stating it. I should remark, however, that I do not intend to imply that God and the neighbor are simply to be identified. No one else is God, only God).

What I am trying to stress here is that the Christian man in his search for the meaning of his life is taking a journey into the world of Spirit. The Spirit with whom he is in contact within his own spirit is the very personal Spirit of God. His search is a religious search if it is truly Christian, and the religion of the Christian involves him in relationships that are truly personal. A type of concentration on self (what is often caricatured as "navel-gazing") may be very beneficial for man's psyche (I will have to let the psychologists judge that), but Christian spirituality calls him to much more than this. Christian contemplation goes far beyond mere self-awareness; it calls the Christian to contact with God who is the personal Other, and it calls the

Christian to contact with the personal others who are his brothers and sisters.

I think there are many movements today which tend to tranquilize man. The picture of the man, lost in contemplation, with his eyes closed and a beatific smile dawning on his face, abstracted from the harsh reality of this world, is not, to my mind, the picture of the genuine Christian contemplator. The man who seeks in contemplation some sort of an escape from the world, some sort of a secure refuge that takes him out of the world of his brothers and sisters into some abstract Nirvana which is not a community of personal relationships — this man is not, again to my mind, the Christian contemplator.

And what happens within an individual can happen within a group. A group can come together for an experience of the spirit within the group. Using all the techniques of group interaction they can arrive at a wonderful sense of awareness within the group. And they can experience a tremendous joy and happiness in their own companionship. But, I suggest that if the spirit moving them is one that sets the focus within the center of the group, it could be a matter of mere collective navel-gazing and not necessarily a matter of Christian spirituality.

Maybe many of us should reflect on our various group experiences, whether they be in religious communities, Cursillos, Days with the Lord, Christian Life Communities, Catholic Family Movement units, charismatic prayer groups, or whatever. Have we really moved beyond the great good of group dynamics to the real challenge of the Spirit of Christ? Or are we stuck within ourselves, enjoying ourselves with a type of psychic or spiritual narcissism? This reminds me of the scene in the Bible, in the Books of the Acts of the Apostles. Jesus, after the resurrection, had appeared to his disciples, but then came the event of the ascension and he was taken out of their sight. "And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold two men stood by them in white robes, and said: 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?'" (Acts 1:10-11)

There is the real danger that we could get ourselves wound

up in a type of spirituality that wraps us in false peace, closing our eyes to the crying needs of our fellow men. And I wonder if we don't have to admit that for us, in the situation in which we find ourselves, any spirituality that abstracts us from the world must be suspect.

I am also suspicious of a type of contemplation or contact with the "spirit" that would simply help us to be more effective in the world of industry or business. And please remember, I am speaking tonight from the standpoint of spirituality that is authentically Christian. I admit that there are many seminars and programs available today that have a validity in the area of psychology, but I would insist that a religious spirituality must go beyond this. Please do not think that I am downgrading management seminars that use techniques of self-possession to achieve their ends. But please do not make religion of such seminars or of such directions for self-possession. And in all honesty I think it must be questioned at times whether the goals of all these seminars are truly Christian.

May I bring these reflections to a final consideration. I suggest that the Spirit is truly active in all ages and in all places. He acts most effectively within those who are truly open to his action (and this is perhaps the greatest insight of the Pentecostals and Charismatics). But — and this is the point I wish to stress — for us, in our time and in our place in the world, the Spirit who has been revealed as the Spirit of Christ is calling us to a special awareness of our brothers and sisters, an awareness of them in their situation of justice or of injustice. When Jesus Christ stood up and read in the synagogue he read to the people the passage from the Book of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (Lk 4:18-19). It is the same Spirit of the same Lord who is the moving Spirit of any genuine Christian search for the meaning of life. It is that same Spirit that has been given to each one of us in our baptism and hopefully accepted even more personally in

our confirmation. It is this Spirit to whom we are challenged to open ourselves as we search for the Spirit who will help us be ourselves more fully.

The call to a spiritual renewal, if it is to be a genuinely Christian call, must be to much more than a consolidation of gains of peace and order. It must be a call to open ourselves to the Spirit who anoints us to preach the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to those who are held bound by oppression, to help those who have been blinded, to see the living truth and not be deceived by falsehood. I submit that such a renewal is more meaningful than a renewal of a spirit that would support a false optimism, pretending that all is well because we don't hear all the groans of the sick, the poor, and the oppressed. I suggest that a spirit which would take us out of this world or which would urge us to escape from reality into some world of make-believe is a false spirit. I suggest that a contemplation or meditation that would have as its goal the tranquil making of more money at the expense of the oppressed and exploited is not the Spirit of Christianity. I am afraid that the Spirit of Christ is calling us to a renewal by which we find our true selves and the real meaning of our lives by getting our hands dirty in trying to bring justice to this world. A spirit that would distract us from the realities of our own life-situation does not seem to me to be the authentic Spirit of life. The genuine Spirit will rather plunge us into the very heart of the world's reality. And our meditation, our contemplation, can perhaps be tested as to its authenticity by the direction we experience in it. If it directs us merely to ourselves or to relationships that exploit the neighbor, it is not Christian contemplation. If it is a contemplation that heightens our awareness of the other, of the neighbor, (and in our present situation, especially of the suffering and oppressed neighbor), and if it moves us to live our lives more for this neighbor, then I think we can rejoice that we have contact with the genuine Spirit of life who will make more real in us Him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.