

Crossing the Threshold

1. Recapitulation

We saw in the last talk that the spiritual formation that Jean-Claude Colin received in his early years, principally in the seminary, consisted of two strands. One of these was Jesuit. The Jesuit element belongs not only to Colin's personal spirituality but also to the spirituality he wanted to inculcate in Marists. Notably, he saw in St Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* the manual and method of meditation *par excellence* – which, by the way, was not the intention of their author; at the same time he acknowledged that God might lead even Marists in other ways of prayer. He also regarded Alonso Rodríguez' *Practice of Christian Perfection* as an indispensable guide to the ascetical tradition. Besides the Jesuit strand, Fr Colin's early formation also included important elements of the 'French School', stemming ultimately from Pierre de Bérulle, but conveyed to Colin and his classmates rather through Sulpician traditions at the seminary. So the Founder recommended to Marists the practice of 'honouring' the 'mysteries' or 'states' of Jesus and Mary, that is, of uniting themselves or 'adhering' to the interior attitude or disposition at the heart of some act, such as Jesus' Agony in the Garden or Mary's care for the new-born Church; the act itself is past, but the 'mystery' remains, with its distinctive grace, in which we can share.

We also saw that Jean-Claude Colin put himself through a very solid reading programme in spiritual authors. It would be useful and interesting to look at the influence on him of Lorenzo Scupoli, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Francis de Sales. As I explained in the article published in *FN* 5,4, 2001, pp. 405-442, my attention was drawn especially to the mystical tradition in the Society of Jesus in 17th century France as an unacknowledged source of Colinian Spirituality. It was in a writer of this tendency, Jean-Joseph Surin, that I first came across the words 'inconnu et caché' – 'unknown and hidden' – outside Colin and was excited to realise that Surin was an author read and highly appreciated by the Founder. Since then, I have found the expression also in Caussade (*Traité sur l'oraison du Coeur*, ch. 12, par. 146) and in the Dominican Chardon (*La croix de Jésus*, quoted by Bremond, t. 8, p. 66), so it seems to have been 'in the air'

in the 17th and 18th centuries. Even more recently, I was reading in the *Mémoires de guerre* of Charles de Gaulle (vol. 3, ch. 3, Paris, Plon, 1959, p. 128): ‘In my present position, nothing concerning France is for me unknown or hidden (Au poste où je suis, rien de ce qui est de la France ne m’est inconnu ou caché)’ – so perhaps we are dealing with a pairing of words that comes readily to a French writer or speaker. In any case, as I read the Jesuit authors of this period whom Colin read and recommended, I came to see some most interesting points of contact and even of probable influence, which went well beyond simply the ‘hidden and unknown’.

2. The ‘Mystical Jesuits’

These were a group of Jesuit formators and writers in France in the 17th century who proposed a mystical interpretation of Ignatian spirituality; Caussade in the 18th century is their natural successor.

Let me explain immediately that by ‘mystical’ I refer to all those aspects of the Christian and spiritual life in which God’s action, and not our own, is dominant. Of course, on this understanding, there is a mystical – or better, infused – element in every Christian act. But there are moments – and even entire phases – of the spiritual life that are marked by God’s action in us and upon us and where our action may be reduced to accepting what God is doing. By contrast, by ‘ascetical’ I mean all those aspects of the Christian and spiritual life in which the accent is upon what we do – always, of course, with the help of God’s grace. Although we are never finished with the need for personal effort, the great tradition represented by, say, St Teresa and St John of the Cross teaches that there is a normal progression from a life characterized by our effort (the ‘ascetical’) to one that is characterized by God’s sovereign action (the ‘mystical’).

The ‘mystical Jesuits’ claimed that the mystical life – including but not restricted to contemplative prayer – is nothing more nor less than the full flowering of the Christian life and as such is essential for the apostolic religious. This teaching went against the common opinion in the Society of Jesus (and elsewhere) that the ‘ordinary way’ of holiness – the normal one for most Christians including Jesuits (or Marists) – was characterized by discursive meditation and the practice of ‘solid virtues’ and asceticism.

The mystical way – by definition ‘extraordinary’ – was for a few chosen souls, typically enclosed nuns; for lay people, priests or active religious to aspire to it was presumptuous and exposed them to dangerous illusions. The ‘mystical Jesuits’ begged to differ.

3. The School of Louis Lallemant

Some of these ‘mystical Jesuits’ formed a distinct school of spirituality; its founder was Louis Lallemant, one of the authors whom Colin names and recommends. Born in 1588, he died in 1635, so was a contemporary of Francis de Sales, Pierre de Bérulle and Vincent de Paul, in the most flourishing period of French spirituality. He was the novice master and tertian master of Surin and many other Jesuits of the northwest of France, and his *Spiritual Teaching* – it exists in English as well as in French – is based on notes taken by his novices and second-novices and was published a long time after his death.¹ A good number of his disciples went as missionaries to Canada, including several future canonized martyrs. This reassures us that Lallemant’s spirituality was truly apostolic; he was certainly not a would-be monk who ended up in the Society of Jesus and then tried to turn Jesuits into Trappists. For all that, he was and remains a somewhat marginal figure in the Society, which, by and large, has preferred its ascetical tradition to the mystical: Rodríguez is a more representative figure than Lallemant or Caussade.

In a nutshell, Lallemant teaches that one who surrenders entirely to God will be truly guided by the Holy Spirit, not only in his or her interior life but also in the apostolate. This latter point obviously has important implications for apostolic religious. In my view it gives Lallemant’s spiritual teaching an interest for us that goes well beyond its historical relevance for the background of Colinian spirituality. In Bremond’s synthesis (t. 5, pp. 3-65) it consists of four chief points: the second conversion; criticism of action; the watch on the heart; the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We will see each of these in turn, looking also for contacts with the spiritual teaching of Jean-Claude Colin.

¹ *La vie et la doctrine spirituelle du Père Louis Lallemant, de la Compagnie de Jésus*. Introduction et notes par François Courel, s.j., nouvelle édition revue et augmentée (Collection Christus 3 ; Paris : Desclée et Brouwer, 3^e édition 1979); English Translation by Alan G. McDougal, *The Spiritual Teaching of Father Louis Lallemant of the Society of Jesus, preceded by an account of his Life by Father Champion, S.J.* (London : Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1928). There is a recent reprint.

a) The second conversion

Lallemant insists that a person arrives at religious maturity and real apostolic effectiveness only after the turning point of the 'second conversion'. This is the moment when the religious launches out into the fullness of the mystical life. More precisely, one renounces self once and for all and lets oneself be united with God and so fully responsive to the movement of the Holy Spirit. The result will not only be great growth in holiness; the religious will also become a perfect instrument in the hands of God for the apostolate. In fact, it is only then that he or she will be really able to enter fully on the apostolic life, to which up till then one has only been, as it were, apprenticed. In the mean time, the chief occupation ought to be to purify one's heart. The second conversion is not, of course, automatic or mechanical. On the other hand, the Jesuit tertian year – or 'second novitiate', after ordination and a few years of apprenticeship in the apostolate – is meant, in Lallemant's view, to prepare the still young religious for the second conversion, which will normally come during this period of retreat and recollection or at least as a consequence of it. Therefore, the 'third year of novitiate' should be so organized as to provide a favourable environment and a stimulus for the second conversion.

This doctrine implies that all, at any rate all Jesuits – and why not all Marists? – are called to a high degree of the mystical life. Therefore, the mystical life is not something rare, reserved for a chosen few. Rather, it is simply the flowering of the life of God infused at baptism. As the divine life develops in a person, God comes to play a more and more important role, and the human partner, in a sense, less. This change of roles is liable to be felt in prayer, in terms of a persistent and unaccountable inability to meditate as one used to. This is one of the classic signs of the transition to a more contemplative prayer. From this perspective, contemplative prayer is not at all extraordinary, but is the normal prayer that accompanies the second conversion, surrender to God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. So it is the prayer that characterizes the mature religious.

Prayer is indeed the privileged occasion of deeper union with God. The mystical life is not, however, restricted to prayer but extends to every facet of the person's existence, including, in the case of a Jesuit (or a Marist) the apostolate. There too God takes over more and more – a situation to which the human partner may find it more or

less difficult to adjust. It is therefore clear that the call to the mystical life is not simply to be identified with a call to the monastic life. On the contrary, the Jesuit (or Marist) who launches out into the fullness of the mystical life does not then retire into a monastery or hermitage. Rather, he gives himself now at last to the apostolate as a true instrument of God. His formation as an apostolic religious is complete.

But let us hear Lallemand himself (*Spiritual Teaching*, a. Principle II, Sect. I, Chap. I, art. 2 – ‘We must give ourselves wholly to God’):

‘3. ... We fight against God for whole years, and resist the movements of his grace, which urge us interiorly to rid ourselves of a part of our miseries, by forsaking the vain “amusements” (i.e. the things with which we fool ourselves) which stop our course, and giving ourselves to him without reserve and without delay. But burdened with our self-love, blinded by our ignorance, deterred by vain apprehensions, we dare not take the step (*franchir le pas* – better, cross the threshold); and for fear of being miserable, we continue in our misery, instead of giving ourselves fully to God, who desires to possess us only to set us free from our miseries.

‘We must renounce, then, once for all, all our own interests and all our satisfactions, all our own designs and all our own choices, that we may henceforth be dependent only on the good pleasure of God, and resign ourselves entirely into his hands.’

‘We dare not cross the threshold’, or, as we might say, ‘take the plunge’, like one who hesitates on the brink of the pool, trying the water with his toes. Lallemand seems to suppose that it is possible to change the course of one’s life suddenly and totally. We are to give ourselves to God ‘without reserve and without delay’ as we once made the decision to enter religious life. Is this possible, psychologically and morally? We stand on the edge of the precipice, seized by an existential vertigo – the fear of losing oneself. For, at the heart of this spiritual drama is the certainty that we will be taken at our word: things can never be the same again. To change the image of place, we are at the crossroads: a new path presents itself, which we are invited to take; but we cannot see very far along it, before it turns a corner and disappears out of sight. In fact, we are being invited to cross the frontier into a new land, where the rules that have so far governed our existence are reversed. Once we have given all, God will do the rest: ‘I live, now not I but

Christ lives in me' (cf. Gal 2:20). This new land is none other than the mystical life.

Jean-Claude Colin does not use the language of 'second conversion'. On the other hand, he can say things like: 'All I know is that if we wanted to, we would become saints' (FS 27,2); 'When you enter upon your apostolate – this to the novice-scholastics at Belley – you must be saints, and to be saints then, you must become saints now' (FS 79,1); 'Only saints, then, can do good there (in Oceania, but also in France), saints – that is to say, missionaries who will lead a life of sacrifice, of death. But we must die completely: if you only half die, you will achieve nothing and be tossed about, dragged this way and that, without securing any fruit' (FS 106,4). Lallemand could have said that.

It is significant that the Founder wanted to establish the second novitiate as a regular institution in the Society of Mary and that he understood it very similarly to the way Lallemand understood the Jesuit tertian year. Articles referring to a second novitiate appear constantly in the various drafts of the Rule, from 1833 to 1872.

According to no. 95 of the *Summarium Regularum S.M.* of 1833 (s),

'After six or eight years from first profession, or ten or even more, as the Superior shall decide, taking into consideration the age and virtue of each religious, let those who have made their first profession return to the Novitiate for a second probation, so that for an entire year they may renew their fervour for piety; and during that time let them give themselves wholly to the study of mystical theology, prayer and the acquisition of solid virtues...'

As with the Jesuit tertianship, this 'second probation' is clearly conceived, not as 'on-going formation', as we have nowadays, but as the completion of initial religious formation. The time for it is not at 'mid-life', or at change of apostolate, but – normally at least – within ten years of first profession. Of course, 'first profession' here is what we mean now by 'perpetual profession'. Even so, the age intended is that at which the religious has attained maturity, but is still comparatively young, after the completion of his studies and some years' experience of the ministry.

Why mystical theology? Not, I think, simply in order to round out the study of dogmatic and moral theology of seminary days; nor merely in order to prepare the religious to be a competent spiritual director, although these reasons are given by Fr

Colin talking to the novice-scholastics at Belley in 1844 (*FS* 79,7). The study of mystical theology – not simply as an abstract subject, but hand in hand with growth in virtue – is surely for the benefit of the religious himself. It is implicit that he has very probably reached the stage in his own spiritual life where a knowledge of mystical theology becomes practical and relevant; the stage, let us say, when, according to the teaching of St John of the Cross and other masters, active meditation is no longer appropriate or even possible and progressively gives way to prayer of a more contemplative type.

But, if it were only the Marist's own personal prayer life that were in question, we might doubt whether the Founder would consider it important to withdraw him from the active ministry for anything up to a year, just at the stage when he was becoming experienced and competent, in order to study mystical theology and concentrate on his own spiritual growth. For that, fidelity to prayer and the guidance of an experienced spiritual director would suffice. No, the 'second probation' is meant to prepare the Marist for the next and definitive stage of his apostolate. One must infer, therefore, that, in Fr Colin's view, the development of the mystical life and growth in solid virtue are the important issues at this moment of his life, the moment of transition between formation and maturity, and that the outcome is of great importance for his apostolate.

Colin's idea of the second novitiate is maintained – with certain changes of detail – right through to the 1872 Constitutions (n. 153). What he expected of this experience is illustrated by various reflections on this theme as gathered by Fr Mayet during the 1840s (*FS* 121,5-8):

[5] 'When you are in the active life, you fail to see your own true motives. There are many things mixed up together in our souls, many things that escape detection (own words).'

[6] 'That is why the Rule says that there shall be a second novitiate after four, five, ten years of ministry. It is a breathing-space. A man takes a year's rest, to concern himself with God alone, and to root himself firmly in the spirit of God.'

[7] 'We are fools if we think that we can do anything without the spirit of God (own words).'

[8] 'Once this novitiate is made, then we shall have some men of God...'

b) The Criticism of Action

By 'action' here Lallemand refers to the various apostolic activities undertaken by the Jesuit: he directs upon these activities a merciless criticism that exposes many illusions – for the active life too has its illusions. What surprises or even shocks the reader is that Lallemand does not stop at the deviations – self-promotion, domination, avarice – or excesses such as hyper-activity, that we could easily recognise and criticise. His criticism of action is radical and universal: action *as such* is never the greatest good and is almost always dangerous and often bad; to action are always to be preferred contemplation and the exercises of the interior life. We must first have within ourselves a 'very perfect life, by the continual application of the understanding and the will to God'; then we can go out to serve our neighbour, not only without harm to our interior life but with the greatest benefit to others. This sounds extreme. What can he possibly mean?

Remember, Lallemand is not talking to Trappists, but to Jesuits, and not to adolescent novices, but to grown men, who have completed their studies in the humanities, philosophy and theology; they have already had some years of experience in the ministry and are shortly to return to it and to receive responsibilities of leadership in the Society. He cannot fool them easily; at the same time, he can be confident that he is not going to be misunderstood: he is not advising them to retire from apostolic activity to devote the rest of their lives solely to contemplation. His meaning quickly becomes clear: when – but only when – they have 'crossed the threshold' and surrendered to God, they will be able to carry out the works of the apostolate, not only without danger to themselves, but also with the greatest profit to those to whom they will minister. In other words, only the religious who has undergone the second conversion and is truly united with God can be a fully effective apostle. In bringing about this development, prayer and contemplation have a crucial role to play by uniting us with God.

This is what he has to say.

d. Principle V, Chap. II, art. 2 – 'Without prayer we cannot acquit ourselves of the duties of our vocation, nor gather fruit from our ministrations':

'2. It is to God we ought to look for every success in our employments. We are his instruments, and we work under him as under a master-architect, who, directing singly the whole design, allots to each one his task, according to the end he proposes, and the

idea he has conceived. Thus we shall produce the more fruit the more united we are to God, and the more we yield ourselves to his guidance, always supposing we possess the talents and the capacity requisite for the active service of our neighbour. Now it is prayer that unites us to God. It is by this holy exercise that we dispose ourselves to receive the impression and movement of grace, as instruments to work out his designs.'

e. Principle VII, Chap. IV, art. 4 – 'Contemplation, so far from being opposed thereto, is necessary to the Apostolic life':

'1. Contemplation, far from hindering zeal for souls, on the contrary augments it...

'2. Without contemplation we will never make much progress in virtue, and shall never be fitted to make others advance therein. We shall never entirely rid ourselves of our weaknesses and imperfections. We shall remain always bound down to the earth, and shall never rise much above natural feelings. We shall never be able to render to God a perfect service. But with it we shall effect more, both for ourselves and for others, in a month, than without it we should accomplish in ten years...

'3. If we have not received this excellent gift, it is dangerous to throw ourselves *too much* (italics mine) into active occupations of charity towards our neighbour. We ought to engage in them only experimentally, unless imposed on us by obedience, otherwise we ought to occupy ourselves but little in external employments, the mind in such case having enough to do in acquiring self-knowledge, in purifying continually the natural acts and sentiments of the heart, and in regulating the interior, so that we may walk always in the presence of God.'

Lallemant states the essential of his teaching in the following principle (Principle V, chap. III, art. 2 – 'How important it is that we should join the interior life with our exterior occupations'): 'We ought so to unite action and the exterior life with contemplation and the interior life, as to give ourselves to the former in the same proportion as we practise the latter.' In consequence, 'If we make much mental prayer, we ought to give ourselves much to action'. Notice that, after the second conversion, apostolic activities are no longer a hindrance to union with God but a primary means to growing in that union: 'the exterior action will aid us in the interior life'. This is a truly apostolic spirituality.

The model is, of course, Our Lord Jesus Christ himself. If we can fast-forward from the 17th to the 21st century, here is Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI in his new book *Jesus of Nazareth* (ET Adrian J. Walker; New York, etc. Doubleday, 2007), p. 7:

‘Again and again the Gospels note that Jesus withdrew “to the mountain” to spend nights in prayer “alone” with his Father. These short passages are fundamental for our understanding of Jesus; they lift the veil of mystery just a little; they give us a glimpse into Jesus’ filial existence, into the source from which his action and teaching and suffering sprang.’

The Pope is not, of course, stating anything new. The theme of Jesus’ prayer was certainly familiar to Lallemand’s students, who would have meditated on it many times. He had no need to remind them of it. The question for him was, however, whether they were convinced in practice of its application to themselves and their own apostolate. Hence the relentless logic of his argumentation. His listeners are not going to be swayed by rhetoric or mere appeals to piety. They will only give way to solid demonstration arguing from premises to conclusions in the best Aristotelian way.

Jean-Claude Colin is no logician, but he is just as pitiless and as paradoxical as Lallemand in his criticism of action. What are we to make of statements such as this? ‘I asked God what the Society of the blessed Virgin should do, and these words came forcibly to mind: “Nothing” – Yes, nothing. Otherwise it would seem that the Society could achieve something by itself, whereas we can do nothing. You know well what I mean by that’ (*FS* 19,2). Like Lallemand, he is sure that we are not going to think he wants us to fold our arms and literally do nothing; only to be aware that our activity *by itself* has no deep or lasting effect. Take another quote. ‘If I were in charge (of the novices) ... I would try simply to unite them to God, to bring them to a spirit of prayer. Once they were united to God, everything else would take care of itself. When the good Lord dwells in the heart, it is he who sets everything in motion. Without that, everything that you do is completely useless; no matter how you plant the seed and tire yourself out, the life-giving principle is still lacking’ (*FS* 63,2).

Fr. Colin, like Lallemand, knows that an instrument – especially an instrument of divine mercy – is only as effective as it is properly adapted to and at the disposition of the

one who uses it: 'What is an instrument by itself? Let us place ourselves in the hands of God like the implement in the hands of a workman. As long as you rely on yourself, you can expect nothing' (FS 140,11). He might have added: When once you rely on God, you can expect everything.

c) The Watch on the Heart

Until we have finally surrendered to God and passed under the regime of the Spirit – and so become effective apostles – our chief concern, according to Lallemant, is to purify our hearts. Indeed, 'the two elements of the spiritual life are the cleansing of the heart and the direction of the Holy Spirit. These are the two poles of all spirituality' (Principle IV, Chap. II, art. 1). He can even say that 'the shortest the surest way of attaining perfection, is to study purity of heart rather than the exercise of the virtues, because God is ready to bestow all manner of graces upon us, provided we put no obstacles in their way' (Principle III, Chap. I, art. 2) – a provocative statement that puts him in a different camp from that of Rodríguez and the ascetical tradition.

In order to arrive at purity of heart, Lallemant prescribes keeping watch on its movements, observing what goes on within ourselves, so as to discern what comes from the Spirit of God and what from another spirit. The discernment of spirits is, of course, characteristically Ignatian. As you know, a feature of the contemporary Ignatian renewal has been to recommend what is often called 'consciousness or awareness examen' – being in touch with ourselves and with what goes on in us, not from self-preoccupation, but precisely in order to discern the promptings of the diverse spirits. Fr. Colin too recommends this practice, in n. 37 of the 1872 Constitutions: '... each one shall assiduously scrutinise (better, watch over – JT) the inner movements of his heart in order to direct them properly.' This practice belongs to a very ancient tradition of spiritual teaching. Thus Diadochus of Photice writes in the 5th century (*Chapters on Spiritual Perfection*):

'We must maintain great stillness of mind even in the midst of our struggles. We shall then be able to distinguish between the different types of thoughts that come to us: those that are good, those sent by God, we will treasure in our memory; those that are evil and inspired by the devil we will reject. A comparison with the sea may help us. A

tranquil sea allows the fisherman to gaze right to its depths. No fish can hide there and escape his sight. The stormy sea, however, becomes murky when it is agitated by the winds. The very depths that it revealed in its placidness, the sea now hides. The skills of the fisherman are useless.'

Finally, it is worth noting that, with an emphasis that we do not find in all spiritual writers, Lallemant stresses the place of the sacrament of Penance in bringing about purity of heart, recommending frequent, even daily, confession.

d) The Guidance of the Holy Spirit

'The end to which we ought to aspire, after having for a long time exercised ourselves in purity of heart, is to be so possessed and governed by the Holy Spirit that he alone shall direct all our powers and all our senses, and regulate all our movements, interior and exterior, while we, on our part, make a complete surrender of ourselves, by a spiritual renunciation of our own will and our own satisfaction. We shall thus no longer live in ourselves, but in Jesus Christ, by a faithful correspondence with the operations of his divine Spirit and by a perfect subjugation of all our rebellious inclinations to the power of his grace' (Principle IV, Chap. II, art. 1).

The guidance of the Spirit is the pivot of Lallemant's spirituality; it occupies the place that is given to adherence to the incarnate Word in that of Bérulle, which it so much resembles in other respects. This emphasis is Lallemant's characteristic contribution to spiritual theology, and one in which he goes further than most spiritual writers. About one fifth of his *Spiritual Teaching* is devoted to the action of the Spirit, to docility to the Spirit's guidance, to the operation of the traditional seven gifts of the Spirit in the fruitful exercise of the apostolate as well as in bringing the apostle to the heights of holiness. Lallemant in fact attributes the mediocrity of so many religious to our failure to develop the gifts of the Spirit in our daily life and ministry. He puts especial emphasis on the role of the gifts of Wisdom and Understanding in giving us a 'real' apprehension of the truths of faith – as opposed to one that is purely 'notional', to borrow Newman's famous distinction: Lallemant himself compares looking at a painting of a lion and coming face to face with a living one. The gifts of Knowledge and Counsel come into their own in confession and spiritual direction, and generally in advising others. Fortitude gives us the

strength and courage we need to persevere; Piety and Fear of the Lord form our fundamental attitude towards God and others.

I hope that I have said enough to whet your appetite to read Lallemant for yourselves. There are mystical authors who are more poetic or uplifting, but few or none who are more balanced or more reliable. Sober and sobering, his prosaic and logical pages assure us that this is no dreamer or fanatic. At the same time, he challenges us to go beyond the limits we have set ourselves and God, to 'cross the threshold'. For all these reasons, no doubt, he is highly recommended by our Founder.