

BY BARBARA C. HARRIS

Concern for Spiritual and Moral Input

If we do, indeed, have a concern for spiritual input, then we must acknowledge that such input comes into our lives not just by our profession of Christian faith and our acceptance of Christian teachings, but that it comes in more vivid and tangible form as the result of the living, moving operation of the Holy Spirit.

There are those who would like to say how, where, when, under what fortuitous circumstances and through whom the Holy Spirit can and does operate.

In my own Episcopal denomination, many say that God does not call women to be priests. The corollary of that is — if He does call them, we don't have to acknowledge that call. To me such reasoning seeks to *proscribe* and *limit* the operation of God the Holy Spirit, and that kind of vain effort has to come down hard on the side of sin.

There are those who would talk to you of a Godly, righteous and sober life — and this is no small thing to be discounted. But it is not all of life in reality, nor does it speak entirely to the various avenues and sources of spiritual input.

Eleven days ago, I participated in a service of Ordination of an Episcopal deacon — the final of several steps before becoming a priest. As you may know, with checks and balances along the way, one first becomes a postulant, later a candidate and later, satisfying certain stringent requirements, is then ordained deacon, then priest.

Not only was this ordination historic in nature, it constituted an emotionally laden moment because of the multiple dynamics operative in the total situation.

The service took place in the cold and antiseptic setting of a prison chapel with the ever present symbols of man's authority — bars and guards — more visible than God's authority. But I assure you, not only that chapel, but the whole of Graterford Prison, outside Philadelphia, was on fire that day.

Along with a priest, and on behalf of the clergy and people of the Diocese of Pennsylvania, I was privileged to present to the Bishop, for ordination, a young man — 32 years of age — who is serving a life sentence for the bizarre murder of his wife eight years ago. In the tradition of apostolic succession, the Bishop layed his hands on the young man's head and prayed: "Oh Father, through Jesus Christ your son, give your Holy Spirit to Vaughan: fill him with grace and power and make him a Deacon in your church." And those of us who have known this young man over his years in prison and had witnessed his unordained ministry to his fellows, were well aware that he, indeed, had been filled with grace and power, even before the Bishop invoked God's blessing upon him.

In the sermon preached that day, my own pastor, the Rev. Paul Washington, reminded the young man and the church present that: "Even as God called Moses, whose hands were responsible for the death of another, so He has called you, Vaughan, whose hands were responsible for the death of another, to be an instrument of deliverance, a vessel of love, a channel of grace and a source of life."

Father Washington went on to say that the occasion might be confusing to some and for others, blasphemous, but that it was right if we believe in repentance, forgiveness, redemption and salvation.

And how right it is if we can accept the fact that spiritual input, like grace, is a pure gift that comes down from the Father of lights. *Can* we accept that the wind bloweth where it listeth and that the spirit *can* call forth to ministry even one whose hands have destroyed the very gift of life?

Think on this spiritual input to his life and to ours.

Spiritual input that is often ignored is *resident* input — that which is all around, but is frequently overlooked. If you will permit me another reference to my young friend in prison — I had a letter from him a few days after his ordination and I would share some of his words with you.

"The following day the chapel was full and Rev. Williams called on me to preach. It was unbelievable! The Holy Spirit was operating at full capacity, just as on the day before. The brothers were so attentive and their response of full acceptance of my new role was made evident. Can you imagine how that felt?

"Oh how wonderful it is to know of God's love, grace and forgiveness through Christ. . . . I have never been this happy in my life."

Can you imagine how the lives of some of those inmates are being impacted by this resident input? Can you also imagine what spiritual input they are offering themselves in affirming this ministry; what kind of witness some of them are making as they minister to each other?

What think ye of Christ? Those are proclaiming Christ and the good news of His gospel — what kind of spiritual input are you receiving and, in turn, giving?

Many of you are already like Joshua. Surrounded by the rebellious nature and cantankerous complaining of the Israelites, he confronted them with his own firm commitment saying; "Choose you this day whom you will serve. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

A fine commitment, obviously reflecting spiritual input and totally acceptable to all of us.

Last week I went to see the rock drama *Jesus Christ, Superstar* and I watched the character Judas wrestle with his honest doubts about Christ's role, mission and ministry. In this respect I think Judas was being very honest. He tried to weigh the input he got against reality and the reality he saw and confronted, as despicable as it was, won out.

Judas is dismissed in a few sentences in most of the gospel accounts. Only in something like this rock drama does he come alive for some of

us: grappling and struggling with a mind-blowing concept (my kingdom is not of this world); looking for a Saviour, a liberator and a relief from oppression; questioning that incomprehensible sacrifice that was about to occur and that we now very joyfully accept. The input and the reality he got was hard to deal with.

And some of the input and the reality we get are hard for us to deal with. How do you love the unlovable? How do you accept a murderer into the fellowship of the club? And that's what some of us have in the church — a club. (I once heard a minister say: the church should be a hospital for the sin-sick, not a rest home for the redeemed. I sometimes think it is a country club for the ecclesiastically elite.)

As you assume your roles as spiritual leaders, I hope you are prepared to wrestle with the spiritual input that comes to you and prepared also not to discount the quarter from which it may come. Because it can come from anywhere and from anybody.

God does, indeed, choose the weak to confound the wise. Be mindful also that the stone rejected by the builders, indeed, becomes the head of the corner.

To accept this, and I think we should, is to fully accept the second part of the Summary of the Law — Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. It is also to remember the parable of the good Samaritan which points up dramatically who is our neighbor and, conceivably, from where spiritual input can come.

I am reminded of one of the familiar hymns of the church, common to many denominations, which holds a key clue for us all: "Vainly we offer each amble oblation, vainly with gifts would His favor secure. Richer by far is the heart's adoration, dearer to God are the prayers of the poor." Not only the poor in substance, but the poor in heart, the poor in spirit, the poor in hope, the morally poor, the poor in quality of godly, righteous and sober living, the poor in ability to distinguish good from evil, the emasculated poor in manhood, the prostituted poor in womanhood.

We need to have concern for the validity of spiritual input from wherever it comes.

If you wonder when you are receiving or giving spiritual input, just think of time past, time present and time to come when something washing over the soul like a giant wave moves you to reach out to these the brethren and from the inner reaches and secret places of the heart comes that still small voice of calm that says: "Lord, I just come from the fountain, His name so sweet."

