

## ALL THINGS WORK TOGETHER UNTO GOOD

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**P**RAYER in its specialized sense means turning our hearts and minds to God. Prayer in its widest sense means directing our whole lives to God. Everything falls under this definition: work, play, joy, sorrow, health, sickness, our whole selves and the circumstances in which we live. But if we are to direct our lives to God we must see life as it really is—God's plan to enable us to know, love and serve him in this world and to be happy with him for ever in heaven. Any conflict in our minds here is fatal. We need to see life as a whole, not divided into watertight compartments of 'religious' and 'secular' or 'indifferent', but as God's will being worked out by us, here and now, in everything. It means co-ordinating the bits and pieces that make up everyday life into one harmonious whole, knit together by the simple desire of pleasing God at all times and seeing his hand in all things.

On the human side we Catholics are no different from other people. We have the same faculties and habits of thought, we are just as lazy, just as apt to let our emotions and imaginations run away with us, just as prone to be influenced by prevailing opinion. We read the same papers, see the same films, listen to the same wireless programmes; we are surrounded by a materialistic concept of life, and unless we are careful we shall unconsciously absorb much of this alien philosophy to the great impoverishment of our spiritual life. We need a wider vision than we can obtain from human sources. And not only wider but deeper. Until we attain it—and do our best to live up to it—we can hardly escape having what Mr Frank Sheed once called 'worldly minds with Catholic patches'.

The solution lies in integrating our lives with our faith. We have no difficulty in believing that God exists and is infinite in all his perfections. God, our reason assures us, *must* be omniscient and omnipotent: infinite love, wisdom, mercy, goodness and justice. Therefore it necessarily follows that his dealings with us, his great plan of creation, accord perfectly with his attributes—*with himself*. Since God is omniscient and omnipotent, then,

obviously, he knows all things and can do all things; since he is infinite wisdom and goodness he does all things wisely and well. And among the things he does wisely and well is that of setting each one of us in those circumstances best suited for leading to union with him. Our circumstances are the raw material of our sanctification. This is no place to consider the implications of social justice or the inequalities of wealth. To whom much is given, much will be required, and that is true whether it is applied to temporal or spiritual possessions. All wealth belongs ultimately to God; we are his stewards in the administration of what he entrusts to our care and shall be obliged to render an account of our management and, though money and the power it represents can be made to do vast good, its abuse can do equally vast harm. Probably we are all tainted to a certain extent by the materialistic worship of money, but at least we can remember that it is not the amount of capital we have accumulated that God values, but the amount of grace we have laid up for ourselves in heaven. And compared with the infinite riches of God all the wealth of the Indies is less than a grain of sand.

We cannot reflect too often on the immensity of God and our own and the world's littleness. It gives us a sense of proportion. If we measure everything by human standards we shall never rise above our natural level nor attain a supernatural outlook. We stand amazed at scientific progress, and rightly so; with the aid of ever more powerful telescopes we discover—at rare intervals—an unknown star; we look into the future and see ourselves, having overcome incredible technical difficulties, exploring space . . . it seems there is no limit to what men can achieve. Yet God has known from all eternity what we so painfully discover; he alone 'knows the number of the stars and calls them all by their names'; he alone 'spreads out the heavens and causes the evening star to rise upon the children of the earth'. Science, rightly used, is of inestimable benefit to mankind. There is no point in belittling our achievements, rather let us thank God for them and pray that they are not misused. But let us also see them in their true light. It is not that man by his own powers has invented, but that by the aid of his God-given reason he has learnt to find out. The very word 'invent' meant originally to find something that was hidden: we use the word in this way when we speak of the Invention of Holy Cross. Discover, too, means to uncover, to

bring to light something already there. Scientific or any other achievement is possible only because God created the necessary *media* and laws of nature and gave us the means of discovering their potentialities. And, again in no spirit of belittlement, how paltry our knowledge is compared with the omniscience of God. Hydrogen bombs notwithstanding, how puny our powers are compared with the omnipotence of God. If we accustomed ourselves to reflect on these tremendous and stabilizing facts, if we gave more thought to the nature and attributes of God, then both he and his creation would be seen in terms of reality: and a sense of reality is a crying need of the world today.

God knows and understands everything; there is nothing he does not know, no limit to his knowledge. Nothing can be added to it, nothing comes as a surprise to him, all the actions and thoughts of all his children, our whole lives from beginning to end, are known to him from all eternity. In our own experience it is uncertainty that causes most worry. Yet if we are living in union with Almighty God there must be some reflection, some created participation of the divine nature in our souls enabling us, in our human fashion, to share in his immutability. 'Peace I leave you, my peace I give unto you, not as the world gives it do I give it unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled nor let them be afraid.' And where are we to find peace and confidence except in union with our Lord, God?

It is sometimes said that reflections on the nature and attributes of God are too abstract, too philosophical. This may be true if we confine ourselves to the principles of natural theology. But when we realize by the light of revelation that the First Cause is, in fact, the Blessed Trinity, then do our hearts burn within us: we have found him whom we sought. God has only one nature, but he is three Persons, and one of them—the Son—we welcome into our hearts each time we receive him in holy communion. Our Lord, perfect God and perfect Man, has the nature and therefore the attributes of God. He is the second Person of the Blessed Trinity: omniscient and omnipotent, infinite in love, wisdom, mercy, goodness and justice. He became man for our sakes, he translated himself into human language so that we might realize his infinite love through his human heart. We know this; but are we perhaps almost too inclined to focus our attention on his human nature? If we see our Lord chiefly in his sacred humanity

we are not seeing him as he really is; not in the fullness of the hypostatic union. We know that he is God and Man but our finite minds cannot achieve a synthesis. We cannot think closely of both natures at the same time; we have to concentrate on either God or Man. In these days the emphasis is strongly on the side of the sacred humanity. It is not so in the New Testament (after Pentecost), nor in the ancient breviary hymns. To choose one almost at random:

‘Jesus, Redeemer of the world,  
Before the earliest dawn of light  
From everlasting ages born  
Immense in glory as in might. . . .’

If we could only realize that tremendous fact when we receive the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, hypostatically united to the sacred humanity, in holy communion, then indeed we would be humbled under the mighty hand of God.

Being humbled is good for us. Humility means truth. It means seeing ourselves as we really are both in self-knowledge and in relation to God. In practice it means putting ourselves more and more unreservedly into our Lord’s hands because truth forces us to realize that without him we are, and can do, nothing. But it also means rejoicing that he is, and can do everything. He is the beginning and the end, Alpha and Omega, and our whole lives must be submitted to him that he may dispose of them as he sees best. We may not understand his dealings with us, but we have his assurance that ‘to them that love God all things work together unto good’ and we know that everything that happens is part of his plan, intended to lead us to ever-closer union with him.

Since the Fall God, in his inscrutable wisdom, has made work the task-master of us all, but he has also made it one of our chief means of serving him. The greater part of our waking lives is divided (unless we happen to be members of contemplative orders which make prayer their chief concern) between work and leisure. Both must be directed to God, but there is this difference; work is normally laid upon us by the exigencies of life, it implies doing what we are told or what our duties to our fellow humans demand. It is therefore apt to be irksome. How we spend out leisure depends on our own tastes and interests, and doing what we choose is always pleasant. But whether we read or play games, watch television or cultivate our gardens, we must see it

as prayer in its widest sense and share our enjoyment with our Lord. There is a habit of mind called gratitude.

We have largely lost a supernatural outlook on work yet a very little reflection will convince us that our work, no matter what it may be, plays no inconsiderable part in forming our characters: it gives us a major chance of co-operating with grace and so increasing our union with our Lord. Does not teaching demand constant patience, running a home unremitting self-sacrifice and working at a conveyor belt an endless fight against the despondency induced by monotonous and all-but-meaningless action? Apart from these and similar vocational exercises of the virtues, a spiritual outlook on work must be sustained by the gifts of the Holy Ghost. They concern the whole of the spiritual side of our nature; nothing happens God-wards in our hearts and minds that is not assisted by them. Whether our words or thoughts or deeds concern our right response to God or to ourselves or to other people, they are perfected by one or other of the gifts. And how often, even in one day, do we need the spiritual insight to see God and the world and ourselves in accordance with that intuition? As often as we allow ourselves to live and be led by the Spirit we are increasing our accumulation of grace, becoming dearer to our Lord and earning for ourselves (if we persevere) a higher degree of the beatific vision and, above all, the stupendous privilege of being able to give greater glory to God now and for all eternity.

Believing these things, can we possibly regard work as mere drudgery? We cannot. But neither can we live on these exalted heights. We are human beings, still chained to our desks and tractors, pinpricked and disheartened by the 'frets and lets and jars of every day' (if by nothing worse), and there come times to all of us when we have to force ourselves to realize that from all eternity God has known each prosaic task of each humdrum day; that from all eternity he has seen us working out our destinies at shop counters and in the fields, in surgeries and in factories, in religious houses and in our own homes; that in his infinite love and wisdom he has so ordered everything that (in spite of what we may sometimes think to the contrary) 'to them that love God all things work together unto good'. Even the injustices, the dishonesties, the low standards which so legitimately sadden and sicken us are all part of his plan, not indeed that he wills

them, but that he permits them. He is all-powerful and all-wise and allows them only because he can bring good out of evil. It is here, in his indirect dealings, that we most need spiritual insight. What manifestly comes from God is easier to bear. It is injustice and cruelty from our fellow humans that we feel to be the most unkindest cuts of all. Yet ultimately it all comes from God; it is all part of his eternal plan; nothing can happen which is against his directive or permissive will; it is all part of the raw material of our sanctification. We cannot fully understand this side of eternity why he allows the wicked to flourish and the relatively innocent to suffer, but we do know that he is infinite love and wisdom and justice and that we can each one of us take our personal share in the redemption of the world in union with our Lord. All the people we come in contact with (and to some extent the animal and vegetable kingdoms and inanimate things) afford us the means of practising the virtues, living the life of the spirit. They are the *media* through which God gives us opportunities of acquiring grace. We have to lift the whole of creation up to him and in the very forefront of our offering let us place those people, friends or foes, known or unknown, who have contributed to our sanctification by pleasant or unpleasant means. There is a petition among the prayers after the litany of the Saints which expresses this perfectly: 'Vouchsafe, O Lord, for thy name's sake to reward with eternal life all those who do us good.' Those who do us most good may not be those who are good to us.

God created us for a purpose. He has need of each one of us for the completion of his plan. It is our duty to co-operate: our duty but also our high privilege. No two souls are alike and God deals differently with each of us according to our capabilities, but he has work for us all to do. He has set us in these our days in the midst of wars and rumours of wars, in a world that seems to be drifting helplessly to chaos, nationally and individually, and the outcome is in his hands. Not in ours, unless we allow him to guide them aright and so to co-operate with his purpose. Our co-operation is unlikely to be spectacular, but at least we can be about our Father's business in office and hospital, school and farm—to say nothing of presbyteries and religious houses. Being about our Father's business means, pre-eminently, doing his will. Each day we pray 'Thy will be done', but it will not be unless

we start, each one of us, with ourselves. 'This is the will of God, your sanctification' and if we cling to our own wills and so spread selfishness and disorder around us we are neither doing God's will nor advancing our own sanctification. We are merely adding to the sum total of chaos. We know in general terms what God's will is, for he has told us. He has given us laws to live by, a Church which speaks with his voice and which denounces in no uncertain terms the evils of the times. Instead of the welter of conflicting opinions we hear around us, we Catholics have fixed principles to guide our conduct: what God says is true, what God loves is good, what God wills is just. We know these things because God has told us. But we have to ask the Holy Ghost to train us in 'that wisdom which is from above' to see all things as with God's eyes, to love what he loves, to hate what he hates, and to live up to these standards in all the happenings of our lives not so much in the sense of determinedly setting a good example (self-conscious edification can be extremely irritating and seldom rings true), but because our standards are ourselves, integral to us. 'Be not conformed to the world', said St Paul—and added a warning against trying to appear better than we really are. 'Be not conformed to the world. . . .' 'You must not', continues the Knox version a little further on, 'fall in with the manners of this world; there must be an inward change, a remaking of your minds, so that you can satisfy yourselves what is God's will, the good thing, the desirable thing, the perfect thing.' We have to take the whole of our lives, the rough and the smooth, the clear and the obscure, as coming from God's hands, and the harmony with which all things work together unto good will depend on the measure and generosity of our co-operative love. It requires fortitude to persevere, there will be set-backs and pusillanimities, heartbreaks and humiliations, but our Lord who has borne the burden of the day and the heats knows all the difficulties and pitfalls that beset our human paths. And he says, 'Do not therefore lose courage nor let your hands be weakened, for there shall be a reward for your work. . . . I am your protector and your reward exceeding great.'