

SIMPLICITY

BY

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IN our age of psychoanalysis and complicated machinery simplicity is a quality of life and character much underrated, if not actually despised. Perhaps this is the reason why so many of the Saints recently placed on the altars by the Church for our example are men and women of striking simplicity, and even children: St Bernadette, the Curé d'Ars, St Thérèse de Lisieux, Bl. Maria Goretti—a peasant girl, a peasant priest, a young Carmelite cultivating the childlike spirit in its integrity, and a child martyr for purity. It seems as if the Holy Ghost deliberately opposed simplicity to the neuros-thenic complications of the modern world.

Our age is given to despise simplicity, perhaps because it is so difficult to understand and even more difficult to attain, except for those in love with it; and it certainly is almost impossible to define. For the sovereignly simple Being, God, is completely above our natural understanding; and even the great simple things of our daily experience, life and death, love and beauty, cannot be perfectly understood by our reason, though we know them when we meet them, for they 'stare us in the face'.

Perhaps it may seem too sweeping a statement to say that our age despises simplicity. Are not movements such as the 'Back to the Land' and fashions like 'Primitive Art' indications of the need felt for a return to simplicity?

Ay, there's the rub. We cannot 'return' to simplicity, any more than the mature man or woman can return to childhood. If we try to 'return' we shall just be cranks, grown-ups playing at 'let's pretend'. There is no real simplicity in such movements, which are most frequently sponsored by the sophisticated. Yet there is a way to simplicity; not a way back, but a way forward. Unless you become as little children. . . . Except a man be born again. . . . It does not mean to return into our mother's womb, as Nicodemus foolishly imagined; it does not mean becoming primitive by some artificial retrograde movement—simplicity is not the same as primitivity, and is reached, in fact, only by a slow, progressive (not retrogressive) transformation under the influence of that great simplifying power that theologians call grace and that brings forth all the good things of the true life.

For simplicity is marvellously fruitful. Take for example those

few simple sentences which are called the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor in spirit. . . . Blessed are the meek. . . . Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. . . . The sublimest way of perfection is expressed in these few bare sentences, in which there is not a superfluous word; they have provided generation after generation of saints with food for their spiritual life, and a succession of theologians from Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine to Thomas Aquinas, and down to modern scholars like Gardeil and Garrigou-Lagrange with an inexhaustible source for their teaching on Christian perfection. For the simpler a thing is, the more universal and fruitful. We can meditate all our lives on the Our Father and discover ever new riches in it; or, on a lower plane, we can probe into the clear-cut articles of St Thomas and find fresh light in them with each reading. It is the simple things that last through the centuries, which later generations develop, re-interpret, and assimilate as food is assimilated—absorbing what nourishes them, making it their own.

Or let us take the sublime simplicity of the divine drama of the Redemption. Because man, changeable creature that he is, had offended God by his disobedience, God, in his infinite love, became man to repair the fault by his obedience. A child can understand it—in fact a child can understand it far more readily than a grown-up person. God became man, and for his human life he chose the simplest setting: a manger, a carpenter's family, a small town in an out-of-the-way province of the Roman Empire. Fishermen and women were his followers, and his most terrifying thunders were reserved for those who made the way to God so complicated that only they themselves pretended to be able to walk in it.

Yet the way to God is very simple. 'I am the Way'. You know not how to be united to him, the Way that leads to the Father? Why, nothing could be simpler. You need only love him; and see, he takes the simple things of your daily meals, Bread and Wine, and says these simple Words: Take and eat, this is my body . . . Drink, this is my blood. . . . And so you have him within you, so you are united to him, far more intimately than ever woman was to her lover. Are we to be scandalised—as so many of his followers—and leave him, because our minds, made complicated by sin, cannot grasp the simplicity of divine Love?

If we would bring forth fruit sixty- and a hundred-fold, we must feed our souls on the simple food of the Body of our Lord and of the teaching of his Church; that food marvellously designed by the Giver of all food to be assimilated by each one of us according to his capacity. And the way of assimilation is the way of prayer, because it assimilates us to God himself. It leads with wonderful

efficacy from multiplicity to unity, from complication to simplicity. We begin with laborious meditation or spiritual reading; taking point by point, sentence by sentence, pressing out its meaning as juice is pressed out of an orange. And then, if we are faithful, there comes a day when not a drop of juice will come, however hard we press with our understanding; and the understanding itself will refuse to go on with its labours, which have become futile. On that day, however useless all our efforts may seem, we should rejoice, for our feet have been set on the blessed way of simplicity. Under the increasing action of the Holy Ghost, our activities are more and more unified, and, slowly, our whole life becomes marvellously simple.

For it is a simple thing to say: 'Thy will be done'—though it may all but break one's heart. The supremely simple act of giving his human will entirely to the Father cost the Son of God the agony of Gethsemani. For an action to be simple does not mean it to be easy. More often than not the simple way of dealing with a situation will be the most difficult and costly, while the roundabout and complicated escape will be the easy 'way out'. It is the simplicity of martyrdom—and that simplicity, too, our world has to learn anew, as our brethren on the Continent of Europe have already learnt it in concentration camps and before firing squads; and as all the saints have had to learn it, whether they died in their beds or on the rack. For it is only when all the complications and neuroses produced in us by our pampered self-will shall have been purged away by suffering—whether it be in this world or in the next—that we shall be sufficiently conformed to the divine Simplicity to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.