

'THE COMMON TASK'

ELENA

THE things I am going to write about are very ordinary; the framework of my life is very like that of millions of other women. A lot of people think it is dull, and so it might be except that the very dullness of it is a means of grace, and therefore no longer dull. So this is all I can write about—some of the ordinary events, thoughts, problems, prayers of an ordinary day; one of those days which seem so monotonous from outside, but into each of which is poured all the riches of God's grace, if only I have eyes clear enough to see it and a heart brave enough to accept it.

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The clock says ten to six, not time for the alarm to go off yet, but if I go to sleep again it will be so much worse getting up in ten minutes' time; on the other hand, bed is nice and warm. From the next room comes a mewling, plaintive noise; I know what it means. John, who will be two in three months, has kicked off his bed-clothes and is waking up because he feels chilly. I slip out quietly, and go barefooted to tuck him up before he wakes up completely when all peace would be over for me. He grunts contentedly and turns over, thumb in mouth. It would be very nice to go back to bed for a few minutes, but as I have so conveniently been got up without the struggle of deciding for myself, it would surely be rash. I could not rely on more help then, and certainly I never have enough strength of mind to get up simply because I know I ought to.

I turn the clock round to make sure that I can see it if I look up; otherwise I can never believe the time of prayer has been so short. I try to break through the web of small plans and arrangements for the day which is already weaving itself in my mind, to find the elusive God whom I attempt to serve. Already, I know it is going to be another of those long battles with distractions, and apparently nothing else. 'Lord, you are here; I am here; I love you; I'm no good, but I love you. Please help me to pray, or at least help me to love you, when I can't pray. I want to pray the way you like. Sacred heart of Jesus, I place my trust in You.'

When I was a little girl, there was a bay-window in a house where I often stayed, whose deep window-seat could be cut off from the room by a curtain that drew right across it. I still remember how, in the dusk, I used to draw these curtains and sit there in a separate world, alone and happy, while the noises of the household on the other side were, though quite audible, somehow far away and of no importance. There was the magic curtain in between, until Nannie came to call me and my Paradise was invaded. But now, I can't draw the curtain myself; I can only wait patiently for God to do it if he wants to.

The bustle of the day begins. It's not my turn to go to Mass today, but my turn to make the porridge and to wash and dress the children. Elena, who is five, is old enough to dress herself, but her twin brothers of three have to be washed, helped into their clothes (the right way round), brushed and shod, and the baby has to be dressed entirely. The helplessness of a small child is a rather frightening thing. That fat, cheerful little creature, rolling on the bed; what would happen to him if he were left alone? He would not last long. But that hasn't occurred to him; he is perfectly happy and confident, and gives his whole attention to prolonging the business of dressing as much as possible. O Lord, this is my son; You have given him to me to care for, for a while at any rate. I love him with an idiotic devotion, but You love him much more. Because of that, I give him back to You, now, and at all times when I am entranced by his sweetness and gaiety. I will not cling to him, Lord, if You want him back, even though the very thought of losing him is hardly to be borne.

At breakfast Peter behaves very badly and won't finish his porridge. He throws his crusts on the floor; he glares. He is three and a half, and ought to know better. He does know better, and keeps a wary eye on his father, but continues to misbehave. 'If you do that again, you will have to leave the room.' A snort of defiance is the only reply, and in a minute he begins to pour milk carefully and deliberately down the front of his jersey. This time he has gone too far, and is banished by his father. After a lot of angry screaming from behind the closed door, there is, at length, silence. 'Would you like to come in and finish your breakfast now?' A long pause. 'I think I'm not quite good yet.' But a little later, he emerges with a brilliant smile: 'I'm quite good now.' He then proceeds to eat a great deal more. Punishment has done

its work of reconciliation: he feels whole and at peace with the world. The others are in the garden by now, and Paul has left for his work. There is a sudden quiet in the house.

Washing-up, making beds, sweeping, dusting, restoring order and cleanliness: trying to make this house a fit place for God's children, so that peace and order may be established in their souls, from which foundations true temples of the Holy Spirit may arise. Peace? There are awful yells from the garden. Peter is sitting on Guy and beating him with a tin. Out of a tangle of shrill and conflicting explanations it appears that Guy has a ball that Peter wants, and Guy, for all his yelling, is still tightly holding it. 'Whose ball is it?' 'Mine.' 'No, mine.' 'It isn't.' 'It is.' Elena solves the problem: 'A lady gave it to John over the wall.' So John, who is in the sandpit, and has obviously forgotten all about it, gets the ball back. The twins howl in chorus. Very unjust. Why should John have it when he doesn't really want it? Because it's his. A problem in international politics, reduced to nursery terms. Blessed are the peacemakers—but sometimes neither the blessing nor the peace is immediately obvious.

Washing. How I hate washing. I shouldn't, because getting things clean is one of the more obvious ways of serving God. Perhaps this small shirt, from which I've finally removed so much mud, will be just as muddy again in two days, but meanwhile Guy or Peter will have put it on clean, will have been pleased at the whiteness and softness of it, and will have resolved with the utmost sincerity not to get it dirty. One day perhaps he really won't. It may be an exaggeration to see this as a first training for the effort at moral cleanliness, but surely it does help.

It's time to take the big basket of clean, wet washing and hang it out to dry. The clothes-line is at the top of the garden, higher up the hill, and from there I can see for miles. *Attollo oculos meos in montes*: it is a time and a place in which to praise God in his creation, to look at his world and find it good. *Quis ascendit in montem Domini, aut quis stabit in loco sancto ejus?* Here comes Elena, anxious to help peg out the clothes; her hands are covered with mud. *Innocens manibus, et mundus corde*: her hands may be muddy, but they are cleaner than mine. I must send her to wash her hands before she can touch the clean sheets, but mine, though washed, are not guiltless in act as hers are; her clothes are grubby and she has torn her skirt, but she is only five, and her heart is

untouched. *Qui non intendit mentem suam ad vana*. She has not yet breathed in the atmosphere of sin: her mind is not yet warped by the madness of a world which has turned its values upside-down, and then complains that life is topsy-turvy. What right have I to stand beside her? I throw the flapping sheets over the line, and she pegs them for me. The sun shines on them through the leaves of the elder tree, making a dappled swinging pattern of brightness and shadow. Far away, I can see the fields and the farms, the plough-land rising to meet the descending moor, the woods clinging to the steep hillsides, and, above it all, the brilliant sky—*caeli enarrant gloriam Dei*: today, when it is blue, with clouds racing across it, but on other days, too, when it is dark and threatening. I hang up the last shirt, and as I come down the garden again, I look back at Elena, her face bright and pink with the wind and the pleasure of being helpful, smoothing out the folds in a pillow-case.

There is something heart-rending about the innocence of a child; it is so vulnerable, so easily destroyed. Their very naughtiness and wilfulness has a quality of innocence, yet they must be corrected and taught; taught, if possible, to know what sin is, to see it all around them, and yet to walk through it all with their hand in the hand of God, knowing their helplessness and his power. Dear Lord, how can I attempt such a task? I can't, obviously: I'm a fool, and worse than a fool. You know that, and yet You've given me these children of Yours to look after and to teach. At least, don't let me get in the way of what You are trying to do in their souls. That is the answer, of course. If I don't intrude my own selfishness, possessiveness and vanity, You can use me as an instrument of Your grace for these children. Help me to forget myself, my Jesus, to become smaller and smaller, so that Your will may find no resistance.

It is time now for Elena to have her lessons with me. It's not a very serious affair as yet. Generally, we begin by looking at some pictures of our Lord's life, or of the Mass; we talk about them, and I explain any points of doctrine that arise out of our talk. I try to get her to want to know, then she really remembers what I say. Sometimes she learns a short prayer, or draws a picture herself. Then we have a reading lesson—rather hard work, this, and demanding much patience. With one eye on the clock, I calculate how long it will take to peel the potatoes. The

time of lunch isn't really very important, though; it matters much more that Elena should feel that I am at her disposal during this time, and that I really care for her success in mastering the meaning of these complicated and inconsequent combinations of letters. By way of light relief, I read a story to her; sometimes a fairy story, sometimes a story from history, which she loves. Sometimes she learns a little poetry. Finally, I write some copies for her in her writing book, and leave her to struggle alone with the wayward and uncontrollable behaviour of pen and ink. I can see her from the kitchen, working hard. Sometimes she comes dashing out to me: 'Isn't that a good "e"? Don't you think it's good, Mummy?' Encouraged, she returns to her work, and I to mine.

Getting lunch is always a race against time. It's the time of day when I most easily lose my temper if I'm interrupted. How very stupid. As if it mattered if I am a bit late. But, I tell myself, it will make everything else late: I shan't have time for writing that letter or baking biscuits for tea, and anyway, why do the twins always choose this time to fall down and cut their knees or their noses, to lose a favourite toy, or to fill their wellingtons with water from the kitchen drain? Very well, dear Lord, you've won: lunch will be late; I will leave that letter until tonight. Meanwhile who has taken my first-aid scissors? People never put things away properly. (Why do I blame 'people'? Am I ashamed to put a name to the culprit, because I know I'm being ridiculous anyway?) Here is Guy, dripping blood from a cut knee all over my clean floor. (Why do I call it 'my' floor?) Am I too busy to stop and comfort him? Shall I just put a plaster on the cut and send him out again, or shall I spare the time to hug him and tell him he's a brave boy not to cry, so that he goes back to play satisfied and consoled?

At last, lunch is really ready; the children are washed, brushed, bibbed and impatient. Elena and I say Grace, while the twins stand behind their chairs looking solemn and pleased, and John, oblivious of such high matters, bangs on the table with his spoon and shouts for food. The art of eating in a clean and orderly way is slow to be learnt. What they are learning is self-control; learning to curb a natural desire to eat with their hands and throw unwanted food on the floor because, dimly, they realize that such behaviour excludes them from the community of grown-ups, whose fellow-

ship is somehow extremely desirable. They are learning that it is necessary to lose one sort of satisfaction in order to gain something more valuable.

The children are resting after their lunch. The twins and John are asleep, Elena is looking at a book. The kitchen is tidy once more, and a silence I can almost touch settles down on the house. Sometimes I can use this time for writing or reading—an immensely refreshing change-over to purely intellectual activity—but, today, there is a pile of clean washing waiting to be ironed. If I leave it until tomorrow there will be still more. Ironing has its compensations, however: it is a peaceful and rhythmic occupation, and almost an invitation to prayer. Unfortunately, one is often prevented from accepting even the most attractive of invitations: that ring at the door proves to be a visitor—conversation, the effort to think of agreeable things to say, and an end to any hope of peace and silence. Thank you, my sweet Lord, for making me serve You in this way that I find so difficult and repugnant. I know this is for Your glory, and I will be as cheerful and as interested as I can. If I were less selfish, I wouldn't find it so difficult. I will even ask her to come again.

By the time my visitor has gone, I have at least finished most of the ironing, and it's time to get the children up and take them out for a short walk to the shop. Perhaps, I tell Peter, who is sleepy and doesn't want to get up, we will buy some ice-cream for tea. They all love a walk, and they run excitedly ahead; even little John bustles in front of me, his fat legs working hard, but after a moment he comes back to take a firm grip of one of my fingers. He feels safer that way. Here comes Peter with a bunch of very dusty dandelions 'For you, Mummy', which I accept with appropriate expressions of appreciation. In May, he brings similar bunches for our Lady's shrine: his affection naturally expresses itself in giving things, whereas Guy doesn't see the need. He walks alone, looking dreamy, not very interested in or observant of his surroundings, human or otherwise. On the way back we go into church to 'have a little pray' as Peter calls it. They race down the hill to see who can reach the door first, but once inside, they are very good and quiet. Peter's devotions are brief. He kneels down, shuts his eyes tightly, and mutters something unintelligible, then 'We must go, now', and he leaves the church as fast as he came in, while Guy is still standing in the aisle looking

vaguely around, Elena is busily lighting a candle, and John is trying to crawl between the supports of the altar-rails.

It is nearly tea-time, but if I hurry I can make those biscuits. Tea-time means that the blessed hour of putting-to-bed is approaching, with the subsequent release from 'I wonder what they are doing now?'—the worry which is at the back of my head all the day. But, for the children, the immediate present, including ice-cream, is all-important, and the dreary thought of bed-time is still far away.

Everyone likes to *be* clean, but it is many years before the young become resigned to the inescapable fact that 'being clean' involves the uncomfortable business of washing. It's so much easier to say 'But I *am* clean' in an injured tone. (Older people find this is a useful way of avoiding the humiliation of repentance.) So, bath-time is often a battle, or rather four battles. They like to play in the water, but object to the soap. It's done at last, and after John is in his cot, I read to the other three before prayers. On Sundays, Paul is at home to lead family prayers, but generally this falls to me. Elena is old enough to say the prayers with me, and she has her favourite bits: 'I do like when we say "Protect us under the shadow of thy wings".' So do I. 'Visit, we beseech thee, O Lord, this house and family', and other families who are parted by sickness, by war, by persecution. . . . 'May thy Holy Angels dwell herein to keep us in peace . . .'—that elusive thing that we all want, and usually seek in the wrong way.

They are all in bed, but I am not allowed to leave them without several hugs each. 'Goodnight and God bless you.' 'God bless you', comes the response, and they snuggle down, protected from the dark by the 'magic' words they only half understand. Four cheerful, contented children of God, growing up in peace and security. Lord, let me not forget the mothers whose children have been taken from them, or those who must watch their sons and daughters being taught to hate You, and to despise the religion of their parents. When I watch my children playing together in the sun, let me remember the children whose bodies are diseased or twisted by famine or ill-treatment, whose minds are warped by fear or hate, who have never known love or confidence. They are Your children, too, and You love them.

I love drawing the curtains in the sitting-room when the light fades. The day is ending, and for the last few hours of it we

shut out the world and remember that this place is one that God has given us to be in; inside these walls, behind these windows he gives us the graces we need to grow with his life. When there are no guests Paul and I have supper by the fire. We talk over the day's events, or read in comfortable silence, and afterwards we both have more work to do. On the chimney-piece the little Polish statue of our Lady, as simple and direct as a child's toy, and yet so dignified, looks down at us: 'She was a golden lily in the dew, And she was as sweet as an apple on a tree, And she was as fine as a melon in a cornfield, Gliding and lovely as a ship on the sea.' I think of those lines, which have nothing to do with our Lady in their context, whenever I look at that little figure. It was Elena who said, 'She's "gliding and lovely"', Mummy, like in the poem'. There is a pile of mending tonight. I'm glad, because that leaves my mind free and I can try to pray. Dear Mother of God, Golden Lily of Israel, help me to use this time well. I am very tired; I keep on thinking about clothes for the winter, about tomorrow's baking, about the grocer's bill, and the way the cabbages are growing. You had those things to deal with, but You didn't fuss over them. Help me to keep a sense of proportion; bring my wandering thoughts back to the feet of Your Son, where they belong.

The day is over for me. It is now late, and I am very tired. Tomorrow is already much too close. Dear Lord, I'm just sufficiently awake to thank You for all you've done for me today, to be sorry for the poor use I've made of Your gifts. I am a very inadequate servant, but Your patience is eternal, Lord; perhaps in the end You will succeed in making something of me. I have fallen asleep twice since I began my prayers; there is only one thing left to say—Lord, thou knowest that I love thee.

I struggle to the surface from beneath waves of sleep, some time later. Someone is crying in the next room. It is Peter, standing in the middle of the floor, shivering with cold and fright, still held by the nightmare that woke him. I put him back to bed and sit with him for a while until he settles off to sleep again. I've done this so often—night-feeds for tiny babies, teething troubles with older ones, and, later on, the nightmares of an imaginative little boy. And once I've dragged myself out of bed, I'm always glad of it; glad to be awake, when others are asleep; glad of the chance to join my prayers to those of the monks and

nuns who make the night resonant with the praises of the Most High. It seems a pity to go straight back to sleep, and I sit for a while on the edge of my bed, not thinking, not consciously praying, but letting the peace of the night flow over me. But it's nearly four o'clock, not so long until the day's work will begin again; if I am to be any use, I must get some more sleep. The first faint glimmering of the dawn outlines the crucifix above my head, and I remember the prayer of Mary of Scotland: 'As Thy arms, O Christ, were stretched out on the cross, even so receive me into the arms of Thy mercy.'



POINT OF VIEW

To the Editor, THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT

Dear Sir,

In R. Smith's review of Dr MacGregor's book on Pacifism he speaks of the 'way of perfection which is imposed by canon law upon the clergy and proposed as a counsel to all the faithful—the non-shedding of blood'. Later he speaks too of the 'legitimate demands of law and justice'.

Regularly this matter crops up in discussions with Catholic youths at non-Catholic Grammar and Technical Schools—all with enforced National Service ahead, and all increasingly concerned with their own obligations thereunder. A month ago it was shot out starkly: 'I'm going to the R.A.F. If I'm told to drop an atom bomb what do I do?' Experience has shown that they have little patience with all the 'hedging' million-to-one chance that he should ever be so ordered, etc. The group, all alert, want an answer. Father Victor White's paper given to them in substance was summed up in: 'Then we've each got to decide for ourselves? The Church we know is our infallible *guide* in faith and *morals*. In this practically urgent moral perplexity, what is the infallible guidance to hand on to these lads of keen intelligence, good will and trusting faith?

OUR LADY'S CATECHIST