

studies or received jurisdiction to administer the sacrament of penance. A woman sought out the prior: 'Oh, the poor father', she cried. 'I saw him just now at the bottom of the church and I asked him to hear my confession and he said he was sorry but he hadn't his faculties. Oh, the poor father, and he looked quite nice and sensible to me he did who would have thought it!' Well, the faculties of which we are talking are more profound than canonical qualifications. They are parts of the dynamic constitution of our very being, and sometimes to be recognized as such if we are to bring *into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.*<sup>51</sup>



## LET NOT YOUR HEARTS BE TROUBLED

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**P**RAYER means turning our hearts and minds to God. No two persons converse with him in identical ways; even in corporate prayer we each infuse the same words with our individual needs and aspirations, and private prayer, whether vocal or meditative, is essentially personal. But we all have hearts and minds and, broadly speaking, the same problems: and the greatest of these is aridity. No one has ever advanced in the spiritual life without experiencing times when devotion seems non-existent, prayer distasteful or humiliatingly difficult, meditation moribund and discouragement an ever-present temptation, but though our books warn us of these trials our own experiences are different from anything we expect to undergo.

At first the spiritual life is straightforward. We know our faults and weak points and strive earnestly to eradicate them, and we make visible progress. We feel that we are doing well (as indeed we are) and prayer becomes increasingly attractive, our Lord becomes more real, we are more intimate with him and find delight in inventing small ways of pleasing him. If we have a gift for meditation pictures spring to the eyes of our mind and resolutions to our lips and our Lord whispers the sweetest words

to our ears: we feel we are becoming daily more spiritually alive. With eager generosity we want to devote ourselves to his service, we want to do great things for him, we want to prove our love. Nothing shall be too onerous, nothing too painful, no sacrifice too great. All very naïve, no doubt, but informed with a beautiful sincerity which, though untested and at bottom self-seeking, must nevertheless be very pleasing to our Lord. And in his own way he rewards it. Suddenly or by degrees he takes us at our word. We shall devote ourselves to his service, do great things for him and prove our love—but on his terms, not ours. We were children, thinking, speaking, understanding in a childish way: now we are to grow up in faith, hope and charity; and especially in charity. And charity, we soon find, spells aridity. It is all very bewildering. The weapons we had forged against the time when we would find devotion non-existent break in our hands. We had only to be patient and all would be well: or so we thought. The one point we failed to take into account was the fact that our Lord would blindfold us. It could hardly be otherwise. If we could prepare ourselves against aridity the trial would lose its meaning. If we could feel the ground firm under our feet, take our bearings from the bright and morning star and press on manfully towards the goal, we would never become spiritually mature. No two souls can suffer exactly the same aridity because no two souls are alike, and since grace perfects but does not destroy nature, the manifold workings of grace must vary with each person, but in every case the whole person must be purified and perfected and brought into conformity with the will of God.

Holiness consists, very simply, in loving God above all things. The only way of loving God above all things is to find out how lovable he is, and we cannot love a person until we know him. We can know God in three ways, by the use of natural reason and by the supernatural gifts of faith and charity, but only charity gives us intimacy with him. Charity unites us to God and as long as we are in a state of grace he indwells our very souls. God is immanent in all creation, but this indwelling is a particular and special presence and it is normally through the trial of aridity that we come to realize it. We are all familiar with sentences such as 'the Holy Ghost comes to our souls at baptism bringing with him his precious gifts' and most of us could enumerate and even describe the gifts; but are we equally conversant with the doctrine

of the indwelling of the Holy Ghost? Yet this doctrine lies at the very core of the faith. 'If anyone loves me he will keep my word and my Father will love him and we will come to him and take up our abode with him . . . and my Father shall give you another Paraclete and he shall abide with you and shall be in you.' In the Epistles this inhabitation is referred to again and again; there was no need for St Paul to explain what he meant, it was an essential part of the faith known and accepted by all. By charity we are united to God in such a way as to become participators of the divine nature and by the supernatural gift of wisdom we are given a personal knowledge of him; not knowledge derived from our own thoughts, no matter how high and holy these may be, but the knowledge of experience. The gift of wisdom does not teach us fresh truths about God and it has no connection with intellectuality; it gives us a personal knowledge of him. We possess God in our souls and know that we possess him, but in this life we see through a glass in a dark manner and can know only in part: in heaven, by the light of glory, we shall see God face to face and know even as we are known, but even in this world we can enjoy some faint reflection of the bliss which awaits us in heaven.

The indwelling of the Blessed Trinity in our souls is the basis of all Christian mysticism, but we all possess the power to attain to some degree of this experimental knowledge of God. It is this that he intends to teach us during periods of aridity. It is a tremendous doctrine and one which should revolutionize our spiritual lives, but our poor finite minds and hearts are incapable of plumbing the depths and, though God has means of speaking to our souls without the intermediaries of thoughts and feelings, this experimental knowledge of his presence is, in one sense, more a matter of faith than of experience. He does not want it to remain in this undeveloped state; he made us for himself and even in this life he wants us to enjoy the fullest union possible. His invitation is always 'Friend, come up higher'; it is we who put a limit to our spiritual progress. We are all called to be saints and it is mock humility to say or to persuade ourselves that sanctity is not for us. We are here to fulfil God's will in our regard and since 'this is the will of God, your sanctification' our first concern must be to conform ourselves to that perfection. Perhaps the surest way is to have complete confidence in him. At bottom we are all reluctant

to put ourselves unreservedly into his hands; there may be nothing specific we would refuse to give if he asked for it, but handing over as it were a blank cheque requires more heroism than we feel we possess. God does indeed ask us for a blank cheque but at the same time he assures us that he will never ask for more than we are capable of giving and we know we can do all things in him who strengthens us. We need this confidence very specially during periods of aridity. God is calling us higher so that we can give greater glory to him by sharing a deeper degree of union with him: he wants us to know him instead of having thoughts about him; he wants us to love him instead of the gifts he gives us. That is the whole meaning of aridity and though the process is painful there is no need to make it worse by brooding on its dark side. We know, at least in theory, that sensible devotion is of no importance and that our thoughts about God fall infinitely short of their object. God's purpose in drying up the springs of meditation and feelings of sweetness is to give us a purer knowledge of himself. We cannot attain this through our lower faculties of imagination and emotions; if we are to increase our intimacy with him it must be done through the highest faculties of our souls, those of intellect and will, by charity and the supernatural gift of wisdom. This is in a particular sense entirely God's work. We can never do anything without him, but when he wishes to give us an experimental knowledge of his indwelling in our souls, we can do nothing at all. We can only remember those eager offers and promises of our earlier days to serve him and do great things for him and prove our love, and do our best to fulfil them now on his terms, not ours. God is dealing with our souls directly, he knows exactly what he means to accomplish and, agonizing as the operation may be to us, he requires complete passivity on our part. But passivity does not mean inertia. It means co-operation, the same sort of co-operation we demand from a small child when we are trying to dress him. He must stay still or move this way or that as we indicate, but we cannot dress him if he insists on fidgeting and twisting round to see what we are doing, and impatience on his part will only prolong the period of being dressed. Passive co-operation requires much fortitude. All our spiritual scurryings to and fro, all our restlessness, our worry, our feelings of futility and insecurity, our felt repugnance for prayer, our doubts and difficulties, our dismay at our lack of devotion—

all the myriad forms that aridity takes in different souls—can be resolved only by blind surrender of ourselves into our Lord's hands. The crux of the trial is that we feel we cannot do it. We seem to have lost our own familiar friend in whom we trusted, and nothing will console us for the loss.

The truth is that we are living on two different planes; the familiar, sensible, lower plane of our imagination and emotions which, because felt, seem all-important and the higher, spiritual plane of charity which unites us with God and which is entirely beyond our apprehension. We have to learn (or rather allow our Lord to teach us) to ignore our feelings and to live by the spirit. We can do this only by keeping our eyes on God. To do so when maybe we feel doubtful if he so much as exists is difficult but not impossible. It means disregarding our feelings and living as if everything were normal in our spiritual lives. We cannot be unaware of feelings of desolation and the rest, but at least we can do our best to rise above them, not taking them too seriously, not brooding over them, not inflaming the insect bites by constantly scratching them. We need to be very faithful to our customary hours of prayer and if we seem incapable of praying then we must ask our Lord to accept the distractions and lack of devotion instead. It is humiliating not to be able to attend to what we are saying but our Lord reads our most secret thoughts and understands us infinitely better than we understand ourselves and it may well be that deep down beneath all the surface commotion and coldness we are conversing with him in the way he desires and learning the very lesson he intends to teach us. As time goes on we may become more aware of this secret communion between our souls and our indwelling God, at least in the sense of realizing in an inchoate and intangible way that we only want his will to be done, and then we shall attach little importance to our feelings. We must never forget that though aridity can rightly be regarded as a test of our love and fidelity, to be manfully endured in union with our Lord's sufferings, it is far more than that. It is the means God uses to unite us ever more perfectly with himself. He is fashioning us to his own image and all our pains and discouragements and humiliations are caused by the whittling away of self-love. In the earlier days we wanted to acquire virtue to advance in holiness not to honour our Lord but to stand well in his and our own estimation. It was cupboard

love, sincere but childish; we wanted the gifts more than the giver and we wanted to expend them in our own way. Aridity, by slow stages, strips us of this self-seeking by increasing in us the pure love of charity; and charity always wants to give, not to receive. The only gift we can offer to our Lord is our own nothingness for him to build up into the likeness of himself and we can offer that only by submitting to his will and by suffering in patient hope and co-operative passivity the transformation it is his dearest wish to bring about. It will necessarily be a long and painful process and one against which we can make no preparations for it always assails us in an unexpected form, but if we understand the underlying reason for these periods of aridity we shall be far better able to co-operate with God's plan for our sanctification.

Those of us who know of the appalling trials suffered by saints and other advanced souls may be tempted to feel that as we would be incapable of bearing similar privations it is useless for us to embark on the spiritual life, but this is a fallacy. Our Lord will never expect us to run before we can walk, he will never give us more aridity than we can bear and if at some future time he should vouchsafe us a high degree of the experimental knowledge of his indwelling in our souls he will also give us the grace to endure such sufferings as this may entail. There is nothing for us to fear as long as we remain faithful to the life of the spirit and want, even when we seem incapable of putting our desire into practice, to cast our care upon the Lord, knowing that he has care for us. Throughout the whole Bible God is constantly urging us not to be afraid, not to be discouraged, not to be weary in well-doing and though from time to time he sets us 'in a desert place where there is no way and no water', he will never allow us to die of thirst. Some of the saints apparently spent the greater part of their lives in a state of aridity but even they enjoyed respites from their trials, and for us lesser mortals the desert is likely to be well-studded with oases. As we come to these and drink our fill of the living water we find ourselves greatly enriched by the experiences we have undergone. We are unprofitable servants and we know it; we have tasted of the Lord and found that he is sweet, but we can give no coherent account or explanation of what has happened or of what we mean: we simply know that it is so. And with this supra-sensible knowledge we take up our spiritual lives again, but on a different level . . . and in God's good time face

another spell of aridity which, no matter what form it may take, will be different from anything we may have prepared for. But the previous trial, whether the first or the twenty-first, will have left us with a whole scale of new values. We no longer find naïve pleasure in computing our spiritual progress, our responses are too hopelessly inadequate to be worth considering. We know now, or at least we have begun to realize, that holiness means doing God's will, not having pleasant feelings about him, and that in some indefinable way our sojourn in the desert has simplified our entire lives. The faith is a whole, not a number of doctrines; our spiritual life is a whole, not a number of devotions; our everyday life is a whole, not a heterogeneous collection of fragments and everything is reducible to the will of God. Our prayer is different, too, less enthusiastic maybe, less colourful, less articulate but incomparably more nourishing than our early efforts. And with all this there is a quiet abiding dissatisfaction with ourselves. On the rare occasions when we do recognize one of the scanty triumphs grace has won we are only too well aware that our fiat was made in a state of no-enthusiasm. We spoil everything: or so it seems. Yet if another person told us of a struggle in which the soul submitted no matter how reluctantly to our Lord's demand we would see it in terms of victory. We would think little of the remnants of selfishness and conceit that surrounded the final act; torn out of the soul by the roots we would expect to find a few shreds of fallen human nature adhering. But apply that commonsense reasoning to ourselves, we cannot. In our own case we can see nothing but the self-love and lack of generosity; we know indeed that with the grace of the Holy Ghost we co-operated sufficiently to tip the scales God-wards, but what a poor and meagre response . . . we will try to be more generous next time. And we do try. And each successive attempt seems even poorer and more meagre than its predecessor, and our apparent failures throw us ever more completely into God's hands. If he wants us constantly to fail (or to feel that we fail) then we must accept it as his will: that is the only thing that really matters and, though he hides it from us in all our endeavours, that is the whole secret of the spiritual life. We see it plainly enough when considering others; it is only towards ourselves that our eyes are blinded. We grow in spirituality in proportion as our knowledge of God and of ourselves increases

and deepens. We tend to measure everything by his standards and the more intimate we become with him the more humbled we are by his infinite perfections, the more overwhelmed by his love and majesty: and the more abashed by our own nothingness. For indeed we are less than beggars, clothed and nourished by his bounty. He called us into being, but for his ever-present conservation we would fall back into the nothingness from which we came; he has raised us up to be not only his adopted children but participators of the divine nature and, if this were not enough, he has assumed unto himself our human nature that being one with us he might know by experience what temptation and sorrow and shrinking yet absolute surrender to the Father's will can mean. Always for our consolation in our manifold trials and aridities and apparent failures we have that piteous and sublime figure in the garden: 'Father, if thou wilt remove this chalice from me: but yet not my will but thine be done'. And when we unite our reluctant, fearful fiats with his we know they are of infinite value to him. We know that he, indwelling our very souls, has made the surrender for us and yet accounts it wholly ours. It would be false humility to pretend otherwise and pride to ascribe the surrender to ourselves. We know these things but in some mysterious way God hides them from us so that we see only the reluctance, the lack of generosity that seem to spoil our gift. 'Without me', said our Lord, 'you can do nothing.' But with him we have done something, faulty and feeble as it may be we have done something, and may we not take courage from this reflection and remember that in spite of aridity and despondency and dissatisfaction nothing but sin can separate us from 'the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord'.



### VOCATIONS AND THEIR RECOGNITION: III

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**C**OMING to the second element of a religious and priestly vocation, we learn from the Roman Catechism that those who have a divine vocation who are called by the legitimate ministers of the Church. This in no way contradicts what we have