

## MARTYRS THROUGH PRAYERS

BY

A CARTHUSIAN

*The simplicity of the just shall guide them.—Prov. II, 3.*

**W**HEN, at the beginning of the year 1535, Blessed John Houghton, the Prior of the London Charterhouse, announced to his monks gathered together in Chapter that they must either renounce the authority of the Pope or suffer death, all cried with one mind and one voice: 'Let us all die in our simplicity'. They had lived in simplicity, and it was in simplicity that they wished to die. But what exactly is this simplicity, which is the characteristic mark of every true Carthusian?

At the commencement of his religious life a novice is given, as it were, a guarantee that if he is faithful to the observance of his Rule, he will thereby be enabled to attain to that degree of sanctity to which he has been called by his religious vocation. By this, of course, must be understood, not a mere external observance, which is content with a material fulfilment of the letter of the Rule; but a sincere, internal fidelity, rendered living by a supernatural spirit, enabling the religious to recognise the divine will in even its least prescription. It is in this purity of intention, by which every detail, however commonplace, of religious daily life is referred immediately to God, that true simplicity consists; and it is just this which forms in the religious the internal man, that is to say man living the supernatural life of union with God; which, in a word, brings him to that perfection of charity which is the very end of his religious life.

From this it will be seen that sanctity in religion is considered as something which is very simple, and undoubtedly in the Charterhouse this has always been the case. Yet that is by no means the same as saying that it is quite easy to become a saint, even in religion. It is very simple; but is it very easy to seek God alone in all things, without turning aside by love for any created thing whatsoever, without stopping to consider one's own interests, without being deterred by the opinion of the rest of men, but

sacrificing all things for the glory of God, and performing all one's actions by pure love for him alone?

Undoubtedly, it is not easy; but it was the way which the novices of the London Charterhouse were taught to tread, and those who were faithful in following it did not hesitate to take that final step which gained for them the martyr's crown. On the other hand, those who failed during their lifetime to walk in this way of simplicity found their feet unaccustomed to that hard road when their faith was put to the supreme test: nor did they receive any extraordinary grace to enable them to do in a moment of trial what they had refused to do when sufficient grace had been offered to them during their time of preparation.

At first sight it might seem that our English martyrs had a very clear choice to make, which could leave them in no doubt as to what their duty was, however hard the fulfilment of that duty might seem. Yet, at the actual time, many good men were in doubt as to whether they were really called upon to offer a resistance to the will of their monarch which would cost them their lives. The situation became clearer as the break with Rome became more pronounced; but the Carthusians had been singled out as the first to be put to the test. If they acceded to the king's request, their example would influence others to do the same, since the repute of their community was universally high. If, on the other hand, as actually happened, they refused to acquiesce to the royal demands, then their punishment would serve to deter others from doing likewise. So argued Henry VIII.

On Blessed John Houghton fell the heavy responsibility of being the first to take the decision; and on that decision depended the fate of the community of which he was the head. The saintly Prior was distressed, not because of any anxiety about his own personal welfare, but in regard to the safety of his brethren. So he did what he had always been taught to do in all the difficulties with which he had been faced in his religious life: he had recourse to prayer. And, not content with his own prayers, he engaged the whole community to do likewise. So they all passed a triduum in prayer and spiritual exercises, and finally the Prior celebrated a conventual Mass of the Holy Ghost in order to obtain the grace to fulfil the will and the good pleasure of God. At that Mass the whole community received divine light, encouragement and assistance. Their singleness of purpose overcame any doubts or

hesitations they may have experienced, and they were ready to sacrifice everything, even life itself, for the love of God. In a short time a great work had been accomplished in their souls, and they had arrived at that perfection of charity which had been assigned to them as the goal of their striving. Whereas prayer had always been their principal concern in the Charterhouse of the Salutation of the Mother of God, it now became almost their sole occupation.

Yet, in spite of the fact that the members of that community were so united, each one received that measure of divine light and consolation which he had merited, or which it pleased God to bestow upon the individual soul. Many years previously one of the monks of the Charterhouse had foretold what would befall the community, and he used to say: 'Be of one mind in the House, and in the Lord. They will never overcome you, while you agree with one another.' In fact the whole community would have been ready to die together with their Father Prior; but he knew that this could not be and was greatly disturbed as to the fate of the weaker members. At that time there were about twenty in the House who were less than thirty-eight years old, and these now found themselves deprived, first of their Prior on 4th May, 1535, and then of their Vicar, their Procurator, and Dom Sebastian Newdigate, one of the leading members of the community, on 19th June of the same year. Of these latter it is written: 'And they went to death, as to a banquet, accepting it with great meekness and patience of heart, alacrity of body, and joyful countenance, in the hope of eternal life', just as Saint Thomas More said to his daughter Margaret of the three Priors who suffered on 4th May. 'Lo! dost thou not see, Meg, that these blessed Fathers are now as cheerfully going to their death as bridegrooms to their marriage? . . . For God, considering their long-continued life of most sore and grievous penance, will no longer suffer them to remain here in this vale of misery and iniquity, but speedily hence taketh them to the fruition of his everlasting Deity.'

In the next year, 1536, again on 4th May, four of the most zealous monks were sent by orders of the King's Council to two other Houses of the Order. During two whole years they were harassed in every possible way, until finally the community became divided. Just as before it was their spirit of simplicity which enabled the martyrs to see clearly where their duty lay, so

now it was a lack of that same spirit of simplicity that led the weaker members of the community to take the Oath of Supremacy: 'yet not without great hurt to their consciences, and many tears', as we are told by Dom Maurice Chauncey, who was himself finally induced to take the oath in like manner, in the hope of saving the House. Their hope was entirely ill-founded. Within a year those who had submitted—fifteen choir monks and six laybrothers—were expelled, on 15th November, 1538, and the House was given over to profane uses.

In the meantime, the ten members of the community who had continued to walk in simplicity before God and men were all gaoled on 4th June, 1537. Here they entered into their glory in a short time, owing to the foulness of the place of their confinement, with the exception of a laybrother, Blessed William Horn, who survived for four years. He was at last martyred at Tyburn on 4th August, 1540.

In this story of the London Charterhouse, the defection of the weaker half of the community serves to bring out more clearly the virtues of those who remained faithful till the end. The religious state is called a state of perfection, not because all religious are perfect, but because all oblige themselves by the vows they take at profession to tend to that perfection to which they are called. So, religion is a school of perfection, and all who are diligent and apply themselves to its study can hope to succeed; success depends, after divine grace, upon the good will of the scholar. Simplicity is taught to all; but it is not an iron mould into which all are forced, whether they will it or not. Visitors to the Charterhouse are struck by the simplicity of the life lived within its walls; but they are equally struck by the lack of rigid uniformity in the spirituality which they observe there. Simplicity is a spirit, and as such cannot be enforced: it must be spontaneous, or else it will wither and die.

Chauncey, who was but a young man at the time of his defection, only stumbled momentarily. He repented quickly, and when at length he died in his sixty-eighth year an iron chain was found fastened to his body, a sign of how lastingly he had humbly expiated his fault. One of his most treasured possessions was a manuscript copy of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, in the handwriting of Blessed William Exmew, the Vicar and subsequently the Procurator of the London Charterhouse. This relic, with its

precious associations, providentially came into the possession of the modern English Charterhouse.

'Charity', wrote the author of *The Cloud*, 'meaneth nought else but love of God for himself above all creatures, and of men for God even as thyself. And that in this work God is loved for himself and above all creatures, it seemeth right well. For, as it is said before, the substance of this work is nought else but a naked intent directed unto God himself. A *naked intent* I call it. Because in this work a perfect prentice asketh neither releasing of pain, nor increasing of reward, nor (shortly to say) nought but himself. Insomuch, that he neither recketh nor regardeth whether he be in pain or in bliss, but only that his will be fulfilled whom he loveth.' (c. 24.) Such is the contemplative ideal, which furnishes a sure hierarchy of values to those who seek it. God must be loved above all things for himself alone, and all things else for God's sake, as referred to him. Our fellow men must be loved as ourselves, and we must be prepared to renounce even our own life at the call of Christ. Since as long as we retain our bodily life we have not yet actually shown that we despise all that we possess for sake of that which we have been promised, therefore Saint Thomas concludes that in order to be a martyr it is necessary to suffer death itself for Christ's sake. That depends upon the will and good pleasure of God; but the simplicity of heart which is engendered by the assiduous pursuit of this ideal disposes the soul for martyrdom, should the call ever come: and, if it does not, leads the soul to that perfection of charity which is the goal of life here below. May we all die in that simplicity!