

TEMPTATIONS AGAINST THE CHURCH—II

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THE difficulty becomes more acute in certain minds, and the pain more excruciating when it seems that despite all conceivable efforts at adaptation, for reasons which render all initiative helpless, the action of the Church is far from being *efficacious*. Far from continually advancing, she seems to be slipping backwards. This is true even in lands where she appears to be reigning, even in places where her influence is acknowledged and supported, she does not make the gospel reign around her and the social order is not transformed by its principles. But should not a tree be judged by its fruits? Is not one, henceforth, justified in thinking that the Church will never be able to realise, more than in symbol, what others boast of bringing to actuality? Consequently, should not one transfer to these others the faith which he had once vowed to her?

How many equivocations there are in this argument which wears such a simple appearance! Certainly, if every member of the Church were all that he should be, it is evident that the kingdom of God would march forward at a different pace, even amid constantly increasing obstacles. It is equally true that a particular event in history, or a specific social frame, independently of the wills of individual men can create unfavourable conditions, profound misunderstandings, divorces between the Church and society, and so pose grave problems. But in order to have the opportunity to solve these problems, or at least, if it must be admitted that certain of them are temporarily beyond solution, to preserve our confidence intact, we must thoroughly scatter these concealed equivocations. Leaving aside, then, considerations which belong to sociology, the first thing to be done is to employ this discernment of spirits.

When we come to consider matters which concern the Church, we cannot judge in terms of advance or retreat, of

success or failure, in the manner one judges things strictly of the temporal order. The supernatural good which the Church pursues here below is totalled in the realm of the intangible. From generation to generation, the aggregate of the communion of saints mounts upwards. Another point: let us not start dreaming again of a Church externally triumphant. Her divine Master made her no promise of glittering successes in constantly increasing brilliance. It is not taking refuge in oratory or in romantic sentimentalising, but the enunciation of a law of her nature to repeat here the words of Pascal that she must, like Christ, be in agony to the end of time. Let us always remember the exigencies of 'the wisdom of redemption'. See her at work in the life and in the activity of Christ himself. This meditation will help us, even when torn by anxiety, to remain patient. It will make us transcend anxiety and emerge beyond, with no fear of letting us lapse backwards into a kind of surrender which would be disgraceful. The apostle must learn patience. The priest must frequently accept a feeling of helplessness. He must face the fact that he is almost never understood.

Above all, we must not mistake the nature of the Kingdom of God which is the Church's goal and whose anticipation is her mission. All of our faith comes to issue here. Without at all ignoring the urgency of the problems of temporal society nor the indispensable part the Church plays in their solution, how can we forget without detriment that she is intent upon solving a problem no less urgent, but loftier and more vast, more persistent and of wider scope? Just as a plague springing from its surroundings reacts against its cure and reappears under a new form, as soon as one thinks it is stamped out, so the radical evil which man bears in the depths of his being can arise again under unforeseeable aspects, as society itself undergoes change. This does not mean that we should not exhaust all efforts to seek improvement. The tenacity of evil should be only a challenge to battle more relentlessly and with greater perseverance. But supposing—and how regrettably distant we are from it—a social functioning which would approximate to such an ideal, that is, an external order as perfect as humans could make it, the work of the Church would not, so to

speak, have yet begun. For she has no intention of establishing us in life here below, but wants to lift us above this mortal existence. In bringing us Christ's redemption, she aims to detach us from that inner evil and open up for us another kind of life. In return, if she were to seek above all else temporal efficiency, even this would not be accorded her. If she were to wait until temporal conditions were at last bettered—whatever form such an *optimum* might conceivably take—in order to accomplish in the midst of the world her work of salvation, she would be unfaithful to her mission, which is to lead to the gates of heaven, not some ideal humanity of the future but the totality of the human race, not some mythical humanity but the flesh-and-blood human beings of each generation.

If then we are eager to be realistic, again we must make sure that our realism does not mistake its target. If we are anxious to be efficient, we must not base everything upon means which are of another order, of a kind to divert us from our purpose. If we can, as sometimes we ought, be severe with those who bear the name Catholic (with ourselves!), still we must know what we are doing and act in the name of standards which are not false. We must not lose sight of the Church's essential function.

However, this essential function—which would disappear completely if we refused to situate it at the centre of our present activity—is not to be judged from a quantitative point of view. On the other hand, the existence of a single saint would be sufficient witness to the divine value of the principle which had nourished him. But is our vision sufficiently purified? Do we know how to use our eyes to discover the effectiveness of the Church in this order of sanctity all about us? Let us try at least to catch a glimpse of it. Oh that the towering mass of externals did not conceal the inner reality from us! Would that the noise of debate over ideologies did not prevent our hearing the silent breathing of the Church! The great St Cyprian, head of a community which at that time hardly included more than the very poor and the unlettered, and had little appreciable influence on the destinies of the Roman empire, said long ago: 'We Christians say little, but we are *alive*!' This statement

remains ever true. It is scarcely necessary to discuss basic realities. The dynamism of Christianity at each epoch depends far less upon discussions and events and changes on the world scene than one is led to believe. For far beneath the roar of politics, the eddying of opinion, the ebb and flow of idea and controversy, out of reach of the world's inquisitive eye and ear, a life flows serenely on, communicating itself endlessly—and no verdict can be passed upon it from without. In hiddenness shines the kingdom of God. Here and there a random flash reveals it. Pools of light blend, spread out, join together; some stars in the night are ablaze with a whiter light. Sometimes there are patches, blood-red, to snap us to attention. They are portents for us.

Amid all this discussion about the Christianity of our time, and all the complaining about the Church's lack of adaptability and effectiveness, let us keep coming back to these very simple thoughts. The best Christians, those most fully alive, are not necessarily, nor even as a rule, found in the ranks of the savants, nor among the talented, nor among the intelligentsia, nor among the politicians, nor among those whose hands are heavy with power or gold, nor among the socially prominent. As a result the voice of these élite of Christ does not echo in the market-place nor in the daily press, nor does their activity at all interest the general public. Their life is hidden from the prying eyes of the world, and if they do arrive at the hall of fame, it is by way of exception and tardily, always with a risk of strange distortions. These are they, none the less, who—more than all the rest combined—are responsible for the fact that our earth is not a hell. The bulk of these followers of Christ never wonder if their faith is 'adapted' nor if it be 'efficacious'. It is enough for them to be living it, as an ever-present reality, but the fruit which they bring forth, although often hidden is not for that reason less magnificent. Even if they have not directly influenced the outer world, they are the inspiration of all the initiative and activity and creation which will endure in this world. And these are the men and women who preserve us and provide us with an inkling of hope. Who is to say that they are less numerous today than in other ages?

Let not a dream of *efficiency*, perhaps pure fantasy, blind us to the real *fecundity* of our holy Mother.

There is another temptation. This one, also, is beyond the ken of the coarser type of soul. Of all temptations it is the most serious. This temptation arises from a fact which St Paul already described: 'Consider, brethren, . . . that not many of you are wise, in the world's fashion, not many powerful, not many well-born'. Though the wise and the powerful and the well-born did come later the reflection of the apostle is not for that fact less profoundly true and universally applicable. The Church, like her Master, bears in the eyes of the world the appearance of a slave. She exists on this earth in the form of a slave (cf. Philippians 2, 7). And it is not merely the wisdom of the world, taken in a gross sense, that she lacks: it is also, at least so it seems, the wisdom of the spirit. She is as far from being an academy of savants, as she is from being an assembly of the sublimely spiritual or a collection of Nietzsche's supermen. Actually, she is the exact opposite. Within her ranks the crippled and the deformed and the miserable of every hue rub elbows, and the crowd of the mediocre, who are particularly at home in her midst, everywhere imposes its tone upon her. Her most magnificent accomplishments only serve to highlight this characteristic the more in the mediocrity of her membership as in the ordinary warp and woof of her existence. It would be a simple matter, indeed, to show this in detail. On the other hand, it is difficult, or rather completely impossible, for the natural man as long as his most intimate thoughts have not been spiritualised, to discover in such a fact the accomplishment of that *Kenosis* of redemption, the adorable path marked out by the 'lowliness of God'.

At all times the Church has drawn to herself the contempt of the élite. Philosophers or mystics, many noblest minds, in their quest for the profound life, refuse allegiance to her. Among them, some are openly hostile. Like Celsus, they are disgusted by 'this swarm of little people' and turn away from her, wrapped either in the Jovian serenity of Goethe, or in the Dionysiac madness of a Nietzsche. 'You make pretence', they seem to cry, 'to be the body of Christ'

the body of God! Would the body of God be fashioned of such gross material? And how, in the first place, can divinity have a body?' (Origen, quoting Celsus.)

Many others among the nobler souls think that they are giving the Church her just due, and protest at finding themselves listed as adversaries. If it ever became necessary they would patronise her. But just now they keep their distance. For themselves they want no part in a faith which would bury them in a crowd of the wretched, above whom they place themselves because of their aesthetic accomplishments, their philosophic insight, or their dedication to the higher life. These are the 'aristocrats', who cannot see themselves mingling with the *hoi polloi*. According to their line of thought, the Church leads men over paths too common. Willingly they acknowledge her ability to present sublime truth veiled in imagery. But they distinguish themselves as 'those who know' in opposition to 'those who only believe'. They pretend to know the Church better than she can ever know herself. They allot her a place in things, condescendingly, but without her leave they grant themselves the faculty of drawing the profounder meaning out of her doctrines and deeds. Some of these people establish themselves as leaders of a sect, offering their followers as secret lure, the promise of 'knowledge'. Such in olden times was a Valentinus, or that Faustus to whose influence Augustine for a time succumbed. Such in our own day, in different style, are certain moderns. Others in this category remain in their seclusion. Yet it is not always a satanic refusal which keeps them out of the Church. More simply, this can be the disgust which a high-minded person has for forms of life and thought which would make him part of the herd. Even more simply, it is sometimes a case of where a delicate soul shrinks back or fearfully withdraws into a shell. They ask: Does not formal membership in the Church, which frowns upon untrammelled investigation, and which holds back spiritual soaring, result in what is really regimentation and base promiscuity?

An echo more or less muffled rises up from these objections, these repugnances, to irritate the conscience of certain Christians. If their faith does not wither away, at least the

bonds which secure them to the Church are sometimes slackened, causing a loss of vigour and enthusiasm. The reason is, that even though from the standpoint of the truth Christianity can well emerge victorious over all trials, the Church herself would still not appear justified in what she is. At least a theoretical justification does not automatically abolish the humanly-felt repugnance to her. An unbiased examination can readily make it plain that the wisdom which the Church proposes, and with which she imbues her offspring, does not consist in the mass of 'childish trifles' of which St Augustine believed she was composed, before the sermons of St Ambrose had opened his eyes. Such an examination may well lead one to discover the solidity of her dogmas, even to see vaguely the profundity of her mysteries and how they are interpreted by the great doctors. It may well make us admire the splendour of the art and the richness of the culture which, at least during certain periods, made her human visage so illustrious. All this does not alter the manifest commonness of the mass of connecting cells which compose her body, and to which all Catholic existence must daily accommodate itself and in whose soil it must inevitably take root.

André Malraux, standing before the paintings in the Roman catacombs, the first artistic expression of the gospel word which range from Christ's own lips, exclaimed: 'How wretchedly these miserable scenes correspond to the rich tones of the Gospel Voice!' One could elaborate that remark. Will it not be the same inevitably with any expression of Catholic reality, whatever its mode or manner? In the sermon we hear today, what has happened to the riches of Revelation? In the usual way it is presented, what becomes of the Christian vocation? What becomes of the Kingdom of God in many minds among the devout faithful or among the theologians? What becomes of the holy love of unity in some hearts too little purified from human passions? And in the manuals of the theologian, what have they done too often to the sense of mystery? Pascal could write glowingly of that attribute which theological mystery has of holding together both extremes of a truth while polarising all the intervening space; but in practice, is not this soaring

synthesis changed into some dull formula of 'balanced compromise'? The wonderful *complexio oppositorum* that Catholicism presents under all its aspects frightens so many of her own believers. Does not the Church herself habitually discourage overbold thinking and spirituality that is too lofty? Should not then the forms which she most willingly approves be, of necessity, such that the average Catholic climate can bear them? Have we not to confess that this atmosphere is always, in Claudel's phrase, 'rather insipid and mediocre'? Even from the hands of those who believe themselves learned, what fodder, rehashed from age to age, is offered to the *irrisio infidelium*! In all truth, when you view her without illusion, when you bring her down from the ethereal atmosphere of pure idea and situate her in the hard core of reality, 'What is the Church if not, so to speak, a body of humiliation which provokes insult and godlessness?' or stern aversion or at best forbearance and reserve, 'among men who do not have the faith?' (Newman).

It is the whole of this very complexity, however, which we have, not indeed to canonise in its totality but to endure in its inevitable elements and to embrace in a loyalty which would not be loyal if it remained completely in the realm of the superficial. In order to accept the Church, one must take her as she is in her day-to-day human reality, as well as in her eternal divine idea, for *de jure* and *de facto* all disassociation is impossible. To love the Church, a man must first of all completely overcome his antipathy, then love her in her solid tradition and bury himself, so to speak, in the expansive mass of her life, like the grain of wheat buried in the ground. Such is the Catholic way of losing one's life in order to find it. Without this ultimate mediation, the mystery of salvation cannot touch us nor transfigure us. The Incarnation must be pushed to its logical conclusion, and according to that law, divinity must adapt itself to human weakness. To possess the treasure one must grasp the 'vessel of clay' in which it is borne and outside of which it escapes as vapour. In other words, the need for humility in order to belong to Jesus Christ demands also humility to seek him in his Church and to join intellectual submission with 'love for the brethren' (see I Peter 2, 17). Such is the

price of a good without price: the Catholic communion.

That is what Clement of Rome, the first successor of St Peter, wrote ages ago, in a single sentence plunging to the deepest meaning of the Church: 'Christ belongs to those who are humble in their sentiments, not to those who tower proudly above the flock'.

In the sight of the 'superior' man, everything in the Church appears lowly. But again in Pascal's phrase: 'strength goes hand-in-hand with this lowliness'. And it is found only with lowliness. The idealised forms of Church life in which the 'superior' man takes delight, seem to him loftier and more refined only because they are the offspring of his own mind. Let him search among them, if he will, for a tool with which to carve out a personality rich, harmonised, and vigorous, or a text for interpreting the universe, or a spring-board for projecting himself beyond the confines which wall in our human condition—they are all equally impotent, being unable even to begin changing the human heart. Despite their apparent grandeur, the thoughts of the 'superior' man are for him but a mirror in which he admires himself and which chain him to his pride. The sole grandeur which would not be full of deception, that which the Holy Spirit himself plants in man's heart, supposes the soil of the common faith, accepted without reservation and never abandoned. There alone flow the waters of Siloe. There alone opens up the royal road of the cross. The Church in her apparent lowliness is the sacrament, that is, the real and efficacious sign, of the 'profundity of God'. That is why the passage of the apostle Paul which we have just explained is at once, to the natural man, a statement of scandal, and to the man of faith a cry of triumph:

Consider, brethren, the circumstances of your own calling; not many of you are wise, in the world's fashion, not many powerful, not many well-born. No, God has chosen what the world holds foolish, so as to abash the wise, God has chosen what the world holds weak so as to abash the strong, God has chosen what the world holds base and contemptible, nay, has chosen what is nothing, so as to bring to nothing what is now in being; no human creature was

to have any ground for boasting, in the presence of God.'

(I Corinthians I, 26-29.)

Only a miracle of grace can make these things understood. Without grace, the most beautiful sentiments and the most lofty spiritual powers are only an obstacle. Even within the Church, as we have already seen, they can become temptations. If one day it should come to pass, that we are tempted in this way, it might be profitable to reread what St Augustine recounts for us in the eighth book of his *Confessions*. He heard this incident from his friend Simplician. The elderly Victorinus was a philosopher 'skilled in all the liberal learning'. However, this master who enjoyed the esteem of many senators of rank, this man who had lived to see his own statue erected in the Forum, ultimately came 'to feel no shame in making himself a slave for Christ, in bending his neck to the yoke with humility, and bowing his head beneath the opprobrium of the cross'. But this only took place after long resistance, made longer by a haughty inability to comprehend. His example, for that very reason, becomes only more beautiful:

Lord, 'Thou has let down the heavens and from them have come forth', but by what means were you able to get within the heart of a man like this? He was well versed in holy scripture. He was accustomed to search diligently for truth and was wont to study profoundly all the Christian documents. Also, not in public but in private did he say to Simplician: 'Know ye that now I am a Christian?' 'I will not believe that, I will not look upon thee as one of us until I shall see thee present within the Church of Christ.' Whereupon Victorinus smilingly replied: 'Ah, then, is it the walls of a building which make a man a Christian?' Again and again he insisted that he was a Christian, but always Simplician answered him in the same fashion and Victorinus returned with the same ironic remark. . . . But after he had formed the firm resolve through further intensive readings . . . he felt that he would be committing a veritable crime, if he continued to be ashamed of the mysteries instituted by Thy Word during His fleshly humiliation. . . . Abruptly he sought out Simplician, who hardly expected such an outcome, to

say: 'Let us hasten to the Church; I wish to become a Christian'. Simplician, scarcely able to contain his joy, at once set out with him. After his initial instruction in the basic truths of the *catechesis*, he even asked to have his name set down without further delay for the ceremony of baptism. All Rome was filled with astonishment and the Church with happiness. (*Confessions*, 1, 2.)

If the aged Victorinus had not resolved to take the decisive step and thus lose himself in the lowly flock of the 'practising' faithful, he would still be remembered doubtless as an outstanding philosopher. Perhaps he would still be admired as the theologian who first conceived the internal theory of the Trinity which St Augustine was later to elaborate into definite formulae for the West. His name would thus remain among those of the 'makers' of dogma and no better claim to fame would have been his. But had he not taken that step to humility, he would not have merited another title, plain enough to be frank, and for many scarcely noteworthy, but of all titles the most beautiful when its deep meaning is understood: *he* would not have been a *Catholic*.

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