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SEEDS OF CONTEMPLATION

BY THOMAS MERTON

A Man in the Divided Sea
Figures for an Apocalypse
The Seven Storey Mountain
Seeds of Contemplation

Seeds of Contemplation

by Thomas Merton



A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

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Nihil Obstat

JOHN M. A. FEARNs, S.T.D.

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ABBAS GENERALIS

*Memento Dei Genitrix
Et miserere pauperum;
Largire vitam mortuis,
Ostende nobis Filium.*

*Emitte Sapientiam,
Da nobis Lumen cordium,
Dilectionis copiam
Et gloriae primordium.*

*Gloria tibi Deitas
Qui sempiternae caelitus
Regnas, Pater et Filius
Et utriusque Spiritus.*

Amen



SEEDS OF CONTEMPLATION

A U T H O R ' S N O T E

THIS is the kind of book that writes itself almost automatically in a monastery. But perhaps that is one reason why relatively few such books get written. There is too much passion and too much physical violence for men to want to reflect much on the interior life and its meaning. Yet since the interior life and contemplation are the things we most of all need — I speak only of contemplation that springs from the love of God — the kind of considerations written in these pages ought to be something for which everybody, and not only monks, would have a great hunger in our time. And that is why I think a volume of more or less disconnected thoughts and ideas and aphorisms about the interior life needs no particular apology or excuse, even though this kind of book may have become unfamiliar.

If the reader needs any reminder that there exists a long tradition of such writing, he may consult Pascal's *Pensées*, the *Cautelas* and *Avisos* of St. John of the Cross, the *Meditationes* of Guigo the Carthusian, or, for that matter, the *Imitation of Christ*. But since to mention such names would seem to suggest a comparison with the work of great men whom the author would never dare to imitate, he simply mentions them to justify the publication of what is nothing more than a collection of notes and personal reflections.

These are the kind of thoughts that might have occurred to any Cistercian monk; they came to mind at odd moments and were put down on paper when there was time, without order and without any special sequence. Here they have been arranged, and a little expanded where details seemed to be required. They do not cover everything in the interior life. On the contrary, much is assumed or presupposed. Everything taught in the Gospel of Christ and the Rule of St. Benedict, everything accepted by Catholic tradition about the self-discipline of Christian asceticism is here taken for granted, and there is no attempt at apologetics on these points or any others. Much of what is said has its origin and justification in the writings of the Cistercians of the twelfth century, especially those of St. Bernard of Clairvaux who did most to form the spirituality of the contemplative Order to which the author belongs. But those who have made the acquaintance of St. John of the Cross will find that practically everything that is said about contemplative prayer follows lines laid down by the Spanish Carmelite. And so this book makes no claim to be revolutionary or even especially original. We sincerely hope it does not contain a line that is new to Catholic tradition or a single word that would perplex an orthodox theologian.

And that is why the book could have been written by any monk. It expresses the preoccupations that are more or less in the minds of all contemplatives — allow-

ing for differences of temperament and personality. It has no other end or ideal in view than what should be the ordinary fulfillment of the Christian life of grace, and therefore everything that is said here can be applied to anyone, not only in the monastery but also in the world.

The book does not claim, either, to be a work of art. Practically anybody else with the same interests might possibly have written it much better. The fact that this author happens to have written it does not make much difference one way or the other, either for better or, we hope, for worse. For this is the kind of book that achieves an effect that is not and cannot be controlled by any human author. If you can bring yourself, somehow, to read it in communion with the God in Whose Presence it was written, it will interest you and you will probably draw some fruit from it, more by His grace than by the author's efforts. But if you cannot read it under these conditions, no doubt the book will be at least a novelty.

Seeds of Contemplation

EVERY MOMENT AND EVERY EVENT of every man's life on earth plants something in his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of invisible and visible winged seeds, so the stream of time brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, because men are not prepared to receive them: for such seeds as these can not spring up anywhere except in the good soil of liberty and desire.

The mind that is the prisoner of its own pleasure and the will that is the captive of its own desire cannot accept the seeds of a higher pleasure and a supernatural desire.

For how can I receive the seeds of freedom if I am in love with slavery and how can I cherish the desire of God if I am filled with another and an opposite desire? God cannot plant His liberty in me because I am a prisoner and I do not even desire to be free. I love my captivity and I lock myself in the desire for the things that I hate, and I have hardened my heart against true love.

IF I were looking for God, every event and every moment would sow, in my will, grains of His life, that would spring up one day in a tremendous harvest.

For it is God's love that warms me in the sun and God's love that sends the cold rain. It is God's love that feeds me in the bread I eat and God that feeds me also by hunger and fasting. It is the love of God that sends the winter days when I am cold and sick, and the hot summer when I labor and my clothes are full of sweat: but it is God Who breathes on me with light winds off the river and in the breezes out of the wood. His love spreads the shade of the sycamore over my head and sends the water-boy along the edge of the wheatfield with a bucket from the spring, while the laborers are resting and the mules stand under the tree.

It is God's love that speaks to me in the birds and streams but also behind the clamor of the city God speaks to me in His judgments, and all these things are seeds sent to me from His will.

If they would take root in my liberty, and if His will would grow from my freedom, I would become the love that He is, and my harvest would be His glory and my own joy.

And I would grow together with thousands and millions of other freedoms into the gold of one huge field praising God, loaded with increase, loaded with corn.

IF in all things I consider only the heat and the cold, the food or the hunger, the sickness or labor, the beauty or pleasure, the success and failure or the material good or evil my works have won for my own will, I will find only emptiness and not happiness. I shall not be fed, I shall not be full. For my food is the will of Him Who made me and Who made all things in order to give Himself to me through them. My chief care should not be to find pleasure or success, health or life or money or rest or even things like virtue and wisdom — still less their opposites, pain, failure, sickness, death. But in all that happens, my one desire and my one joy should be to know: “Here is the thing that God has willed for me. In this His love is found, and in accepting this I can give back His love to Him and give myself with it to Him, and grow up in His will to contemplation, which is life everlasting.”

And by receiving His will with joy and doing it with gladness I have His love in my heart, because my will is now the same as His love and I am on the way to becoming what He is, Who is Love. And by accepting all things from Him I receive His joy into my soul, not because things are what they are but because God is Who He is, and His love has willed my joy in them all.

I Everything that is, is Holy

IT IS NOT TRUE THAT THE SAINTS and the great contemplatives never noticed created things, and had no understanding or appreciation of the world and its sights and sounds and the people living in it.

Do you think that their love of God was compatible with a hatred for things that reflected Him and spoke of Him on every side?

You will say that they were supposed to be absorbed in God and they had no eyes to see anything but Him. Do you think they walked around with faces like stones and did not listen to the voices of men speaking to them or understand the joys and sorrows of those who were around them? Then you do not know what contemplation is.

It was because the saints were absorbed in God that they were truly capable of seeing and appreciating created things and it was because they loved Him alone that they alone loved everybody.

Do you think that a saint has to excuse his interest in created things by tripping himself up in his language and introducing a lot of uselessly explicit references to

God whenever he talks or thinks about the world and what is in it? A saint is capable of talking about the world without any explicit reference to God, in such a way that his statement gives greater glory to God and arouses a greater love of God than the observations of someone less holy, who has to strain himself to make an arbitrary connection between creatures and God through the medium of hackneyed analogies and metaphors that are so stupid they make you think there is something the matter with religion.

And the reason for the difference is that the saint knows that the world and everything made by God is good, while those who are not saints either think that created things are unholy, or else they don't bother about the question one way or another because they are only interested in themselves.

The eyes of the saint make all beauty holy and the hands of the saint consecrate everything they touch to the glory of God, and the saint is never offended by anything and is scandalized at no man's sin because he does not know sin. He knows nothing but the love and the mercy of God and he is on earth to bring that love and that mercy to all men.

WHEN we belong to God's love we own all things in Him and offer them all to Him in Christ His Son. For all things are ours and we are Christ's and Christ is God's. Resting in His glory above all pleasure and pain,

joy or sorrow, and every other good or evil, we love in all things His will rather than the things themselves, and that is the way we make creation a sacrifice in praise of God.

This is the end for which all things were made by God.

THE only true joy on earth is to escape from the prison of our own self-hood (I do not say the body, because the body is God's temple and therefore it is holy), and enter by love into union with the Life Who dwells and sings within the essence of every creature and in the core of our own souls. In His love we possess all things and enjoy fruition of them, finding Him in them all. And thus as we go about the world everything we meet and everything we see and hear and touch, far from defiling, purifies us and plants in us something more of contemplation and of heaven.

Short of this perfection, created things do not bring us joy but pain. Until we love God perfectly, everything in the world will be able to hurt us. And the greatest misfortune is to be dead to the pain they inflict on us, and not to realize what it is.

For until we love God perfectly His world is full of contradiction. The things He has created attract us to Him and yet keep us away from Him. They draw us on and they stop us dead. We find Him in them to some extent and then we don't find Him in them at all.

Just when we think we have discovered some joy in them, the joy turns into sorrow; and just when they are beginning to please us the pleasure turns into pain.

In all created things we, who do not yet love God, can find something that reflects the fulfillment of heaven and something that reflects the anguish of hell. We find something of the joy of blessedness and something of the pain of loss, which is damnation.

The fulfillment belongs to the reality of the created being, a reality that is from God and belongs to God and reflects God. The anguish belongs to the disorder of our desire which looks for a greater reality in the object of our desire than is actually there: a greater fulfillment than it is capable of giving. Instead of worshipping God through His creation we are always trying to worship ourselves with creatures.

But the reality in us is not one that can be worshipped. To worship ourselves is to worship nothing. And the worship of nothing is hell.

A TREE GIVES GLORY TO GOD first of all by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be, it is imitating an idea which is in God and which is not distinct from the essence of God, and therefore a tree imitates God by being a tree.

The more it is like itself, the more it is like Him. If it tried to be like something else which it was never intended to be, it would be less like God and therefore it would give Him less glory.

But there is something more. No two trees are alike. And their individuality is no imperfection. On the contrary: the perfection of each created thing is not merely in its conformity to an abstract type but in its own individual identity with itself. This particular tree will give glory to God by spreading out its roots in the earth and raising its branches into the air and the light in a way that no other tree before or after it ever did or will do.

Do you imagine that all the individual created things in the world are imperfect attempts at reproducing an ideal type which the Creator never quite succeeded in

actualizing on earth? If that is so they do not give Him glory but proclaim that He is not a perfect Creator.

Therefore each particular being, in its individuality, its concrete nature and entity, with all its own characteristics and its private qualities and its own inviolable identity, gives glory to God by being precisely what He wants it to be here and now, in the circumstances ordained for it by His Love and His infinite Art.

THE forms and individual characters of living and growing things and of inanimate things and of animals and flowers and all nature, constitute their holiness in the sight of God.

Their inscape is their sanctity.

The special clumsy beauty of this particular colt on this April day in this field under these clouds is a holiness consecrated to God by His own Art, and it declares the glory of God.

The pale flowers of the dogwood outside this window are saints. The little yellow flowers that nobody notices on the edge of that road are saints looking up into the face of God.

This leaf has its own texture and its own pattern of veins and its own holy shape, and the bass and trout hiding in the deep pools of the river are canonized by their beauty and their strength.

But the great, gashed, half-naked mountain is another of God's saints. There is no other like it. It is alone

in its own character; nothing else in the world ever did or ever will imitate God in quite the same way. And that is its sanctity.

BUT what about you? What about me?

Unlike the animals and the trees, it is not enough for us to be what our nature intends. It is not enough for us to be individual men. For us, holiness is more than humanity. If we are never anything but men, never anything but our natural selves, we will not be saints and we will not be able to offer to God the worship of our imitation, which is sanctity.

It is true to say that for me sanctity consists in being myself and for you sanctity consists in being *your* self and that, in the last analysis, your sanctity will never be mine and mine will never be yours, except in the communism of charity and grace.

FOR me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self.

Trees and animals have no problem. God makes them what they are without consulting them, and they are perfectly satisfied.

With us it is different. **God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please.** But the problem is this: *since God alone possesses the secret of my identity, He alone can make me who I am*

or rather, He alone can make me who I will be when I at last fully begin to be.

The seeds that are planted in my liberty at every moment, by God's will, are the seeds of my own identity, my own reality, my own happiness, my own sanctity.

To refuse them is to refuse everything: it is the refusal of my own existence and being: of my identity, my very self.

Not to accept and love and do God's will is to refuse the fullness of my existence.

And if I never become what I am meant to be, but always remain what I am not, I shall spend eternity contradicting myself by being at once something and nothing, a life that wants to live and is dead, and a death that wants to be dead and cannot quite achieve its own death because it still has to exist.

To say I was born in sin is to say I came into the world with a false self. I came into existence under a sign of contradiction, being someone that I was never intended to be and therefore a denial of what I am supposed to be. And thus I came into existence and non-existence at the same time because from the very start I was something that I was not.

To say the same thing without paradox: as long as I am no longer anybody else than the thing that was born of my mother, I am so far short of being the per-

son I ought to be that I might as well not exist at all. In fact, it were better for me that I had not been born.

EVERY one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self.

This is the man that I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown of God is altogether too much privacy.

My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the radius of God's will and God's love — outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion.

We are not very good at recognizing illusions: least of all the ones we have about ourselves — the ones we are born with and which feed the roots of sin. For most of the people in the world, there is no greater subjective reality than this false self of theirs, which does not and cannot exist. A life devoted to the cult of this shadow is what is called a life of sin.

All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered. Thus I use up my life trying to accumulate pleasures and experiences and power and honor and knowledge and love, to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real. And I wind experiences around

myself and cover myself up with pleasures and glory like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world, as if I were an invisible body that could only become visible when something visible covered its surface.

But there is no substance under the things I have gathered together about me. I am hollow, and my structure of pleasures and ambitions has no foundation. I am objectified in them. But they are all destined by their very contingency to be destroyed. And when they are gone there will be nothing left of me but my own nakedness and emptiness and hollowness, to tell me that I am a mistake.

THE secret of my identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God.

But whatever is in God is really identical with Him: for His infinite simplicity admits no division and no distinction. Therefore I cannot hope to find myself anywhere except in Him.

Ultimately the only way that I can be myself is to become identified with Him in Whom is hidden the reason and fulfillment of my existence.

Therefore there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him, I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him.

But although this looks simple, it is in reality im-

mensely difficult. In fact if I am left to myself it will be utterly impossible. For although I can know something of God's existence and nature by my own reason, there is no human and rational way in which I can arrive at that contact, that possession of Him, which will be the discovery of Who He really is and of Who I am in Him.

That is something that no man can ever do alone.

Nor can all the men and all the created things in the universe help him in this work.

The only One Who can teach me to find God is God, Himself, Alone.

3 Pray for Your Own Discovery

THERE EXISTS SOME POINT AT which I can meet God in a real and experimental contact with His infinite actuality: and it is the point where my contingent being depends upon His love. Within myself is a metaphorical apex of existence at which I am held in being by my Creator.

God utters me like a word containing a thought of Himself.

A word will never be able to comprehend the voice that utters it.

But if I am true to the concept that God utters in me, if I am true to the thought of Him I was meant to embody, I shall be full of His actuality and find Him everywhere in myself, and find myself nowhere. I shall be lost in Him.

What one of you can enter into himself and find the God Who utters him?

If, like the mystics of the Orient, you succeed in emptying your mind of every thought and every desire, you may indeed withdraw into the center of yourself and concentrate everything within you upon the imaginary point where your life springs out of God:

yet you will not find God. No natural exercise can bring you into vital contact with Him. Unless He utters Himself in you, speaks His own name in the center of your soul, you will no more know Him than a stone knows the ground upon which it rests in its inertia.

OUR discovery of God is, in a way, God's discovery of us. We cannot go to heaven to find Him because we have no way of knowing where heaven is or what it is. He comes down from heaven and finds us. He looks at us from the depths of His own infinite actuality, which is everywhere, and His seeing us gives us a superior reality in which we also discover Him. We only know Him in so far as we are known by Him, and our contemplation of Him is a participation of His contemplation of Himself.

We become contemplatives when God discovers Himself in us.

At that moment, the point of our contact with Him opens out and we pass through the center of our own souls, and enter eternity.

It is true that God knows Himself in all the things that exist. He sees them, and it is because He sees them that they exist. It is because He loves them that they are good. His love in them is their intrinsic goodness. The value He sees in them is their value. In so far as He sees and loves them, all things reflect Him.

But although God is present in all things by His knowledge and His love and His power and His care of them, He is not necessarily realized and known by them. He is only known and loved by those to whom He has freely given a share in His own knowledge and love of Himself.

In order to know and love God as He is, we must have God dwelling in us in a new and special way. And so God bridges the infinite distances between Himself and the spirits created to love Him, by supernatural missions of His own Life. The Father, dwelling in the depths of all things and in my own depths, communicates to me His Word and His Spirit, and in these missions I am drawn into His own life and know God in His own Love.

My discovery of my identity begins and is perfected in these missions, because it is in them that God Himself, bearing in Himself the secret of who I am, begins to live in me not only as my Creator but as my other and true self. *Vivo, iam non ego, vivit vero in me Christus.*

THESE missions begin at Baptism. But they do not take on any practical meaning in the life of our faculties until we become capable of conscious acts of love. From then on God's special presence in us depends entirely on our own preferences. From then on our life becomes a series of choices between the fiction of our false-self, whom

we feed with the illusions of passion and selfish appetite, and our true identity in the peace of God.

As long as I am on earth my mind and will remain more or less impervious to the missions of God's Word and His Spirit. I do not easily receive His light.

Every movement of my own natural appetite, even though my nature is good in itself, tends in one way or another to keep alive in me the illusion that is opposed to God's reality living within me. Even though my natural acts are good they have a tendency, when they are only natural, to concentrate my faculties on the man that I am not, the one I cannot be, the false-self in me, the person that God does not know. This is because I am born in selfishness. I am born self-centered. And this is original sin.

Even when I try to please God, I tend to please my own ambition, His enemy. There can be death and impurity in every movement of natural zeal, even in the ardent love of great perfection, even in the desire of virtue, of sanctity. Even the desire of contemplation can be impure, when we forget that true contemplation means the complete destruction of all selfishness, and the most pure poverty and cleanness of heart.

ALTHOUGH God lives in the souls of men who are unconscious of Him, how can I say that I have found Him and found myself in Him if I never know Him or think of Him, never take any interest in Him or seek

Him or desire His presence in my soul? What good does it do to say a few formal prayers to Him and then turn away and give all my mind and all my will to created things, desiring only ends that fall far short of Him? Even though my soul may be justified, yet if my mind does not belong to Him then I do not belong to Him either. If my desires do not reach out towards Him but scatter themselves in His creation, it is because I have reduced His life in me to the level of a formality, forbidding it to move me with anything like a vital influence.

Justify my soul, O God, but also from Your fountains fill my will with fire. Shine in my mind, although perhaps this means “be darkness to my experience,” but occupy my heart with Your tremendous Life. Let my eyes see nothing in the world but Your glory, and let my hands touch nothing that is not for Your service. **Let my tongue taste no bread that does not strengthen me to praise Your glory.** I will hear Your voice and I will hear all harmonies You have created, singing Your hymns. Sheep’s wool and cotton from the field shall warm me enough that I may live in Your service, and all that is beyond belongs to Your poor. Let me use all things for one sole reason: to find my joy in giving You great glory.

Therefore keep me, above all things, from sin. Keep me from the death of deadly sin which puts hell in my soul. Keep me from the murder of lust that blinds and

poisons my heart. Keep me from the sins that eat a man's flesh with irresistible fire until he is devoured. Keep me from loving money in which is hatred, from avarice and ambition that suffocate my life. Keep me from the vain works of vanity and the thankless labor in which artists destroy themselves for pride and money and reputation, and saints are smothered under the avalanche of their own importunate zeal. Stanch in me the rank wound of covetousness and the hungers that exhaust my nature with their bleeding. Stamp out the serpent envy that stings love with poison and kills all joy.

Untie my hands and deliver my heart from sloth. Set me free from the laziness that goes about disguised as activity when activity is useless, and from the cowardice that does what is not demanded, in order to escape sacrifice.

But give me the strength that waits upon You in silence and in peace. Give me humility in which alone is rest, and deliver me from pride which is the heaviest of burdens. And possess my whole heart and soul with the simplicity of love for which one thing alone is necessary. Occupy my whole life with the one thought and the one desire of love, that I may love not for the sake of merit, not for the sake of perfection, not for the sake of virtue, not for the sake of sanctity but for love alone.

For there is only one thing that can satisfy love and reward it: and that is love alone.

THIS then is what it means to seek God perfectly: to withdraw from illusion and pleasure, from worldly anxieties and desires, from the works that God does not want, from a glory that is only human display; to keep my mind free from confusion in order that my liberty may be always at the disposal of His will; to entertain silence in my heart and listen for the voice of God; to cultivate an intellectual freedom from concepts and the images of created things in order to receive the secret contact of God in faith; to love all men as myself; to rest in humility and to find peace in withdrawal from conflict and competition with other men; to turn aside from controversy and put away heavy loads, judgment and censorship and criticism and the whole burden of opinions that I have no obligation to carry; to have a will that is always ready to fold back within itself and draw all the powers of the soul down into its deepest center to rest in silent expectancy for the coming of God, poised in tranquil and effortless concentration upon the point of my dependence on Him; to gather all that I am and have and all that I can possibly suffer or do or be, and abandon them all to God in the resignation of a perfect love and blind faith and pure trust in God, to do His will.

And then to wait in peace and emptiness and oblivion of all things.

Bonum est praestolari cum silentio salutare Dei.

IN ORDER TO BECOME MYSELF I must cease to be what I always thought I wanted to be, and in order to find myself I must go out of myself, and in order to live I have to die.

The reason for this is that I am born in selfishness and therefore all my natural efforts to make myself more real and more myself, make me less real and less myself, because they all revolve around a lie.

PEOPLE who know nothing of God and whose lives are centered on themselves, imagine that they can only find themselves by asserting their own desires and ambitions and appetites in a struggle with the rest of the world. They try to become real by imposing themselves on other people, by appropriating for themselves some share of the limited supply of created goods and thus emphasizing the difference between themselves and the other men who have less than they, or nothing at all.

They can only conceive one way of becoming real: cutting themselves off from other people and building a barrier of contrast and distinction between themselves and other men.

I have what you have not. I am what you are not. I have taken what you have failed to take and I have seized what you could never get. Therefore you suffer and I am happy, you are despised and I am praised, you die and I live: you are nothing and I am something, and I am all the more something because you are nothing. And thus I spend my life admiring the distance between you and me; at times this even helps me to forget the other men who have what I have not and who have taken what I was too slow to take and who have seized what was beyond my reach, who are praised as I cannot be praised and who live on my death. . . .

The man who lives like that is living in death. He cannot find himself because he is lost; he has ceased to be a reality. The person he believes himself to be is a bad dream. And when he dies he will discover that he long ago ceased to exist because God, Who is infinite reality and in Whose sight is the being of everything that is, will say to him: "I know you not."

I AM thinking of the disease which is spiritual pride. I am thinking of the peculiar unreality that gets into the hearts of the saints and eats their sanctity away before it is mature. There is something of this worm in the hearts of all religious men. As soon as they have done something which they know to be good in the eyes of God, they tend to take its reality to themselves and to make it their own. They tend to destroy their virtues by

claiming them for themselves and clothing their own private illusion of themselves with values that belong to God. Who can escape the secret desire to breathe a different atmosphere from the rest of men? Who can do good things without seeking to taste in them some sweet distinction from the common run of sinners in this world?

This sickness is most dangerous when it succeeds in looking like humility. When a proud man thinks he is humble his case is hopeless.

Here is a man who has done many things that were hard for his flesh to accept. He has come through difficult trials and done a lot of work, and by God's grace he has come to possess a habit of fortitude and self-sacrifice in which, at last, labor and suffering become easy. It is reasonable that his conscience should be at peace. But before he realizes it, the clean peace of a will united to God becomes the complacency of a will that loves its own excellence.

The pleasure that is in his heart when he does difficult things and succeeds in doing them well, tells him secretly: "I am a saint." Then he realizes that other people admire him. The pleasure burns into a sweet, devouring fire. The warmth of that fire feels very much like the love of God. It is fed by the same virtues that nourished the flame of charity. He burns with self-admiration and thinks: "It is the fire of the love of God."

He thinks his own pride is the Holy Ghost.

The sweet warmth of pleasure becomes the criterion of all his works. The relish he savors in acts that make him admirable in his own eyes, drives him to fast, or to pray, or to hide in solitude, or to write many books, or to build churches and hospitals, or to start a thousand organizations. And when they succeed he thinks his sense of satisfaction is the unction of the Holy Spirit.

And the secret voice of pleasure sings in his heart: "*Non sum sicut caeteri homines.*"

Once he has started on this path there is no limit to the evil his self-satisfaction may drive him to do in the name of God and of His love, and for His glory. He is so pleased with himself that he can no longer tolerate the advice of another — or the commands of a superior. When some one opposes his desires he folds his hands humbly and seems to accept it for the time being, but in his heart he is saying: "I am persecuted by worldly men. They are incapable of understanding one who is led by the Spirit of God. With the saints it has always been so."

After that he is ten times as stubborn as before.

It is a terrible thing when such a one gets the idea he is a prophet or a messenger of God or a man with a mission to reform the world. . .

I MUST look for my identity, somehow, not only in God but in other men.

I will never be able to find myself if I isolate myself from the rest of mankind as if I were a different kind of being.

Some men have perhaps become hermits with the thought that sanctity involved some kind of escape from other men. But the only justification for a life of deliberate solitude is the conviction that it will help you to love not only God but also other men. Otherwise, if you go into the desert merely to get away from crowds of people you dislike, you will not find peace or solitude either: you will only isolate yourself with a tribe of devils.

Go into the desert not to escape other men but in order to find them in God.

THERE is no true solitude except interior solitude. And interior solitude is not possible for anyone who does not accept his true place in relation to other men. There is no true peace possible for the man who still imagines that some accident of talent or grace or virtue segregates him from other men and places him above them.

God does not give us graces or talents or virtues for ourselves alone. We are members one of another and everything that is given to one member is given for the whole body. I do not wash my feet to make them more beautiful than my face.

The saints love their sanctity not because it separates them from the rest of us and places them above us, but

because, on the contrary, it brings them closer to us and in a sense places them below us. Their sanctity is given them in order that they may help us and serve us — for the saints are like doctors and nurses who are better than the sick in the sense that they are healthy and possess arts of healing them, and yet they make themselves the servants of the sick and devote their own health and their art to them.

The saints are glad to be saints, not because their sanctity makes them admirable to others but *because the gift of sainthood makes it possible for them to admire everybody else*. It gives them a vision that can find good in the most terrible criminals. It delivers them from the burden of judging others, condemning other men.

IN humility is the greatest freedom. As long as you have to defend the imaginary self that you think is important, you lose your peace of heart. As soon as you compare that shadow with the shadows of other people, you lose all joy, because you have begun to trade in unrealities, and there is no joy in things that do not exist.

As soon as you begin to take yourself seriously and imagine that your virtues are important because they are yours, you become the prisoner of your own vanity and even your best works will blind and deceive you. Then, in order to defend yourself, you will begin to

see sins and faults everywhere in the actions of other men. And the more unreasonable importance you attach to yourself and to your own works, the more you will tend to build up your own idea of yourself by condemning other people. Some of the most virtuous men in the world are also the bitterest and most unhappy, because they have unconsciously come to believe that all their happiness depends on their being more virtuous than other men.

When humility delivers a man from attachment to his own works and his own reputation, he discovers that true joy is only possible when we have completely forgotten ourselves. And it is only when we pay no more attention to our own life and our own reputation and our own excellence that we are at last completely free to serve God in perfection for His own sake alone.

A MAN who is not stripped and poor and naked within his own soul will always unconsciously do the works he has to do for his own sake rather than for the glory of God. He will be virtuous not because he loves God's will but because he wants to admire his own virtues. But every moment of the day will bring him some frustration that will make him bitter and impatient and in his impatience he will be discovered.

He has planned to do spectacular things. He cannot conceive himself without a halo. And when the events

of his daily life keep reminding him of his own insignificance and mediocrity he is ashamed, and his pride refuses to swallow a truth at which no sane man should be surprised.

Even saints, and sometimes the saints most of all, waste their lives in competition with one another, in which nothing is found but misery.

The only way to escape from this unhappiness is to be content that you are not yet a saint, even though you realize that the only thing worth living for is sanctity. Then you will be satisfied to let God lead you to sanctity by paths that you cannot understand. You will travel in darkness in which you will no longer be concerned with yourself and no longer compare yourself with other men. Those who have gone by that way have finally found out that sanctity is everywhere and that God is all around them. Having given up all desire to compete with the other saints, they suddenly wake up and find that the joy of God is everywhere, and they are able to exult in the virtues and goodness of others more than they ever could have done in their own. They are so dazzled by the reflection of God in the souls of the men they live with, that they no longer have any power to condemn anything they see in another. Even in the greatest sinners they can see virtues and goodness that no one else can find. As for themselves, if they still consider themselves, they no longer dare to compare themselves with others. The idea has

now become unthinkable. But it is no longer a source for great suffering and lamentation: they have finally reached the point where they take their own insignificance for granted and are no longer interested in themselves.

To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence: for God is love.

Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name.

If, therefore, I do anything or think anything or say anything or know anything or desire anything that is not purely for the love of God, it cannot give me peace, or rest, or fulfillment, or joy.

To find love I must enter into the sanctuary where it is hidden: which is the essence of God. And to enter into His sanctity I must become holy as He is holy, perfect as He is perfect. None of this can be done by any effort of my own, by any striving of my own, by any competition with other men. It means leaving all the ways that men can follow or understand.

I who am without love cannot become love unless Love identifies me with Himself. But if He sends His own Love, Himself, to act and love in me and in all that I do, then I shall be transformed, I shall discover who I am and shall possess my true identity by losing myself in Him.

And that is what is called sanctity.

ONE of the greatest paradoxes of the mystical life is this: that *a man cannot enter into the deepest center of himself and pass through that center into God, unless he is able to pass entirely out of himself and empty himself and give himself to other people in the purity of a selfless love.*

And so one of the worst illusions in the mystical life would be to try to find God by barricading yourself inside your own soul, shutting out all external reality by sheer concentration and will-power, cutting yourself off from the world and other men by stuffing yourself inside your own mind and closing the door like a turtle.

Fortunately most of the men who try this sort of thing never succeed. For self-hypnotism is the exact opposite of contemplation. We enter into possession of God when He invades all our faculties with His light and His infinite fire. But this business of doping your mind and isolating yourself from everything that lives, merely deadens you to all the opportunities for love which is the heart of contemplation.

THE more I become identified with God, the more will I be identified with all the others who are identified with Him. His Love will live in all of us. His Spirit will be our One Life, the Life of all of us and the Life of God. And we shall love one another and God with the same Love with which He loves us and Himself. This Love is a Person, and it is God Himself.

Christ prayed that all men might become One as He was One with His Father, in the Unity of the Holy Spirit. Therefore when you and I become what we are really meant to be, we will discover not only that we love one another perfectly but that we are the same Mystical Person, and that we are both living in Christ and Christ in us, and we are all One Christ.

The ultimate perfection of the contemplative life is not a heaven of separate individuals, each one viewing his own private vision of God: it is a sea of Love which flows through the One Person of all the elect, all the angels and saints, and their contemplation would be incomplete if it were not shared, or if it were shared with fewer souls, or with spirits capable of less vision and less joy.

And I will have more joy in heaven and in the contemplation of God, if you are also there to share it with me; and the more of us there will be to share it the greater will be the joy of all. For contemplation is not ultimately perfect unless it is shared. We do not finally taste the full exultation of God's glory until we share His infinite gift of it by overflowing and transmitting glory all over heaven, and seeing God in all the others, and knowing that He is the Life of all of us and that we are all One in Him.

Even on earth it is the same, but in obscurity. This unity is something we cannot yet realize and enjoy ex-

cept in the darkness of faith. But even here the more we are alone with God the more we are united with one another; and the silence of contemplation is deep and rich and endless society, not only with God but with men. Yet perhaps for the time being it is better to forget about it, because it might upset our imagination. For if we remembered individuals and thought of them in our contemplation, that would tend to withdraw us from God and therefore from spiritual union with them. We remain more truly with them when we no longer clearly know them. For we are still in transition, waiting to find God in them visibly and clearly. Until then, we find both them and God in one darkness, which is contemplation.

The more we are alone with Him the more we are with one another, in darkness, yet a multitude. And the more we go out to one another in work and activity and communication, according to the will and charity of God, the more we are multiplied in Him and yet we are in solitude.

The more we are alone the more we are together; and the more we are in society, the true society of charity, not of cities and physical mobs, the more we are alone with Him. For in my soul and in your soul I find the same Christ Who is our Life, and He finds Himself in our love, and together we all find Paradise which is the sharing of His Love for His Father in the Person of Their Spirit.

My true personality will be fulfilled in the mystical Person of Christ in this one way above all, that through me, Christ and His Spirit will be able to love you and all men and God the Father in a way that would be possible in no one else.

Love comes out of God and gathers us to God in order to pour itself back into God through all of us and bring us all back to Him on the tide of His own infinite mercy.

So we all become avenues and windows through which God shines back into His own house.

When the Love of God is in me, God is able to love you through me and you are able to love God through me. If my soul were closed to that love, God's love for you and your love for God and God's love for Himself in you and in me, would be denied the particular expression which it finds through me and through no other.

Because God's love is in me it can come to you from a different and special direction that would be closed if He did not live in me, and because His love is in you it can come to me from a quarter from which it would not otherwise come. And because it is in both of us, God has greater glory. His love is expressed in two more ways in which it would not otherwise be expressed: that is, in two more joys that could not exist without Him.

LET us live in this love and this happiness, you and I

and all of us, in the love of Christ and in contemplation: for this is where we find ourselves and one another as we truly are. It is only in this love that we at last become real. For it is here that we most truly share the reality of One God in Three Persons.

God in His Trinity of subsistent relations makes an infinite escape from every shadow of selfishness. For the One God does not subsist apart and alone in His oneness: He subsists as Father and as Son and as Holy Ghost. These Three are One: but apart from them God does not subsist also as One. He is Three Persons, but One God. But the Persons are not independent and alone. They are One and yet they exist in view of each other, communicating their One Infinite Being to One another.

For the Father is only the Father because of the Son and the Holy Ghost Who proceed from Him, and the Word is the Son because of the Father Whose Being He communicates to the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit is only the Spirit for the sake of the Father and the Son and for the sake of perpetuating this communication in the unending plenitude of Love.

Each of these Three exists not for Himself but for the others, and the One God Who exists only in them is a circle of relations in which His infinite reality, Love, is ever identical and ever renewed, always perfect and always total, always beginning and never ending, absolute, everlasting and full.

In the Father the infinite Love of God is always beginning and in the Son it is always full and in the Holy Spirit it is perfect and it is renewed and never ceases to return to its everlasting source. But if you follow Love forward and backward through the circulation from Person to Person, you can never track it to a stop, you can never corner it and hold it down and fix it to one of the Persons as if He could appropriate to Himself the fruit of the love of the others. For the One Love of the Three Persons is an infinitely rich giving of Itself which never ends and is never taken, but is always perfectly given, only received in order to be perfectly shared and returned.

It is because this circulation of the Love of God never finds a *self* that is capable of halting and absorbing it, but only another principle of communication and return, that the Life and Happiness of God are absolutely infinite and perfect and inexhaustible. Therefore in God there can be no selfishness, because the Three Selves of God are Three subsistent relations of selflessness, overflowing and superabounding in joy in the perfection of their Gift of their One Life to One another.

The Love of these Persons is contemplation. Our joy and our life are destined to be nothing but a participation in the Life that is theirs. In Them we will one day live entirely for God and for one another as the Persons of God live for One another.

5 A Body of Broken Bones

YOU AND I AND ALL MEN WERE made to find our identity in the One Mystical Person of Christ, in Whom we all complete one another “unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ.”

When we all reach that perfection of love which is the contemplation of God in His glory, our inalienable personalities, while remaining eternally distinct, will nevertheless combine into one Person so that each one of us will find himself in all the others: and God will be the life and reality of all. *Omnia in omnibus Deus.*

It is only the fire of God, Who is a consuming Fire, that can refine us like gold, and separate us from the slag and dross of our selfish individualities to fuse us into this wholeness of perfect unity that will reflect His own Triune Life forever.

As long as we refuse His love the power to consume us entirely and unite us to one another in Himself, the gold that is in us will be hidden by the rock and dirt which keep us in opposition to one another.

As long as we are not purified by the love of God and

transformed into Him in the union of pure sanctity, we will remain separate from one another, opposed to one another, and union among us will be a precarious and painful thing, full of labor and sorrow and without lasting cohesion.

IN the whole world, throughout the whole of history, even among religious men and among saints, Christ suffers dismemberment.

His physical Body was crucified by Pilate and the Pharisees: His mystical Body is drawn and quartered from age to age by the devils in the agony of that disunion which is bred and vegetates in our souls prone to selfishness and to sin.

All over the face of the earth the avarice and lust of men breed unceasing divisions among them, and the wounds that tear men from union with one another widen and open out into huge wars. Murder, massacres, revolution, hatred, the slaughter and torture of the bodies and souls of men, the destruction of cities by fire, the starvation of millions, the annihilation of populations and finally the cosmic inhumanity of atomic war: Christ is massacred in His members, torn limb from limb; God is murdered in men.

The history of the world, with the material destruction of cities and nations and people, expresses the division that tyrannizes the souls of all men, and even of the saints.

Even the innocent, even those in whom Christ lives by charity, even those who want with their whole heart to love one another, remain divided and separate. Although they are already one Person in Him, their union is hidden from them, because it still only possesses the secret substance of their souls.

But their minds and their judgments and their desires, their human characters and faculties, their appetites and their ideals are all imprisoned in the slag of an inescapable worldliness which love has not yet been able to refine.

As long as we are on earth, the love that unites us will bring us suffering by our very contact with one another, because this love is the resetting of a Body of broken bones. Even saints cannot live with saints on this earth without some anguish, without some pain at the differences that come between them.

There are two things which men can do about the pain of disunion with other men. They can love or they can hate.

Hatred recoils from the sacrifice and the sorrow that are the price of this resetting of bones. It refuses the pain of reunion. It identifies the agony with the other men whose presence causes agony in us by reminding us of our disunion.

Hatred tries to cure disunion by annihilating those who are not united with us. It seeks peace by the elimination of everybody else but ourselves.

But Love, by its acceptance of the pain of reunion, begins to heal all wounds.

IT is principally in the suffering and sacrifice that are demanded for men to live together in peace and harmony that love is perfected in us, that we are prepared for contemplation.

For Christianity is not merely a doctrine or a system of beliefs: it is Christ living in us and uniting men to one another in His own Life and unity. "I in them and Thou, Father, in Me, that they may be made perfect in One . . . And the glory which Thou hast given me I have given them, that they may be One as we also are One." *In hoc cognoscent omnes quia mei estis discipuli, si dilectionem habueritis ad invicem.*

"He that loveth not abideth in death."

IF you regard contemplation principally as a means to escape from the miseries of human life, as a withdrawal from the anguish and the suffering of this struggle for reunion with other men in the charity of Christ, you do not know what contemplation is and you will never find God in your contemplation. For it is precisely in the recovery of our union with our brothers in Christ that we discover God and know Him: for then His life begins to penetrate our souls and His love possesses our faculties and we are able to find out Who He is from the experience of His own selflessness reflected in our purified wills.

THERE is only one true flight from the world: it is not an escape from trouble and conflict and difficulty and suffering, but the flight from disunity and separation, to unity and peace in the love of other men.

What is the "world" that Christ would not pray for, and of which He said that His disciples were in it but not of it? The world is the unquiet city of those who live for themselves and are therefore divided against one another in a struggle that cannot end, for it will go on eternally in hell. It is the city of those who are fighting for possession of limited things and for the monopoly of goods and pleasures that cannot be shared by all.

But if you try to escape from this world merely by leaving the city and hiding yourself in solitude, you will only take the city with you into solitude: and yet you can be entirely out of the world while remaining in the midst of it, if you let God set you free from your own selfishness and if you live for love alone.

For the flight from the world is nothing else but the flight from selfishness. And the man who locks himself up in private with his own selfishness has put himself into a position where the evil within him will either possess him like a devil or drive him out of his head.

That is why it is dangerous to go into solitude merely because you happen to like to be alone.

Nevertheless, physical solitude, exterior silence and real recollection are all morally necessary for anyone

who wants to lead a contemplative life: but like everything else in creation they are nothing more than means to an end, and if we do not understand the end we will make a wrong use of the means.

Therefore we have to remember that we look for solitude in order to grow there in love for God and in love for other men. We do not go into the desert to escape people but to learn how to find them: we do not leave them in order to have nothing more to do with them, but to find out the way to do them the most good. But this is always only a secondary end.

The one end that includes all others is the love of God.

THE TRUEST SOLITUDE IS NOT something outside you, not an absence of men or of sound around you: it is an abyss opening up in the center of your own soul.

And this abyss of interior solitude is created by a hunger that will never be satisfied with any created thing.

The only way to find solitude is by hunger and thirst and sorrow and poverty and desire, and the man who has found solitude is empty, as if he had been emptied by death.

He has advanced beyond all horizons. There are no directions left in which to travel. And this is a country whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. You do not find it by travelling but by standing still.

Yet it is in this loneliness that the deepest activities begin. It is here that you discover act without motion, labor that is profound repose, vision in obscurity, and, beyond all desire, a fulfillment whose limits extend to infinity.

ALTHOUGH it is true that this solitude is everywhere, there is a mechanism for finding it that has some refer-

ence to actual space, to geography, to physical isolation from the towns and the cities of men.

There should be at least a room, or some corner where no one will find you and disturb you or notice you. You should be able to untether yourself from the world and set yourself free, loosing all the fine strings and strands of tension that bind you, by sight, by sound, by thought, to the presence of other men.

Once you have found such a place, be content with it, and do not be disturbed if a good reason takes you out of it. Love it, and return to it as soon as you can, and do not be too quick to change it for another.

YOU will never find interior solitude unless you make some conscious effort to deliver yourself from the desires and the cares and the interests of an existence in time and in the world.

Do everything you can to avoid the amusements and the noise and the business of men. Keep as far away as you can from the places where they gather to cheat and insult one another, to exploit one another, to laugh at one another, or to mock one another with their false gestures of friendship. Do not read their newspapers, if you can help it. Be glad if you can keep beyond the reach of their radios. Do not bother with their unearthly songs or their intolerable concerns for the way their bodies look and feel.

Do not smoke their cigarettes or drink the things

they drink or share their preoccupation with different kinds of food. Do not complicate your life by looking at the pictures in their magazines.

Keep your eyes clean and your ears quiet and your mind serene. Breathe God's air. Work, if you can, under His sky.

But if you have to live in a city and work among machines and ride in the subways and eat in a place where the radio makes you deaf with spurious news and where the food destroys your life and the sentiments of those around you poison your heart with boredom, do not be upset, but accept it as the love of God and as a seed of solitude planted in your soul, and be glad of this suffering: for it will keep you alive to the next opportunity to escape from them and be alone in the healing silence of recollection and in the untroubled presence of God.

And yet remember, if you seek escape for its own sake and run away from the world only because it is (as it must be) intensely unpleasant, you will not find peace and you will not find solitude. If you seek solitude merely because it is what you prefer, you will never escape from the world and its selfishness; you will never have the interior freedom that will keep you really alone.

The Moral Theology of the Devil

THE DEVIL HAS A WHOLE SYSTEM of theology and philosophy, which will explain, to anyone who will listen, that created things are evil and that men are evil and that God created evil and that He directly wills that men should suffer evil and He rejoices in the suffering of men and, in fact, that the whole universe is full of misery because God has willed and planned it that way.

The people who listen to this sort of thing, and absorb it, and enjoy it, develop a notion of the spiritual life which is a kind of hypnosis of evil. The concepts of sin, suffering, damnation, punishment, the justice of God, retribution, the end of the world and so on, are things over which they smack their lips with unspeakable pleasure. And this is because they derive a deep, subconscious comfort from the thought that many other people will fall into the hell which they themselves are going to escape. And how do they know they are going to escape it? They cannot give any definite reason except for the fact that they feel a certain sense of relief at the thought that all this suffering is prepared for practically everyone but themselves.

This feeling of complacency is what they refer to as “faith,” and it constitutes a kind of conviction that they are “saved.”

THE devil makes many disciples by preaching against sin. He convinces them of the great evil of sin, induces an emotional crisis which persuades them that God ignores their sins, and after that he lets them spend the rest of their lives meditating on the intense sinfulness and evident reprobation of other men.

THE moral theology of the devil starts out with the principle: “Pleasure is sin.” Then he goes on to work it the other way: “All sin is pleasure.”

After that, he points out that pleasure is practically unavoidable and that we have a natural tendency to do things that please us, from which he concludes that all our natural tendencies are evil and that our nature is evil in itself. And he leads us to the conclusion that no one can possibly avoid sin, since pleasure is inescapable.

After that, to make sure that no one will try to escape or avoid sin, he adds that what is unavoidable cannot be a sin. Then the whole concept of sin is thrown out the window as irrelevant, and people decide that there is nothing left except to live for pleasure, and in that way pleasures that are naturally good become evil by deordination and lives are thrown away in unhappiness and sin.

IT sometimes happens that men who preach most vehemently about evil and the punishment of evil, so that they seem to have practically nothing else on their minds except sin, are really unconscious haters of other men. They think the world does not appreciate them, and this is their way of getting even.

THE devil is not afraid to preach the will of God provided he can preach it in his own way.

The argument goes something like this: "God wills you to do what is right. But you have an interior attraction which tells you, by a nice warm glow of satisfaction, what is right. Therefore, if your Superiors try to interfere and make you do something that does not produce this comfortable sense of interior satisfaction, quote Scripture, tell them that you ought to obey God rather than men, and then go ahead and do your own will, do the thing that gives you that nice, warm glow."

MANY POETS ARE NOT POETS for the same reason that many religious men are not saints: they never succeed in being themselves. They never get around to being the particular poet or the particular monk they are intended to be by God. They never become the man or the artist who is called for by all the circumstances of their individual lives.

They waste their years in vain efforts to be some other poet, some other saint. For many absurd reasons, they are convinced that they are obliged to become somebody else who died two hundred years ago and who lived in circumstances utterly alien to their own.

They wear out their minds and bodies in a hopeless endeavor to have somebody else's experiences or write somebody else's poems or possess somebody else's sanctity.

There can be an intense egoism in following everybody else. People are in a hurry to magnify themselves by imitating what is popular — and too lazy to think of anything better.

Hurry ruins saints as well as artists. They want quick

success and they are in such haste to get it that they cannot take time to be true to themselves. And when the madness is upon them they argue that their very haste is a species of integrity.

IN great saints you find that perfect humility and perfect integrity coincide. The two turn out to be practically the same thing. The saint is unlike everybody else precisely because he is humble.

As far as the accidentals of this life are concerned, humility can be quite content with whatever satisfies the general run of men. But that does not mean that the essence of humility consists in being just like everybody else. On the contrary, humility consists in being precisely the person you actually are before God, and since no two people are alike, if you have the humility to be yourself you will not be like anyone else in the whole universe. But this individuality will not necessarily assert itself on the surface of everyday life. It will not be a matter of mere appearances, or opinions, or tastes, or ways of doing things. It is something deep in the soul.

To the truly humble man the ordinary ways and customs and habits of men are not a matter for conflict. The saints do not get excited about the things that people licitly eat and drink, wear on their bodies, or hang on the walls of their houses. To make conformity or non-conformity with others in these accidents a

matter of life and death is to fill your interior life with confusion and noise. Ignoring all this as indifferent, the humble man takes whatever there is in the world that helps him to find God and leaves the rest aside.

He is able to see quite clearly that what is useful to him may be useless for somebody else, and what helps others to be saints might ruin him. That is why humility brings with it a deep refinement of spirit, a peacefulness and tact and a common sense without which there is no sane morality.

It is not humility to insist on being someone that you are not. It is as much as saying that you know better than God who you are and who you ought to be. How do you expect to arrive at the end of your own journey if you take the road to another man's city? How do you expect to reach your own perfection by leading somebody else's life? His sanctity will never be yours: you must have the humility to work out your own salvation in a darkness where you are absolutely alone. . .

And so it takes heroic humility to be yourself and to be nobody but the man, or the artist, that God intended you to be.

You will be made to feel that your honesty is only pride. This is a serious temptation because you can never be sure whether you are being true to your true self or only building up a defense for the false personality that is the creature of your own appetite for esteem.

But the greatest humility can be learned from the

anguish of keeping your balance in such a position: of continuing to be yourself without getting tough about it and without asserting your false self against the false selves of other people.

PERFECTION is not something you can acquire like a hat — by walking into a place and trying on several and walking out again ten minutes later with one on your head that fits. Yet people sometimes enter monasteries with that idea.

They are eager to get the first available system fitted on to them and to spend the rest of their lives walking around with the thing on their heads.

They devour books of piety indiscriminately, not stopping to consider how much of what they read applies, or can be applied, to their own lives. Their chief concern is to acquire as many externals as possible, and to decorate their persons with the features they have so rapidly come to associate with perfection. And they walk around in clothes cut to the measure of other people and other situations.

If they do this job thoroughly, their spiritual disguises are apt to be much admired. Like successful artists, they become commercial. After that there is not much hope for them. They are good people, yes: but they are out of place and much of their well-intentioned energy will only be wasted. They have become satisfied with their own brand of sanctity, and with the perfec-

tion they have woven for themselves out of their own imaginations.

And God Himself, Who wanted to create their special perfection and their own joy, will have to wait until after they have passed through a laborious Purgatory before He can finally do so.

ONE of the first signs of a saint may well be the fact that other people do not know what to make of him. In fact they are not sure whether he is crazy or only proud: but it must at least be pride to be haunted by some individual ideal which nobody but God really comprehends. And he has inescapable difficulties in applying all the abstract norms of "perfection" to his own life. He cannot seem to make his life fit in with the books.

Sometimes his case is so bad that no monastery will keep him. He has to be dismissed, sent back to the world like Benedict Joseph Labre who wanted to be a Trappist and a Carthusian and succeeded in neither. He finally ended up as a tramp. He died in some street in Rome.

And yet the only canonized saint, venerated by the whole Church, who has lived either as a Cistercian or a Carthusian since the Middle Ages is St. Benedict Joseph Labre.

9 The Root of War is Fear

THE CONCEPT OF "VIRTUE" DOES not appeal to men, because they are no longer interested in becoming good. Yet if you tell them that Saint Thomas talks about virtues as "habits of the practical intellect" they may, perhaps, pay some attention to your words. They are pleased with the thought of anything that would seem to make them clever.

OUR minds are like crows. They pick up everything that glitters, no matter how uncomfortable our nests get with all that metal in them.

THE devils are very pleased with a soul that comes out of its dry house and shivers in the rain for no other reason than that the house is dry.

I HAVE very little idea of what is going on in the world: but occasionally I happen to see some of the things they are drawing and writing there and it gives me the conviction that they are all living in ash-cans. It makes me glad I cannot hear what they are singing.

IF a writer is so cautious that he never writes anything that cannot be criticized, he will never write anything that can be read. If you want to help other people you have got to make up your mind to write things that some men will condemn.

THE poet enters into himself in order to create. The contemplative enters into God in order to be created.

A CATHOLIC poet should be an apostle by being first of all a poet, not try to be a poet by being first of all an Apostle. For if he presents himself to people as a poet, he is going to be judged as a poet and if he is not a good one his apostolate will be ridiculed.

IF you write for God you will reach many men and bring them joy.

If you write for men — you may make some money and you may give someone a little joy and you may make a noise in the world, for a little while.

If you write for yourself you can read what you yourself have written and after ten minutes you will be so disgusted you will wish that you were dead.

AT the root of all war is fear: not so much the fear men have of one another as the fear they have of *everything*. It is not merely that they do not trust one another: they do not even trust themselves. If they are not sure when

someone else may turn around and kill them, they are still less sure when they may turn around and kill themselves. They cannot trust anything, because they have ceased to believe in God.

WILL you end wars by asking men to trust men who evidently cannot be trusted? No. Teach them to love and trust God; then they will be able to love the men they cannot trust, and will dare to make peace with them, not trusting in them but in God.

For only love — which means humility — can cast out the fear which is the root of all war.

IF men really wanted peace they would ask God and He would give it to them. But why should He give the world a peace which it does not really desire? For the peace the world seems to desire is really no peace at all.

To some men peace merely means the liberty to exploit other people without fear of retaliation or interference. To others peace means the freedom to rob one another without interruption. To still others it means the leisure to devour the goods of the earth without being compelled to interrupt their pleasures to feed those whom their greed is starving. And to practically everybody peace simply means the absence of any physical violence that might cast a shadow over lives devoted to the satisfaction of their animal appetites for comfort and pleasure.

Many men like these have asked God for what they thought was “peace” and wondered why their prayer was not answered. They could not understand that it actually *was* answered. God left them with what they desired, for their idea of peace was only another form of war.

So instead of loving what you think is peace, love other men and love God above all. And instead of hating the people you think are warmakers, hate the appetites and the disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war.

HELL IS WHERE NO ONE HAS anything in common with anybody else except the fact that they all hate one another and cannot get away from one another and from themselves.

They are all thrown together in their fire and each one tries to thrust the others away from him with a huge, impotent hatred. And the reason why they want to be free of one another is not so much that they hate what they see in others, as that they know others hate what they see in them: and all recognize in one another what they detest in themselves, selfishness and impotence and agony and terror and despair.

The tree is known by its fruits. If you want to understand the social and political history of modern nations, study hell.

And yet the world, with all its wars, is not yet hell. And history, however terrible, has another and a deeper meaning. For it is not the evil of history that is its significance and it is not by the evil of our time that our time can be understood. In the furnace of war and hatred, the City of those who love one another is drawn and fused together in the heroism of charity under

suffering, while the city of those who hate everything is scattered and dispersed and its citizens are cast out in every direction, like sparks and smoke and flame.

OUR God also is a consuming fire. And if we, by love, become transformed into Him and burn as He burns, His fire will be our everlasting joy. But if we refuse His love and remain in the coldness of sin and opposition to Him and to other men then will His fire (by our own choice rather than His) become our everlasting enemy, and Love, instead of being our joy, will become our torment and our destruction.

WHEN we love God's will we find Him and own His joy in all things. But when we are against God, that is when we love ourselves more than Him, all things become our enemies. They cannot help refusing us the lawless satisfaction our selfishness demands of them because the infinite unselfishness of God is the law of every created essence and is printed in everything that He has made and can only be friends with His unselfishness which is also the fundamental law of the life of men.

THERE is nothing interesting about sin, or about evil as evil.

And this evil is not a positive entity but the absence of a perfection that ought to be there. Sin as such is

essentially boring because it is the lack of something that could appeal to our wills and our minds.

What attracts men to evil acts is not the evil in them but the good that is there, seen under a false aspect and with a distorted perspective. And the good seen from that angle is only the bait in a trap. When you reach out to take it, the trap is sprung and you are left with disgust and boredom — and hatred. Sinners are people who hate everything, because their world is necessarily full of betrayal, full of illusion, full of deception. And the greatest sinners are the most boring people in the world because they are also the most bored and the ones who find life most tedious.

When they try to cover the tedium of life by noise and excitement and agitation and violence — the inevitable fruits of a life devoted to the love of values that do not exist — they become something more than boring: they are scourges of the world and of society. And being scourged is not merely something dull or tedious.

Yet when it is all over and they are dead, the record of their sins in history becomes exceedingly uninteresting and is inflicted on school children as a penance which is all the more bitter because even an eight year-old can readily see the uselessness of learning about people like Hitler and Napoleon.

THE BEGINNING OF CONTEMPLATION is faith. If there is something essentially sick about your conception of faith you will never be a contemplative.

Here are some of the wrong notions of what faith is.

First of all, it is not an emotion, not a feeling. It is not a blind sub-conscious urge towards something vaguely supernatural. It is not simply an elemental need in man's spirit. It is not a feeling of God's existence. It is not a conviction that one is somehow saved or "justified" for no special reason except that one happens to feel that way. It is not something entirely interior and subjective, with no reference to any external motive. It is not something that bubbles up out of the recesses of your soul and fills you with an indefinable "sense" that everything is all right. It is not something so purely yours that its content is incommunicable. It is not some personal myth of your own that you cannot share with anyone else, and the objective validity of which does not matter either to you or God or anybody else.

But also it is not an opinion. It is not a conviction

based on rational analysis. It is not the fruit of scientific evidence. You can only believe what you do not know. As soon as you know it, you no longer believe it, at least not in the same way as you know it.

Faith is first of all an intellectual assent. It perfects the mind, it does not destroy it. It puts the intellect in possession of Truth which reason cannot grasp by itself. It gives us certitude concerning God as He is in Himself; faith is the way to a vital contact with a God Who is alive, and not to an abstract First Principle worked out by syllogisms from the evidence of created things.

But the assent of faith is not based on the intrinsic evidence of a visible object. The act of belief unites two members of a proposition which have no connection in our natural experience. But also there is nothing within reach of reason to argue that they are disconnected. The statements which demand the assent of faith are simply neutral to reason. We have no natural evidence why they should be true or why they should be false. We assent to them because of something other than intrinsic evidence. We accept their truth as revealed and the motive of our assent is the authority of God Who reveals them.

Faith is not expected to give complete satisfaction to the intellect. It leaves the intellect suspended in obscurity, without a light proper to its own mode of knowing. Yet it does not frustrate the intellect, or deny it, or

destroy it. It pacifies it with a conviction which it knows it can accept quite rationally under the guidance of love. For the act of faith is an act in which the intellect is content to know God by *loving* Him and accepting His statements about Himself on His own terms. And this assent is quite rational because it is based on the realization that our reason can tell us nothing about God as He actually is in Himself, and on the fact that God Himself is infinite actuality and therefore infinite Truth, Wisdom, Power and Providence, and can reveal Himself with absolute certitude in any manner He pleases, and can certify His own revelation of Himself by external signs.

Ultimately faith is the only key to the universe. The final meaning of human existence, and the answers to questions on which all our happiness depends cannot be found in any other way.

THE living God, the God Who is God and not a philosopher's abstraction, lies infinitely beyond the reach of anything our eyes can see or our minds can understand. No matter what perfection you predicate of Him, you have to add that He is not what we conceive by that term.

He Who is infinite light is so tremendous in His evidence that our minds only see Him as darkness. *Lux in tenebris lucet et tenebrae eam non comprehenderunt.*

IF nothing that can be seen can either be God or represent Him to us as He is, then to find God we must pass beyond everything that can be seen and enter into darkness. Since nothing that can be heard is God, to find Him we must enter into silence.

Since God cannot be imagined, anything our imagination tells us about Him is ultimately a lie and therefore we cannot know Him as He really is unless we pass beyond everything that can be imagined and enter into an obscurity without images and without the likeness of any created thing.

And since God cannot be seen or imagined, the visions of God we read of the saints having are not so much visions *of* Him as visions *about* Him; for to *see* anything is not to see Him.

GOD cannot be understood except by Himself. If we are to understand Him we can only do so by being in some way transformed into Him, so that we know Him as He knows Himself. And He does not know Himself by any representation of Himself: His own infinite Being is His own knowledge of Himself and we will not know Him as He knows Himself until we become what He is.

Faith is the first step in this transformation because it is a cognition that knows without images and representation, by a loving identification with God in obscurity.

Faith reaches the intellect not through the senses but in a light directly infused by God. Since this light does not pass through the eye or the imagination or reason, its certitude becomes our own without any vesture of created appearance, without any likeness that can be visualized or described. It is true that the language of the article to which we assent represents things that can be imagined, but in so far as we imagine them we misconceive them and tend to go astray. Ultimately we cannot imagine the connection between the two terms of the proposition: "In God there are Three Persons and One Nature." And it would be a great mistake to try.

But if you make the simple assent of faith, submitting through love to the authority of God revealing Himself, you will receive this interior light.

If you believe, if you make a simple act of submission to the authority of God proposing some article of faith externally through His Church, you will receive the gift of an interior light that is so simple that it baffles description and so pure that it would be coarse to call it an experience. But it is a true light, perfecting the intellect of man with a perfection far beyond science.

The very obscurity of faith is an argument of its perfection. It is darkness to our minds because it so far transcends their weakness. The more perfect faith is, the darker it becomes. The closer we get to God, the less is our faith diluted with the half-light of created

images and concepts. Our certainty increases with this obscurity, yet not without anguish and even material doubt, because we do not find it easy to subsist in a void in which our natural powers have nothing of their own to rely on. And it is in the deepest darkness that we most fully possess God on earth, because it is then that our minds are most truly liberated from the weak, created lights that are darkness in comparison to Him; it is then that we are filled with His infinite Light which is pure darkness to us.

In this greatest perfection of faith the infinite God Himself becomes the Light of the darkened soul and possesses it entirely with His Truth. And at this inexplicable moment the deepest night becomes day and faith turns into understanding.

12 Tradition and Revolution

THE BIGGEST PARADOX ABOUT the Church is that she is at the same time essentially traditional and essentially revolutionary. But that is not as much of a paradox as it seems, because Christian tradition, unlike all others, is a living and perpetual revolution.

Human traditions all tend towards stagnation and lifelessness and decay. They try to perpetuate things that cannot be perpetuated. They cling to objects and values which time destroys without mercy. They are bound up with a contingent and material order of things — customs, clothes, architecture, poems, places and attitudes — which inevitably change and give way to something else.

The presence of a strong element of human conservatism in the Church should not obscure the fact that Christian tradition, supernatural in its source, is something absolutely opposed to human traditionalism.

For the living Tradition of Catholicism is like the breath of a physical body. It renews life by repelling stagnation. It is a constant, quiet, peaceful revolution against death.

As the physical act of breathing keeps the spiritual

soul united to a material body whose very matter tends always to corrupt and decay, so Catholic Tradition keeps the Church alive under the material and social and human elements which will be encrusted upon it as long as it is in the world.

The reason why Catholic tradition is a tradition is because there is only one living doctrine in Christianity: there is nothing new to be discovered. The life of the Church is the life of God Himself, poured out into the Church by His Spirit, and there cannot be any other life to supersede and replace it.

The only thing that can replace such intense life is a lesser life, a kind of death. The constant human tendency away from God and away from this living tradition can only be counteracted by a return to tradition and a renewal of the one unchanging life that was infused into the Church at the beginning.

And yet this tradition must always be a revolution because by its very nature it denies the values and standards to which human passion is so powerfully attached. To those who love money and pleasure and reputation and power this tradition says "Be poor, go down into the far end of society, take the last place among men, live with those who are despised, love other men and serve them instead of making them serve you. Do not resist them when they push you around, but pray for those that hurt you. Do not look for pleasure, but turn away from the things that satisfy

your senses and your mind and look for God in hunger and thirst and darkness, through deserts of the spirit in which it seems to be madness to travel. Take upon yourself the burden of Christ's Cross, that is Christ's humility and poverty and obedience and renunciation, and you will find peace for your souls."

This is the most complete revolution that has ever been preached: in fact it is the only true revolution, because all the others demand the extermination of somebody else, but this one means the death of the man who, for all practical purposes, you have come to think of as your own self.

A revolution is supposed to be a change that turns everything completely around. But the ideology of political revolution will never change anything except appearances. There will be violence, and power will pass from one party to another, but when the smoke clears and the bodies of all the dead men are underground, the situation will be essentially the same as it was before: there will be a minority of strong men in power exploiting all the others for their own ends. There will be the same greed and cruelty and lust and ambition and avarice and hypocrisy as before.

For the revolutions of men change nothing. The only influence that can really upset the injustice and iniquity of men is the power that breathes in Christian tradition, renewing our participation in the Life that is the Light of men.

To those who have no personal experience of this thing, but who see only the outer crust of dead, human conservatism that tends to form around the Church the way barnacles gather on the hull of a ship, all this talk of revolution sounds foolish.

Each individual Christian and each new age of the Church has to make this rediscovery, this return to the source of Christian life.

It demands a fundamental act of renunciation that accepts the necessity of starting out on the way to God under the guidance of other men. This acceptance can be paid for only by sacrifice, and ultimately only a gift of God can teach us the difference between the dry outer crust of formality which the Church sometimes acquires from the human natures that compose it, and the living inner current of Divine Life which is the only real Catholic tradition.

THE notion of dogma terrifies men who do not understand the Church. They cannot conceive that a religious doctrine may receive a clear and definite and authoritative statement without at once becoming static and rigid and inert and losing all its vitality. And in their frantic anxiety to escape from any such conception they take refuge in a system of beliefs that is vague and fluid, a system in which truths pass like mists and waver and vary like shadows. They make their own personal selection of ghosts, in this pale, indefinite

twilight of the mind, and take good care never to bring them out into the full brightness of the sun for fear of a full view of their unsubstantiality.

They favor the Catholic mystics with a sort of sympathetic regard, for they believe that these rare men somehow reached the summit of contemplation in defiance of Catholic dogma. Their deep union with God is supposed to have been an escape from the teaching authority of His Church, and an implicit protest against it.

But the truth is that the saints arrived at the deepest and most vital and also the most individual and personal knowledge of God precisely because of the Church's teaching authority, precisely through the tradition that is guarded and fostered by that authority.

For outside the *magisterium* directly guided by the Spirit of God we find no such contemplation and no such union with Him — only the void of nirvana or the feeble intellectual light of Platonic idealism, or the sensual dreams of the Sufis. But the first step to contemplation is faith; and faith begins with an assent to Christ teaching through His Church; *fides ex auditu*; *qui vos audit, me audit*. "He that heareth you, heareth Me." And "faith cometh by hearing."

It is not the dry formula of a dogmatic definition by itself that pours light into the mind of a Catholic contemplative: but the assent to the content of that definition deepens and broadens into a vital, personal and

incommunicable penetration of the supernatural truth which it expresses — an understanding that is a gift of the Holy Ghost and which merges into the Wisdom of Love, to possess Truth in its infinite Substance, God Himself.

THE dogmas of Catholic faith are not merely symbols or vague rationalizations which we accept as arbitrary points of stimulation around which good moral actions may form or develop — still less is it true that any idea would serve just as well as those that have been defined, any old pious thought would foment this vague moral life in our souls. The dogmas defined and taught by the Church have a very precise and positive and definite meaning which those who have the gifts to do so must explore and penetrate if they would live an integral spiritual life. For the understanding of dogma is the proximate and ordinary way to contemplation.

Everybody who can do so ought to acquire something of a theologian's accuracy and sharpness in appreciating the true sense of dogma. Every Christian ought to have as deep a comprehension of his belief as his state will allow him. And this means that every one ought to breathe the clean atmosphere of orthodox tradition and be able to explain his belief in correct terminology — and terminology with a content of genuine ideas.

Yet true contemplation is not arrived at by an effort

of the mind. On the contrary, a man could easily lose his way in the forest of technical details which concern a professional theologian. But God gives even theologians a hunger born of humility, which cannot be satisfied with formulas and arguments, and which looks for something closer to God than analogy can bring you.

This serene hunger of the spirit penetrates the surface of words and goes beyond the human formulation of mysteries and seeks, in the humiliation of silence and intellectual solitude and interior poverty, the gift of a supernatural apprehension which words cannot truly signify.

Beyond the labor of argument it finds rest in faith and beneath the noise of discourse it apprehends the Truth, not in distinct and clear-cut definitions but in the limpid obscurity of a single intuition that unites all dogmas in one simple Light, shining into the soul directly from God's eternity, without the medium of created concept, without the intervention of symbols or of language or the likenesses of material things.

Here the Truth is One Whom we not only know and possess but by Whom we are known and possessed. Here theology ceases to be a body of abstractions and becomes a Living Reality Who is God Himself. And He reveals Himself to us in our absolute dedication of our lives to Him. Here the light of truth is not something that exists for our intellect but One in Whom and for Whom all minds and spirits exist, and theology

does not truly begin to be theology until we have transcended the language and separate concepts of theologians.

That was why St. Thomas put the *Summa Theologica* aside in weariness before it was finished, saying that it was "all straw."

And yet when the contemplative returns from the depths of his simple experience of God and attempts to communicate it to men, he necessarily comes once again under the control of the theologian and his language is bound to strive after the clarity and distinctness and accuracy that canalize Catholic tradition.

Therefore beware of the contemplative who says that scholastic theology is all straw before he has ever bothered to read any.

AS A MAGNIFYING GLASS CONCENTRATES the rays of the sun into a little burning knot of heat that can set fire to a dry leaf or a piece of paper, so the mysteries of Christ in the Gospel concentrate the rays of God's light and fire to a point that sets fire to the spirit of man. And this is why Christ was born and lived in the world and died and returned from death and ascended to His Father in heaven: *ut dum visibiliter Deum cognoscimus, per hunc in invisibilium amorem rapiamur*. Through the glass of His Humanity He concentrates the rays of His Holy Spirit upon us so that we feel the burn, and all mystical experience is infused into the soul through the Man Christ.

For God is everywhere. His truth and His love pervade all things as the light and the heat of the sun pervade our atmosphere. But just as the rays of the sun do not set fire to anything by themselves, so God does not touch our souls with the fire of supernatural knowledge and experience without Christ.

But the glass of that Humanity seeks out spirits that are well prepared, dried by the light and warmth of God, and ready to take flame in the little knot of fire that is the grace of the Holy Ghost.

THE normal way to contemplation is by a belief in Christ that is born of thoughtful consideration of His life and His teaching. But just because all experience of God comes to us through Christ, that does not necessarily mean that every contemplative always, invariably, arrives at his contemplation through Christ as He may exist in our *imagination*. For the imagination is only one of the means for keeping the object of our belief before our minds. We do not always have to force ourselves to picture Christ as we think He must have looked, or ought to have looked, for really no one can be quite sure just *how* He looked.

Spiritual writers in the past have made rather a problem out of this, although it is hard to see why there should be any problem at all. Faith in Christ, and in the mysteries of His life and death, is the foundation of the Christian life and the source of all contemplation: and about this there can be no issue. No one can dismiss the Man Christ from his interior life on the pretext that he has now entered by higher contemplation into direct communication with the Word. For the Man Christ *is* the Word of God, even though His human nature is not His divine nature. The two are united in One Person, and are One Person so that the Man Christ is God.

If you have discovered some kind of contemplation that gives you only one without the other you are a heretic.

But it is faith and not imagination that gives us supernatural life, faith that justifies us, faith that leads us to contemplation. My just man liveth by faith, not imagination. Imagination only enters into it accidentally. If you need to use your imagination in order to remind yourself of the Christ in Whom you believe, go ahead and use it. But if you can exercise your faith in Him without the bother of always conjuring up some picture of Him, so much the better: your faith will be simpler and purer.

So it would seem to be unnecessarily complicating the interior life to demand that everyone should deliberately keep his imagination occupied with the image of Christ as He is thought to have looked when He lived among men. With this, as with all other means and devices, the rule would seem to be: "use what helps you and avoid what gets in your way."

FOR some people it is quite easy to return within themselves and find a simple picture of Christ in their imagination: and this is an easy beginning of prayer. But for others this does not succeed. On the contrary, the effort it costs may fill their heads with problems and disturbances that make prayer impossible. Yet at the same time the mere name of Jesus or the indistinct, unanalyzed notion of Christ is enough to keep their faith fully occupied in a simple awareness of Him Who is really present in our souls by His Divinity.

In arriving at contact with God without the medium of sensible images they are travelling by a shorter and simpler way than those who have to mobilize their interior senses when they want to pray, and if they involved themselves in multiple "acts" and devices they would only weaken the intensity of their simple faith.

EVERY one of us forms an idea of Christ that is limited and incomplete. It is cut according to our own measure. We tend to make ourselves a Christ in our own image, a projection of our own aspirations and desires and ideals. We find in Him what we want to find. We make Him not only the incarnation of God but also the incarnation of the things we and our society and our part of society happen to live for.

Therefore, although it is true that perfection consists in imitating Christ and reproducing Him in our own lives, it will not take us very far on the way to perfection merely to imitate the Christ that we have in our imaginations.

We read the Gospels not merely to get a picture or an idea of Christ but to enter in and pass through the words of revelation to establish, by faith, a vital contact with the Christ Who dwells in our souls as God.

The problem of forming Christ in us is not to be solved by our own efforts. It is not a matter of studying the Gospels and then working to put our ideas into

practice, although we should try to do that too: but always under the guidance of grace, in complete subjection to God's grace.

For if we depend on our own ideas and our own judgment and our own efforts to reproduce the life of Christ we will only act out some kind of a pious charade which will ultimately scare everybody we meet because it will be so stiff and artificial and so dead.

It is the Spirit of God that must teach us Who Christ is and form Christ in us and transform us into other Christs. For after all, transformation into Christ is not just an individual affair: there is only one Christ, not many. He is not divided. And for me to become Christ is to enter into the Life of the Whole Christ, the Mystical Body made up of the Head and the members, Christ and all who are incorporated in Him by His Spirit.

But if each individual arrived at perfection by imitating his own peculiar idea of Christ there would be no One Christ, no Mystical Body. For everyone has a different idea of Christ and many of the ideas are not only opposed but contradictory. It would never be possible to reduce them all to unity.

Christ forms Himself by grace and faith in the souls of all who love Him, and at the same time He draws them all together in Himself to make them One in Him.

Ut sint consummati in unum.

And the Holy Ghost, Who is the life of this One

Body dwells entire in the whole Body and in every one of the members so that the whole Christ is Christ and each individual is Christ.

THEREFORE if you want to have in your heart the affections and dispositions that were those of Christ on earth consult not your own imagination but faith. Enter into the darkness of interior renunciation, strip your soul of images and let Christ form Himself in you by His cross.

THE Holy Spirit is sent from moment to moment into my soul by Christ and the Father dwelling in the midst of my soul, the way the blood of life is sent out into all the parts of my body from my heart. And this Spirit draws me back into Christ and binds me to the Father in Him, so that my life is hidden with Christ in God. And yet I travel out from Him, in His Spirit, to do His work and fulfill His will among men. And when the time comes, according to His will, He draws me back into Himself again.

If I have this life in me, what do the accidents of pain and pleasure, hope and fear, joy and sorrow matter to me? They are not my life and they have little to do with it. Why should I fear anything that cannot rob me of God, and why should I desire anything that cannot give me possession of Him?

Exterior things come and go, but why should they

touch me? Why should joy excite me or sorrow cast me down, pleasure please me or pain disturb me, life attract or death repel me if I live only in the Life that is within me by God's gift?

Why should I worry about losing a bodily life that I must inevitably lose anyway, as long as I possess a spiritual life and identity that cannot be lost against my desire? Why should I fear to cease to be what I am not when I have already become something of what I am? Why should I go to great labor to possess satisfactions that cannot last an hour, and which bring misery after them, when I already own God in His eternity of joy?

It is the easiest thing in the world to possess this life and this joy; all you have to do is believe and love; and yet people waste their whole lives in appalling labor and difficulty and sacrifice to get things that make real life impossible.

This is one of the chief contradictions that sin has brought into our souls: we have to do violence to ourselves to keep from laboring uselessly for what is bitter and without joy, and we have to compel ourselves to take what is easy and full of happiness as though it were against our interests, because for us the line of least resistance leads in the way of greatest hardship and sometimes for us to do what is, in itself, most easy, can be the hardest thing in the world.

SOULS are like wax waiting for a seal. By themselves they have no special identity. Their destiny is to be softened and prepared in this life, by God's will, to receive, at their death, the seal of their own degree of likeness to God in Christ.

And this is what it means, among other things, to be judged by Christ.

The wax that has melted in God's will can easily receive the stamp of its identity, the truth of what it was meant to be. But the wax that is hard and dry and brittle and without love will not take the seal: for the seal, falling upon it, grinds it to powder.

Therefore if you spend your life trying to escape from the heat of the fire that is meant to soften and prepare you to become your true self, and if you try to keep your substance from melting in the fire — as if your true identity were to be hard wax — the seal will fall upon you at last and crush you. You will not be able to take your own true name and countenance, and you will be destroyed by the event that was meant to be your fulfillment.

A CONTEMPLATIVE priest will have a deep and absorbing sense of complicity with the Host before him on the altar — so much so that his Mass will be going on within him not only when he is at the altar but when he is away from it, and at many different moments during the day.

I write this without being yet a priest because I have known it to some degree merely by kneeling by the altar as server. The broken Host lies on the paten. But the fact that you are in possession of the secret, identifies you with the Host and with what is going on. And without words or explicit acts of thought you make assent to this within yourself simply by staying where you are and looking on.

There Christ develops your life into Himself like a photograph.

Then a continual Mass, a deep and urgent sense of identification with an act of incomprehensible scope and magnitude that somehow has its focus in the center of your own soul, pursues you wherever you go; and in all situations of your daily life, it makes upon you secret and insistent demands for agreement and consent.

This truth is so tremendous that it is somehow neutral. It cannot be expressed. It is entirely personal. And you have no special desire to tell anybody about it. It is nobody else's business.

Not even distracting duties and work will be able to interfere with it altogether. You keep finding this anonymous Accomplice burning within you like a deep and peaceful fire.

Perhaps you will not be able completely to identify this presence and this continuous action going on within you unless it happens to be taking place formally on the altar before you: but at least then, obscurely,

you will recognize in the breaking of the Bread the Stranger Who was your companion yesterday and the day before. And like the disciples of Emmaus you will realize how fitting it was that your heart should burn within you when the incidents of your day's work spoke to you of the Christ Who lived and worked and offered His Mass within you all the time.

ALL that has been written about the Virgin Mother of God proves to me that hers is the most hidden of sanctities. What people find to say about her generally tells us more about their own selves than it does about Our Lady. For since God has revealed very little to us about her, men who know nothing of who and what she was only reveal themselves when they try to add something to what God has told us about her.

And the things we do know about her only make the true character and quality of her sanctity seem more unknowable. We believe that hers was the most perfect sanctity outside the sanctity of God. But the sanctity of God is only darkness to our minds. Yet the sanctity of the Blessed Virgin is in a way more hidden than the sanctity of God: because He has at least told us something about Himself that is objectively valid when it is put into human language. But about Our Lady He has told us only one or two important things — and even then we cannot grasp what they mean. For all He has told us about her soul amounts to this: that it was

absolutely full of the most perfect created sanctity. But what that means, in detail, we have no sure way of knowing. And therefore the other certain thing we know about her is that her sanctity is most hidden.

To me this is a source of great consolation. It means that I no longer have to try to find Our Lady in the dry verbiage of the theologians who, in the end, discover nothing about her but generalities. And yet I can find her if I too become hidden in God where she is hidden. To share her humility and hiddenness and poverty and concealment and solitude is the only way to know her: but to know her thus is to find wisdom. *Qui me invenerit inveniet vitam et hauriet salutem a Domino.*

In the actual living, human Person who is the Virgin Mother of Christ are all the poverty and all the wisdom of all the saints. It all came to them through her, and is in her. The sanctity of all the saints is a participation in her sanctity, because in the order He has established God wills that all graces come to men through Mary.

That is why to love her and to know her is to discover the true meaning of everything and to have access to all wisdom. Without her, the knowledge of Christ is only speculation. But in her it becomes experience because all the humility and poverty, without which Christ cannot be known, belong to her. Her sanctity is the silence in which alone Christ can be heard, and the voice of God becomes an experience to us in her contemplation.

The emptiness and interior solitude and peace without which we cannot be filled with God, belong to her alone. If we ever manage to empty ourselves of the noise of the world and of our own passions, it is because she has come close to us and given us a share in her sanctity and her hiddenness.

She alone, of all the saints, is, in everything, incomparable. She has the sanctity of them all and yet resembles none of them. And still we can talk of being like her. This likeness to her is not only something to desire — it is the only thing worthy of our desire: but the reason for that is that she, of all creatures, most perfectly recovered the likeness to God that God willed to find, in varying degrees, in us all.

It is necessary, no doubt, to talk about her privileges as if they were something that could be made comprehensible in human language and could be measured by some human standard. I suppose you cannot avoid talking about her as a Queen and acting as if you knew what it meant to say she has a throne above all the angels. But this should not make anyone forget that her highest privilege is her poverty and her greatest glory is that she is most hidden, and the source of all her power is that she is as nothing in the presence of Christ, of God.

It is because she is, of all the saints, the most perfectly poor and the most perfectly hidden, the one who has absolutely nothing whatever that she attempts to

possess as her own, that she can most fully communicate to the rest of us the grace of the infinitely selfless God. And we will most truly possess Him when we have emptied ourselves and become poor and hidden as she is, resembling Him by resembling her.

And all our sanctity depends on her will, on her pleasure. The ones she desires to share the joy of her own poverty and simplicity, the ones whom she wills to be hidden as she is hidden, are the ones who become great saints in the sight of God.

It is a tremendous grace, then, and a great privilege when a person living in the world we have to live in suddenly loses his interest in the things that absorb that world, and discovers in his own soul an appetite for poverty and solitude. And the most precious of all the gifts of nature or grace is the desire to be hidden and to vanish from the sight of men and be accounted as nothing by the world and to disappear from one's own self-conscious consideration and vanish into nothingness in the immense poverty that is the adoration of God.

This absolute emptiness, this poverty, this obscurity holds within it the secret of all joy because it is full of God. To seek this emptiness is true devotion to the Mother of God. To find it is to find her. And to be hidden in its depths is to be full of God as she is full of Him, and to share her mission of bringing Him to all men.

A MAN WHO HAS BEEN KILLED by one enemy is just as dead as one who has been killed by a whole army. If you are friends with one habit of mortal sin you live in death, even though you may seem to have all the other virtues.

SOME people think it is enough to have one virtue, like kindness or broad-mindedness or charity, and let everything else go. But if you are unselfish in one way and selfish in twenty-five other ways your virtue will not do you much good. In fact it will probably turn out to be nothing more than a twenty-sixth variety of the same selfishness, disguised as virtue.

Therefore do not think that because you seem to have some good quality, all the evil in you can be excused or forgotten on that account alone.

Do not think that you can show your love for Christ by hating those who seem to be His enemies on earth. Suppose they really do hate Him: nevertheless He loves them, and you cannot be united with Him unless you love them too.

If you hate the enemies of the Church instead of loving them, you too will run the risk of becoming an enemy of the Church, and of Christ: for He said: "Love your enemies," and He also said: "He that is not with me is against me." Therefore if you do not place yourself with Christ by loving those that He loves, you are against Him.

But Christ loves all men. Christ died for all men. And Christ said there was no greater love than that a man should lay down his life for his friend.

Do not be too quick to assume your enemy is a savage just because he is *your* enemy. Perhaps he is your enemy because he thinks you are a savage. Or perhaps he is afraid of you because he feels that you are afraid of him. And perhaps if he knew you were capable of loving him he would no longer be your enemy.

Do not be too quick to assume that your enemy is an enemy of God just because he is *your* enemy. Perhaps he is your enemy precisely because he can find nothing in you that gives glory to God. Perhaps he fears you because he can find nothing in you of God's love and God's kindness and God's patience and mercy and understanding of the weaknesses of men.

Do not be too quick to condemn the man who no longer believes in God: for it is perhaps your own coldness and avarice and mediocrity and materialism and sensuality and selfishness that have killed his faith.

A MAN cannot be a perfect Christian — that is, a saint, — unless he is also a communist. This means that he must either absolutely give up all right to possess anything at all, or else only use what he himself needs, of the goods that belong to him, and administer the rest for other men and for the poor: and in his determination of what he needs he must be governed to a great extent by the gravity of the needs of others.

But you will say it is practically impossible for a rich man to put into practice this clear teaching of Scripture and Catholic tradition. You are right. And there is nothing new in that. Christ told everybody the same thing long ago when He said it was easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than it was for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

If Christians had lived up to the Church's teaching about property and poverty there would never have been any occasion for the spurious communism of the Marxists and all the rest — whose communism starts out by denying *other men* the right to own property.

There is only one true doctrine about property rights: and that is taught by Catholic tradition. Those rights exist and cannot be denied, but they imply an obligation which, if it were put into practice without hypocrisy and self-deception and subterfuge, would mean that most Christians would be living with something like the communism of the first Apostles: "For neither was there any one needy among them. For as

many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the price of the things they sold, and laid it down before the feet of the Apostles. And distribution was made to every one according as he had need.”

No one denied those men the right to own land, or to keep what they owned, or to sell it and give away their money. Yet that right implied an obligation to satisfy the needs of others as well as their own, and brought with it the privilege of doing so in a manner that was beyond the strict letter of any law and which could go as far as a charity that was heroic.

If you have money, consider that perhaps the only reason God allowed it to fall into your hands was in order that you might find joy and perfection by throwing it away.

IT is easy enough to tell the poor to accept their poverty as God's will when you yourself have warm clothes and plenty of food and medical care and a roof over your head and no worry about the rent. But if you want them to believe you — try to share some of their poverty and see if you can accept it as God's will yourself!

15 Humility against Despair

DESPAIR IS THE ABSOLUTE EXTREME of self-love. It is reached when a man deliberately turns his back on all help from anyone else in order to taste the rotten luxury of knowing himself to be lost.

In every man there is hidden some root of despair because in every man there is pride that vegetates and springs weeds and rank flowers of self-pity as soon as our own resources fail us. But because our own resources inevitably fail us, we are all more or less subject to discouragement and to despair.

Despair is the ultimate development of a pride so great and so stiff-necked that it selects the absolute misery of damnation rather than accept happiness from the hands of God and thereby acknowledge that He is above us and that we are not capable of fulfilling our destiny by ourselves.

But a man who is truly humble cannot despair, because in the humble man there is no longer any such thing as self-pity.

It is almost impossible to overestimate the value of true humility and its power in the spiritual life. For the be-

ginning of humility is the beginning of blessedness and the consummation of humility is the perfection of all joy. Humility contains in itself the answer to all the great problems of the life of the soul. It is the only key to faith, with which the spiritual life begins: for faith and humility are inseparable. In perfect humility all selfishness disappears and your soul no longer lives for itself or in itself but for God: and it is lost and submerged in Him and transformed into Him.

At this point of the spiritual life humility meets the highest exaltation of greatness. It is here that every one who humbles himself is exalted because, living no longer for himself or on the human level, the spirit is delivered of all the limitations and vicissitudes of creaturehood and of contingency, and swims in the attributes of God Whose power and magnificence and wisdom and greatness and eternity have, through love, through humility, become our own.

If we were incapable of humility we would be incapable of joy, because humility alone can destroy the self-centeredness that makes joy impossible.

IF there were no humility in the world, everybody would long ago have committed suicide.

THERE is a false humility which thinks it is pride to desire the highest greatness — the perfection of contemplation, the summit of mystical union with God.

This is one of the biggest illusions in the spiritual life because it is only in this greatness, only in this exalted union, that we can achieve perfect humility.

Yet it is easy to see how this mistake is made: and, in fact, from a certain point of view it is not a mistake at all. For if we consider the joy of mystical union abstractly, merely as something which perfects our own being and gives us the highest possible happiness and satisfaction, it is possible to desire it with a desire that is selfish and full of pride. And this pride will be all the greater if our desire implies that this consummation is somehow due to us, as if we had a right to it, as if there were something we could do to earn it for ourselves.

This is the way mystical union appears in the minds of those who have no idea of what it really is. They do not realize that the essence of that union is a pure and selfless love that empties the soul of all pride and all attachment to its own will and its own judgment, and annihilates it in the sight of God in order that nothing may be left of it but the pure capacity for Him.

If you do not clearly understand that the joy of the mystical love of God springs from a liberation from all self-hood by the annihilation of every trace of pride, you cannot desire it as it ought to be desired. For if you understood what it really meant you would want not to be exalted but only to be abased, not to be great but only little in your own eyes and the eyes of the world: for the only way to enter into that joy is to dwindle

down to a vanishing point and become absorbed in God through the center of your own nothingness. The only way to possess His greatness is to pass through the needle's eye of your own absolute insufficiency.

If you know that the perfection of humility is found in transforming union and if you realize, at least to some extent, what you must suffer in order to get there, and if you understand that only God can bring you to that purity through the fires of interior trial, it would be foolish not to desire such perfection. For what would be the good of being humble in a way that prevented you from seeking the consummation of all humility?

But if you do not understand what transforming union really means, and if you think of it only in terms of greatness and reward and satisfaction which you can comprehend in your present state; and if you think God somehow owes you all this because of your intrinsic value and all the qualities with which your own efforts have endowed your soul, then do not desire it for your desire is travelling in the wrong direction.

A HUMBLE man is not disturbed by praise. Since he is no longer concerned with himself, and since he knows where the good that is in him comes from, he does not refuse praise, because it belongs to the God he loves, and in receiving it he keeps nothing for himself but gives it all, with great joy, to his God. *Fecit mihi magna qui potens est, et sanctum nomen ejus!*

A man who is not perfect in humility cannot accept praise gracefully. He knows what he ought to do about it. He knows that the praise belongs to God and not to himself: but he passes it on to God so clumsily that he trips himself up and draws attention to himself by his own awkwardness.

One who has not yet learned humility becomes upset and disturbed by praise. He may even lose his patience when people praise him; he gets irritated by the sense of his own unworthiness. And if he does not make a fuss about it, at least the things that have been said about him haunt him and obsess his mind and torment him wherever he goes.

At the other extreme is the man who has no humility at all and who devours praise, if he gets any, the way a dog gobbles a chunk of meat. But he presents no problem: he is so obvious that he has been a character in every farce since Aristophanes.

The humble man receives praise the way a clean window takes the light of the sun. The truer and more intense the light is, the less you see of the glass.

THERE is a danger that men in monasteries will go to such elaborate efforts to be humble, with the humility they have learned from a book, that they will make true humility impossible. How can you be humble if you are always paying attention to yourself? True humility excludes self-consciousness, but false humility

intensifies our awareness of ourselves to such a point that we are crippled, and can no longer make any movement or perform any action without putting to work a whole complex mechanism of apologies and formulas of self-accusation.

If you were truly humble you would not bother about yourself at all. Why should you? You would only be concerned with God and with His will and with the objective order of things and values as they are, and not as your selfishness wants them to be. Consequently you would have no more illusions to defend. Your movements would be free. You would not need to be hampered with a lot of excuses which are really only framed to defend you against the accusation of pride — as if your humility depended on what other people thought of you!

A humble man can do great things with an uncommon perfection because he is no longer concerned about accidentals, like his own interests and his own reputation, and therefore he no longer needs to waste his efforts in defending them.

For a humble man is not afraid of failure. In fact he is not afraid of anything, even of himself, since perfect humility implies perfect confidence in the power of God, before Whom no other power has any meaning and for Whom there is no such thing as an obstacle.

Humility is the surest sign of strength.

16 Freedom Under Obedience

VERY FEW MEN ARE SANCTIFIED in isolation. Very few become perfect in absolute solitude.

Living with other people and learning to lose yourself in the understanding of their weaknesses and deficiencies — which are also your own — is not only the way to perfection in general but even helps us to become true contemplatives. For there is no better means of getting rid of the rigidity and harshness and coarseness of our ingrained egoism, which is the one unbeatable obstacle to the infused light and action of the Spirit of God.

Even the courageous acceptance of interior trials in utter solitude cannot altogether compensate for the work of purification accomplished in us by patience and humility in loving other men and sympathizing with their most unreasonable needs and demands.

There is always a danger that hermits will only dry up and solidify in their own eccentricity. Living out of touch with other people they tend to lose that deep sense of spiritual realities, which only pure love can give.

Do you think the way to sanctity is to lock yourself up completely with your prayers and your books and the meditations that please and interest your mind, and protect yourself, with many walls, against people you consider stupid? Do you think the way to contemplation is found in the refusal of activities and works which are necessary for the good of others but which happen to bore and distract you? Do you imagine that you will discover God by winding yourself up in a cocoon of stuffy intellectual pleasures, instead of renouncing all your tastes and desires and ambitions and satisfactions for the love of Christ, Who will not even live within you if you cannot find Him in other men?

FAR from being essentially opposed to each other, interior contemplation and external activity are two aspects of the same love of God.

But the activity of a contemplative must be born of his contemplation and must resemble it. Everything he does outside of contemplation ought to reflect the luminous tranquillity of his interior life.

To this end, he will have to look for the same thing in his activity as he finds in his contemplation—contact and union with God.

No matter how little you may have learned of God in mental prayer, compare your acts with that little: order them by that measure. Try to make all your activity bear fruit in the same emptiness and silence and

detachment you have found in contemplation. Ultimately the secret of all this is perfect abandonment to the will of God in things you cannot control, and perfect obedience to Him in everything that depends on your own volition, so that in all things, in your interior life and in your outward works for God, you desire only one thing, which is the fulfillment of His will.

If you do this, your activity will share the disinterested peace that you are able to find at prayer, and in the simplicity of the things you do men will recognize your peacefulness and will give glory to God.

It is above all in this silent and unconscious testimony to the love of God that the contemplative exercises his apostolate. For the saint preaches sermons by the way he walks and the way he stands and the way he sits down and the way he picks things up and holds them in his hand.

The perfect do not have to reflect on the details of their actions. Their thoughts, if they can be called thoughts, are directed to God in whose love all these things are being done.

Less and less conscious of themselves, they finally cease to be aware of themselves doing things, and gradually God begins to do all that they do, in them and for them, at least in the sense that the habit of His love has become second nature to them and informs all that they do with His likeness.

THE extreme difficulties that lie in the way of those who seek interior freedom and purity of love soon teach them that they cannot advance by themselves, and the Spirit of God gives them a desire for simplest means of overcoming their own selfishness and blindness of judgment. And this is obedience to the judgment and guidance of another.

A spirit that is truly drawn to God in contemplation will soon learn the value of obedience: the hardships and anguish he has to suffer every day from the burden of his own selfishness and clumsiness and incompetence and pride will give him a hunger to be led and advised and directed by somebody else.

His own will becomes the source of so much misery and so much darkness that he does not go to some other man merely to seek light, or wisdom, or counsel: he comes to have a passion for obedience itself and for the renunciation of his own will and of his own lights.

Therefore he does not obey his abbot or his director merely because the commands or the advice given to him seem good and profitable and intelligent in his own eyes. He does not obey just because he thinks the abbot makes admirable decisions. On the contrary, sometimes the decisions of his superior seem to be less wise: but with this he is no longer concerned, because he accepts the superior as a mediator between him and God and rests only in the will of God as it comes to him through

the men that have been placed over him by the circumstances of his vocation.

THE most dangerous man in the world is the contemplative who is guided by nobody. He trusts his own visions. He obeys the attractions of an interior voice but will not listen to other men. He identifies the will of God with anything that makes him feel, within his own heart, a big, warm, sweet interior glow. The sweeter and the warmer the feeling is the more he is convinced of his own infallibility. And if the sheer force of his own self-confidence communicates itself to other people and gives them the impression that he is really a saint, such a man can wreck a whole city or a religious order or even a nation: and the world is covered with scars that have been left in its flesh by visionaries like these.

However, very often these people are nothing more than harmless bores. They have wandered into a spiritual blind-alley and there they rest in a snug little nest of private emotions. No one else can really bring himself either to envy or admire them, because even those who know nothing of the spiritual life can somehow sense that these are men who have cheated themselves out of reality and have come to be content with a fake.

They seem to be happy, but there is nothing inspiring or contagious about their happiness. They seem to be at peace, but their peace is hollow and restless. They have much to say, and everything they say is a message

with a capital "M", and yet it convinces nobody. Because they have preferred pleasure and emotion to the austere sacrifices imposed by genuine faith, their souls have become stagnant. The flame of true contemplation has gone out.

IF YOU are being led by God into the darkness where contemplation is found, you will never be able to rest in the false sweetness of your own will. The fake interior satisfaction of self-complacency and absolute confidence in your own judgment will never be able to deceive you entirely: it will make you slightly sick and you will be forced by a vague sense of interior nausea to gash yourself open and let the poison out. In the end no gratuitously independent act will leave you feeling clean. The hunger for peace will drive you where peace can be found — to someone whom the circumstances of your vocation enable you to obey as a representative of God. And then, even if his judgment is objectively foolish, the luxury of being delivered from dependence on your own feelings and tastes and emotions and desires will make it a great relief to be able to obey.

THE MERE ABILITY TO CHOOSE between good and evil is the lowest limit of freedom, and the only thing that is free about it is the fact that we can still choose good.

To the extent that you are free to choose evil, you are not free. An evil choice destroys freedom.

We can never choose evil as evil: only as an apparent good. But when you decide to do something that seems to you to be good when it is not really so, you are doing something that you do not really want to do, and therefore you are not really free.

Perfect freedom is a total inability to make any evil choice. When everything you desire is truly good and every choice not only aspires to that good but attains it, then you are free because you do everything that you want, every act of your will ends in perfect fulfillment.

Freedom therefore does not consist in an equal balance between good and evil choices but in the perfect love and acceptance of what is really good and the perfect hatred and rejection of what is evil, so that everything you do is good and makes you happy, and

you refuse and deny and ignore every possibility that might lead to unhappiness and self-deception and grief: *Ut scias reprobare malum et eligere bonum*: only the man who has rejected all evil so completely that he is unable to desire it at all, is truly free.

God, in Whom there is absolutely no shadow or possibility of evil or of sin, is infinitely free. In fact, He is Freedom.

Only the will of God is indefectible. Every other freedom can fail and defeat itself by a false choice. And all true freedom comes to us as a supernatural gift of God, as a participation in His own essential Freedom by the Love He infuses into our souls, uniting them with Him first in perfect consent, then in a transforming union of wills.

The other freedom, the so-called freedom of our nature, which is indifference with respect to good and evil choices, is nothing more than a capacity, a potentiality waiting to be fulfilled by the grace and the will and the supernatural love of God.

ALL good, all perfection, all happiness, are found in the infinitely good and perfect and blessed will of God. Since true freedom means the ability to desire and choose, always, without error, without defection, what is really good, then freedom can only be found in perfect union and submission to the will of God. If our will travels with His, it will reach the same end, rest

in the same peace, and be filled, or rather overwhelmed with the same infinite happiness that is His.

Therefore, the simplest definition of freedom is this: it means the ability to do the will of God. To be able to resist His will is not to be free. In sin there is no freedom.

Surrounding sin there are certain goods — in sins of the flesh there are, for instance, pleasures of the flesh. But it is not these pleasures that are evil. They are good, and they are willed by God and even when someone takes those pleasures in a way that is not God's will, God still wills that those pleasures should be felt. But though the pleasures in themselves are good, the direction of the will to them under circumstances that are against the will of God, becomes evil. And because that direction of the will is evil it cannot reach the mark which the will intends. Therefore it defeats itself. And therefore there is ultimately no happiness in any act of sin.

YOU fool! You have really done what you did not want to do! God has left you with the pleasure, because the pleasure also was His will: but you have neglected the happiness He wanted to give you along with the pleasure, or perhaps the greater happiness He intended for you *without* the pleasure and beyond it and above it!

You have eaten the rind and thrown away the

orange. You have kept the paper that was nothing but a wrapping and you have thrown away the case and the ring and the diamond.

And now that the pleasure — which had to end — is finished, you have nothing of the happiness that would have enriched you forever. If you had taken (or forsaken) the pleasure in the way God willed for the sake of your happiness, you would still possess the pleasure in your happiness, and it would be with you always and follow you everywhere in God's will. For it is impossible for a sane man to regret an act that was consciously performed in union with God's will.

I WONDER IF THERE ARE TWENTY men alive in the world now, who see things as they really are. That would mean that there were twenty men who were free, who were not dominated or even influenced by any attachment to any created thing or to their own selves or to any gift of God, even to the highest, the most supernaturally pure of His graces. I don't believe that there are twenty such men alive in the world. But there must be one or two. They are the ones who are holding everything together and keeping the universe from falling apart.

EVERYTHING you love for its own sake, outside of God alone, blinds your intellect and ruins your judgment of moral values and vitiates your choices so that you cannot clearly distinguish good from evil and you do not truly know God's will. And when you love and desire things for their own sakes, even though you may understand general moral principles, you do not know how to apply them. Even when your application of principles is formally correct, there will probably be a hidden circumstance you have overlooked, which will spoil your most virtuous actions with some imperfection.

As for those who have thrown themselves entirely into the disorder of sin — they often make themselves completely incapable of understanding the simplest principles; they can no longer see the most obvious and the most natural moral law. They may have the most brilliant gifts and be able to discuss the subtlest of ethical questions — and they do not even have a faint appreciation of what they are talking about because they have no love for these things as values, only an abstract interest in them as concepts.

THERE are aspects of detachment and refinements of interior purity and delicacy of conscience that even the majority of sincerely holy men never succeed in discovering. Even in the strictest monasteries and in places where people have seriously dedicated their lives to the search for perfection, many never come to suspect how much they are governed by unconscious forms of selfishness, how much their virtuous acts are prompted by a narrow and human self-interest. In fact, it is often precisely the rigidity and the unbending formalism of these pious men that keep them from becoming truly detached.

They have given up the pleasures and ambitions of the world, but they have acquired for themselves other pleasures and ambitions which have a higher and more subtle and more spiritual character. Sometimes they never even dream that it is possible to seek perfection

with an intensity of zeal that is itself imperfect. They too are attached to the good things of their little enclosed world.

Sometimes, for instance, a monk can develop an attachment to prayer or fasting, or to a pious practice or devotion, or to a certain external penance, or to a book or to a system of spirituality or to a method of meditation or even to contemplation itself, to the highest graces of prayer, to virtues, to things that are in themselves marks of heroism and high sanctity. And men who seemed to be saints have let themselves be blinded by their inordinate love for such things and have remained just as much in darkness and error as brothers in the monastery who seemed far less perfect than they.

SOMETIMES contemplatives think that the whole end and essence of their life is to be found in recollection and interior peace and the sense of the presence of God. They become attached to these things. But recollection is just as much a creature as an automobile. The sense of interior peace is no less created than a bottle of wine. The experimental "awareness" of the presence of God is just as truly a created thing as a glass of beer. The only difference is that recollection and interior peace and the sense of the presence of God are spiritual pleasures and the others are material. Attachment to spiritual things is therefore just as much an attachment as

inordinate love of anything else. The imperfection may be more hidden and more subtle: but from a certain point of view that only makes it all the more harmful because it is not so easy to recognize.

And so, many contemplatives never become great saints, never enter into close friendship with God, never find a deep participation in His immense joys, because they cling to the miserable little consolations that are given to beginners in the contemplative way.

How many there are who are in a worse state still: they never even get as far as contemplation because they are attached to activities and enterprises that seem to them to be important. Blinded by their desire for ceaseless motion, for a constant sense of achievement, famished with a crude hunger for results, for visible and tangible success, they work themselves into a state in which they cannot believe that they are pleasing God unless they are busy with a dozen jobs at the same time. Sometimes they fill the air with lamentations and complain that they no longer have any time for prayer, but they have become such experts in deceiving themselves that they do not realize how insincere their lamentations are. They not only allow themselves to be involved in more and more work, they actually go looking for new jobs. And the busier they become the more mistakes they make. Accidents and errors pile up all around them. They will not be warned. They go

further and further from the shore — and then perhaps God allows their mistakes to catch up with them. Then they wake up and discover that their carelessness has involved them in some gross and obvious sin against justice, for instance, or against the obligations of their state. And so they drown.

How many there must be who have smothered the first sparks of contemplation by piling wood on the fire before it was well lit. The stimulation of interior prayer so excites them that they launch out into ambitious projects for teaching and converting the whole world, when all that God asks of them is to be quiet and keep themselves at peace, attentive to the secret work that He is beginning in their souls.

And yet if you try to explain to them that there might be a considerable imperfection in their zeal for activities that God does not desire of them, they will treat you as a heretic. They know you must be wrong because they feel such an intense appetite for the results which they imagine they are going to accomplish.

THE secret of interior peace is detachment. Recollection is impossible for the man who is dominated by all the confused and changing desires of his own will. And even if those desires reach out for the good things of the interior life, for recollection, for peace, for the pleasures of prayer, if they are no more than natural

and selfish desires they will make recollection difficult and even impossible.

You will never be able to have perfect interior peace and recollection unless you are detached even from the desire of peace and recollection. You will never be able to pray perfectly until you are detached from the pleasures of prayer.

If you give up all these desires and seek one thing only, God's will, He will give you recollection and peace in the middle of labor and conflict and trial.

THERE is a kind of crude materialism in religious life which makes sincerely holy men believe that abnegation means simply giving up things that please the five exterior senses.

But that is scarcely the beginning of abnegation.

Of course we have to be detached from gross and sensual things before the interior life can even begin. But once it has begun it will make little progress unless we become more and more detached even from rational and intellectual and spiritual goods.

A man who hopes to become a contemplative by detaching himself only from the things that are forbidden him by reason, will not even begin to know the meaning of contemplation. For the way to God lies through deep darkness in which all knowledge and all created wisdom and all pleasure and prudence and all human hope and human joy are defeated and annulled

by the overwhelming purity of the light and the presence of God. Nothing that we know and nothing that we can enjoy and desire with our natural faculties can be anything but an obstacle to the pure possession of Him as He is in Himself and therefore if we can still be satisfied with any of these things we will remain infinitely far away from Him.

That is why we must be detached and delivered from them all in order to come to Him. It is not enough to possess and enjoy material and spiritual things within the limits of rational moderation: we must be able to rise above all joy and pass beyond all possession if we will come to the pure possession and enjoyment of God.

AND so the true contemplative life does not consist in the enjoyment of interior and spiritual pleasures. Contemplation is something more than a refined and holy aestheticism of the intellect and of the will, in love and faith. To rest in the beauty of God as a pure concept, without the accidents of image or sensible species or any other representation, is a pleasure which still belongs to the natural order. It is perhaps the highest pleasure to which nature has access and many people do not arrive at it by their natural powers alone — they need grace before they can experience this satisfaction which is of itself within the reach of nature. And nevertheless, since it is natural and can be desired by nature

and acquired by natural disciplines it can hardly have much to do with supernatural contemplation.

True contemplation is the work of a love that transcends all satisfaction and all experience to rest in the night of pure and naked faith. This faith brings us so close to God that it may be said to touch and grasp Him as He is, though in darkness. And the effect of that contact is often a deep peace that overflows into the lower faculties of the soul and thus constitutes an "experience." Yet that experience or feeling of peace always remains an accident of contemplation, so that the absence of this "sense" does not mean that our contact with God has ceased.

To become attached to the "experience" of peace is to threaten the true and essential and vital union of our soul with God above sense and experience in the darkness of a pure and perfect love.

And so, although this sense of peace may be a sign that we are united to God it is still only a sign — an accident. The substance of the union may be had without any such sense, and sometimes when we have no feeling of peace or of God's presence He is more truly present to us than He has ever been before.

If we attach too much importance to these accidentals we will run the risk of losing what is essential, which is the perfect acceptance of God's will, whatever our feelings may happen to be.

But if I think the most important thing in life is a

feeling of interior peace I will be all the more disturbed when I notice that I do not have it. And since I cannot directly produce that feeling in myself whenever I want to, the disturbance will increase with the failure of my efforts. Finally I will lose my patience by refusing to accept this situation which I cannot control and so I will lose the one important reality, union with the will of God, without which true peace is completely impossible.

SINCE CONTEMPLATION IS THE union of our mind and will with God in a supreme act of pure love that is at the same time the highest knowledge of Him as He is in Himself, the way to contemplation is to develop and perfect our mind and will and our whole soul. True contemplation really begins when the direct intervention of God raises this whole process above the level of our nature: and then He perfects our faculties by seeming to defeat and destroy all their activity in the suffering and darkness of His infused light and love.

But before this begins, we ordinarily have to labor to prepare ourselves in our own way and with the help of His grace, by deepening our knowledge and love of God in meditation and active forms of prayer, as well as by setting our wills free from attachments to created things.

About all these things many books have been written. There are all kinds of techniques and methods of meditation and mental prayer, and it would be hard to begin to talk about them all. That is why I shall talk about none of them except to say that they are all good

for those who can use them and everyone who can get profit out of systematic meditation should not fail to do so, as long as he is not afraid to lay the method aside and do a little thinking for himself once in a while.

The trouble with all these methods is not that they are too systematic and too formal: they need to be both these things, and it is good that they are. There is nothing wrong with methods. The trouble lies in the way people use them — or fail to use them.

The purpose of a book of meditations is to teach you how to think and not to do your thinking for you. Consequently if you pick up such a book and simply read it through you are wasting your time. As soon as any thought stimulates your mind or your heart you can put the book down because your meditation has begun. To think that you are somehow obliged to follow the author of the book to his own particular conclusion would be a great mistake. It may happen that his conclusion does not apply to you. God may want you to end up somewhere else. He may have planned to give you quite a different grace than the one the author suggests you might be needing.

And then there are people who only think of meditating when the book is explicitly called “Meditations.” If you called it something else they would assume they were just supposed to read it without attempting to think.

THE best thing beginners in the spiritual life can do, after they have really acquired the discipline of mind that enables them to concentrate on a spiritual subject and get below the surface of its meaning and incorporate it into their own lives, is to acquire the agility and freedom of mind that will help them to find light and warmth and ideas and love for God everywhere they go and in all that they do. People who only know how to think about God during certain fixed periods of the day will never get very far in the spiritual life. In fact they will not even think of Him in the moments they have religiously marked off for “mental prayer.”

LEARN how to meditate on paper. Drawing and writing are forms of meditation. Learn how to contemplate works of art. Learn how to pray in the streets or in the country. Know how to meditate not only when you have a book in your hand but when you are waiting for a bus or riding in a train. Above all, enter into the Church’s Liturgy and make the liturgical cycle part of your life — let its rhythm work its way into your body and soul.

THE reason why meditation and mental prayer do not serve their true purpose in the lives of so many who practice them is that their true purpose is not really understood.

Some people seem to think that the only reason for

meditating on God is to get some interesting ideas about Him. It is true that one of the elementary purposes of meditation is to strengthen all our religious convictions and give them a deeper foundation of faith and understanding: but that is only the beginning. That is only the threshold of meditation.

Others suppose that the function of meditation is to show us the necessity for practising virtues and to produce in us the courage and determination to go ahead and do something about it. That is true. This is another elementary fruit of meditation. But it is only another step on the way.

A less serious error — for now we come closer to the truth — is that meditation is supposed to produce in us greater love for God. Whether or not this concept is satisfactory depends on what you mean by loving God. If you think meditation has done its work when it has made you *say* you love God or *feel* that you love God, then you are still wrong.

MEDITATION is a twofold discipline that has a twofold function.

First it is supposed to give you sufficient control over your mind and memory and will to enable you to recollect yourself and withdraw from exterior things and the business and activities and thoughts and concerns of temporal existence, and second — this is the real end of meditation — it teaches you how to become aware of

the presence of God; and most of all it aims at bringing you to a state of almost constant attention to God, and dependence on Him.

The real purpose of meditation is this: to teach a man how to shake himself free of created things and temporal concerns, in which he finds only confusion and sorrow, and enter into a conscious and loving contact with God, in which he is prepared to receive from God the help he knows he needs so badly, and to pay to God the praise and honor and thanksgiving and love which it has now become his joy to give.

The success of your meditation will not be measured by the brilliant ideas you get or the great resolutions you make or the feelings and emotions that are produced in your interior senses. You have only really meditated well when you have come, to some extent, to realize God. Yet even that is not quite the thing.

After all, anyone who has tried it is aware that the closer you get to God, the less question there can be of realizing Him or anything about Him.

And so, suppose your meditation takes you to the point where you are baffled and repelled by the cloud that surrounds God, Who maketh darkness His covert. Far from realizing Him, you begin to realize nothing more than your own helplessness to know Him, and you begin to think that meditation is something altogether hopeless and impossible. And yet the more helpless you are, the more you seem to desire to see Him and

to know Him, and the contradiction of your desires and your failure generate in you a painful longing for God which nothing seems able to satisfy.

Do you think your meditation has failed? On the contrary: this bafflement, *this darkness and anguish of helpless desire is the true fulfillment of meditation*. For if meditation aims above all at establishing in your soul a vital contact of love with the living God, then as long as it only produces images and ideas and affections that you can understand and feel and appreciate it is not yet doing its full quota of work. But when it gets beyond the level of your understanding and your imagination it is really bringing you close to God, for it introduces you into the darkness where you can no longer think of Him, and are consequently forced to reach out for Him by blind faith and hope and love.

It is then that you should strengthen yourself against the thought of giving up mental prayer; you should return to it at your appointed time each day, in spite of the difficulty and dryness and pain you feel. Eventually your own suffering and the secret work of grace will teach you what to do.

You may perhaps be led into a completely simple form of affective prayer in which your will, with few words or none, reaches out into the darkness where God is hidden, with a kind of mute and half hopeless and yet supernaturally confident desire of knowing and loving Him.

Or else, perhaps, knowing by faith that He is present to you and realizing the utter hopelessness of trying to think intelligibly about this immense reality and all that it can mean, you relax in a simple contemplative gaze that keeps your attention peacefully aware of Him hidden somewhere in this deep cloud into which you also feel yourself drawn to enter.

From then on you should keep your prayer as simple as possible.

When it becomes possible to meditate again, meditate. If you get an idea, develop it, but without excitement. Feed your mind with reading and the liturgy, and if the darkness of your simple prayer becomes too much of a tension — or degenerates into torpor or sleep — relieve it with a few vocal prayers or simple affections, but do not strain yourself trying to get ideas or feel fervor, or upset yourself with useless efforts to realize the grandiose proposals offered by a conventional book of meditations.

PRAYER AND LOVE ARE LEARNED in the hour when prayer has become impossible and your heart has turned to stone.

IF you have never had any distractions you don't know how to pray. For the secret of prayer is a hunger for God and for the vision of God, a hunger that lies far deeper than the level of language or affection. And a man whose memory and imagination are persecuting him with a crowd of useless or even evil thoughts and images may sometimes be forced to pray far better, in the depths of his murdered heart, than one whose mind is swimming with clear concepts and brilliant purposes and easy acts of love.

That is why it is useless to get upset when you cannot shake off distractions. In the first place, you must realize that they are often unavoidable in the life of prayer. The necessity of kneeling and suffering submersion under a tidal wave of wild and inane images is one of the standard trials of the contemplative life. If you think you are obliged to stave these things off by using a book and clutching at its sentences the way a

drowning man clutches at straws, you have the privilege of doing so, but if you allow your prayer to degenerate into a period of simple spiritual reading you are losing a great deal of fruit. You would profit much more by patiently resisting distractions and learning something of your own helplessness and incapacity. And if your book merely becomes an anaesthetic, far from helping your meditation it has ruined it altogether.

ONE reason why you have distractions is this. The mind and memory and imagination only work, in meditation, in order to bring your will into the presence of its object, which is God. Now when you have practiced meditation for a few years, it is the most spontaneous thing in the world for the will to settle down to its occupation of obscurely and mutely loving God as soon as you compose yourself for prayer. Consequently the mind and memory and imagination have no real job to do. The will is busy and they are unemployed. So, after a while, the doors of your subconscious mind fall ajar and all sorts of curious figures begin to come waltzing about on the scene. If you are wise you will not pay any attention to these things: remain in simple attention to God and you keep your will peacefully directed to Him in simple desire, while the intermittent shadows of this annoying movie go about in the remote background. If you are aware of them at all it is only to realize that you refuse them.

The kind of distractions that holy people most fear are generally the most harmless of all. But sometimes pious men and women torture themselves at meditation because they imagine they are “consenting” to the phantasms of a lewd and somewhat idiotic burlesque that is being fabricated in their imagination without their being able to do a thing to stop it. The chief reason why they suffer is that their hopeless efforts to put a stop to this parade of images generate a nervous tension which only makes everything a hundred times worse.

If they ever had a sense of humor, they have now become so nervous that it has abandoned them altogether. Yet humor is one of the things that would probably be most helpful at such a time.

There is no real danger in these things. The distractions that do harm are the ones that draw our will away from its profound and peaceful occupation with God and involve it in elaborations of projects that have been concerning us during our day’s work. We are confronted by issues that really attract and occupy our wills and there is considerable danger that our meditation will break down into a session of mental letter writing or sermons or speeches or books or, worse still, plans to raise money or take care of our health.

It will be hard for anyone who has a heavy job on his shoulders to get rid of these things. They will always remind him of what he is, and they should warn him not to get too involved in active work, because it is no

use trying to clear your mind of all material things at the moment of meditation, if you do nothing to cut down the pressure of work outside that time.

BUT in all these things, it is the will to pray that is the essence of prayer, and the desire to find God and to see Him and to love Him is the one thing that matters. If you have desired to know Him and love Him you have already done what was expected of you, and it is much better to desire God without being able to think clearly of Him, than to have marvelous thoughts about Him without desiring to enter into union with His will.

21 The Gift of Understanding

CONTEMPLATION, BY WHICH WE know and love God as He is in Himself, apprehending Him in a deep and vital experience which is beyond the reach of any natural understanding, is the reason for our creation by God. And although it is absolutely above our nature, it is our proper element because it is the fulfillment of deep capacities in us that God has willed should never be fulfilled in any other way. All those who reach the end for which they were created will therefore be contemplatives in heaven: but many are also destined to enter this supernatural element and breathe this new atmosphere while they are still on earth.

Since contemplation has been planned for us by God as our true and proper element, the first taste of it strikes us at once as utterly new and yet strangely familiar.

Although you had an entirely different notion of what it would be like, (since no book can give an adequate idea of contemplation except to those who have experienced it) it turns out to be just what you seem to have known all along that it ought to be.

The utter simplicity and obviousness of the infused light which contemplation pours into our soul suddenly awakens us to a new world. We enter a region which we had never even suspected, and yet it is this new world which seems familiar and obvious. The old world of our senses is now the one that seems to us strange and remote and unbelievable — until the intense light of contemplation leaves us and we fall back to our own level.

COMPARED with the pure and peaceful comprehension of love in which the contemplative is permitted to see the truth not so much by seeing it as by being absorbed into it, ordinary ways of seeing and knowing are full of blindness and labor and uncertainty.

The sharpest of natural experience is like sleep compared with the awakening which is contemplation. The keenest and surest natural certitude is a dream compared to this serene comprehension.

Our souls rise up from our earth like Jacob waking from his dream: *vere Deus est in loco isto et ego nesciebam*. God Himself becomes the only reality, in Whom all other reality takes its proper place — and falls into insignificance.

Although this light is absolutely above our nature, it now seems to us “normal” and “natural” to see, as we now see, without seeing, to possess clarity in darkness, to have pure certitude without any shred of

discursive evidence, to be filled with an experience that transcends experience and to enter with serene confidence into depths that leave us utterly inarticulate.

O altitudo divitiarum sapientiae et scientiae Dei!

A door opens in the center of our being and we seem to fall through it into immense depths which, although they are infinite, are all accessible to us; all eternity seems to have become ours in this one placid and breathless contact.

God touches us with a touch that is emptiness and empties us. He moves us with a simplicity that simplifies us. All variety, all complexity, all paradox, all multiplicity cease. Our mind swims in the air of an understanding, a reality that is dark and serene and includes in itself everything. Nothing more is desired. Nothing more is wanting. Our only sorrow, if sorrow be possible at all, is the awareness that we ourselves still have a separate existence.

For already a supernatural instinct teaches us that the function of this abyss of freedom that has opened out within our own midst, is to draw us utterly out of our own selfhood and into its own immensity of liberty and joy.

You seem to be the same person and you are the same person that you have always been: in fact you are more yourself than you have ever been before. You have only just begun to exist. You feel as if you were at last fully

born. All that went before was a mistake, a fumbling preparation for birth. Now you have come out into your element. And yet now you have become nothing. You have sunk to the center of your own poverty, and there you have felt the doors fly open into infinite freedom, into a wealth which is perfect because none of it is yours and yet it all belongs to you.

And now you are free to go in and out of infinity.

It is useless to think of fathoming the depths of wide open darkness that have yawned inside you, full of liberty and exultation.

They are not a place, not an extent, they are a huge, smooth activity. These depths, they are Love. And in the midst of you they form a citadel.

There is nothing that can penetrate into the heart of that peace. Nothing from the outside can get in. There is even a whole sphere of your own activity that is excluded from that beautiful airy night. The five senses, the imagination, the discoursing mind, the hunger of desire do not belong in that starless sky.

And you, while you are free to come and go, yet as soon as you attempt to make words or thoughts about it you are excluded — you go back into your exterior in order to talk.

Yet you find that you can rest in this darkness and this unfathomable peace without trouble and without anxiety, even when the imagination and the mind remain in some way active outside the doors of it.

They may stand and chatter in the porch, as long as they are idle, waiting for the will their queen to return, upon whose orders they depend.

But it is better for them to be silent. However you now know that this does not depend on you. It is a gift that comes to you from the bosom of that serene darkness and depends entirely on the decision of Love.

Within the simplicity of this armed and walled and undivided interior peace is an infinite unction which, as soon as it is grasped, loses its savor. You must not try to reach out and possess it altogether. You must not touch it, or try to seize it. You must not try to make it sweeter or try to keep it from wasting away. . .

THE situation of the soul in contemplation is something like the situation of Adam and Eve in Paradise. Everything is yours, but on one infinitely important condition: that it is all *given*.

There is nothing that you can claim, nothing that you can demand, nothing that you can *take*. And as soon as you try to take something as if it were your own — you lose your Eden.

The only difference is that you do not at once realize what you have lost. Therefore only the greatest humility can give us the instinctive delicacy and caution that will prevent us from reaching out for pleasures and satisfactions that we can understand and savor in this

darkness. The moment we demand anything for ourselves or even trust in any action of our own to procure a deeper intensification of this pure and serene rest in God, we defile and dissipate the perfect gift that He desires to communicate to us in the silence and repose of our own powers.

If there is one thing we must do it is this: we must realize to the very depths of our being that this is a pure gift of God which no desire, no effort and no heroism of ours can do anything to deserve or obtain. There is nothing we can do directly either to procure it or to preserve it or to increase it. Our own activity is for the most part an obstacle to the infusion of this peaceful and pacifying light, with the exception that God may demand certain acts and works of us by charity or obedience, and maintain us in deep experimental union with Him through them all, by His own good pleasure, not by any fidelity of ours.

At best we can dispose ourselves for the reception of this great gift by resting in the heart of our own poverty, keeping our soul as far as possible empty of desires for all the things that please and preoccupy our nature, no matter how pure or sublime they may be in themselves.

And when God reveals Himself to us in contemplation we must accept Him as He comes to us, in His own obscurity, in His own silence, not interrupting Him with arguments or words or conceptions or activities

that belong to the level of our own tedious and labored existence.

For all God's gifts there must be in us a response of thanksgiving and happiness and joy: but here we thank Him less by words than by the serene happiness of silent acceptance. *Vacate et videte quoniam ego sum Deus!* It is our emptiness in the presence of the abyss of His reality, our silence in the presence of His infinitely rich silence, our joy in the bosom of the serene darkness in which His Light holds us absorbed, it is all this that praises Him. It is this that causes love of God and wonder and adoration to swim up into us like tidal waves out of the depths of that peace, and break upon the shores of our consciousness in a vast, hushed surf of inarticulate praise, praise and glory!

THIS clear darkness of God is the purity of heart Christ spoke of in the sixth Beatitude. *Beati mundo corde, quoniam ipsi Deum videbunt.* It is created in us when the Holy Ghost infuses into our souls the Gift of Understanding in a particularly strong degree, and usually not without its companion Gift, Wisdom. And this purity of heart brings at least a momentary deliverance from images and concepts, from the forms and shadows of all the things men desire with their human appetites. It brings deliverance even from the feeble and delusive analogies we ordinarily use to arrive at God — not that it denies them, for they are true as

far as they go, but it makes them temporarily useless by fulfilling them all in the sure grasp of a deep and penetrating experience.

IN the vivid darkness of God within us there sometimes come deep movements of love that deliver us entirely, for a moment, from our old burden of selfishness, and number us among those little children of whom is the kingdom of heaven.

And when God allows us to fall back into our own confusion of desires and judgments and temptations, we carry a scar over the place where that joy exulted for a moment in our hearts.

The scar burns us. The sore wound aches within us, and we remember that we have fallen back into what we are not, and are not yet allowed to remain where God would have us belong. And we long for the place He has destined for us and weep with desire for the time when this pure poverty will catch us and hold us in its liberty and never let us go, when we will never fall back from the paradise of the simple and the little children into the forum of prudence where the wise of this world go up and down in sorrow and set their traps for a happiness that cannot exist.

22 The Night of the Senses

THE LIFE OF INFUSED CONTEMPLATION does not always begin with a definite experience of God in the strong inpouring of light that has been described. And in any case such moments of freedom and escape from the blindness and helplessness of the ordinary, laborious ways of the spirit will always be relatively rare. And it is not too hard to recognize these sudden, intense flashes of the gift of understanding, these vivid "rays of darkness" striking deep into the soul and changing the course of a man's whole life. They bring with them their own conviction. They strike blindness from our eyes like scales. They plant in us too deep and too calm and too new a certainty to be misunderstood or quickly forgotten.

But if a man had to wait for such experiences before he became a contemplative he might have to wait a long time — perhaps a whole lifetime. And perhaps his expectation would be vain.

It is more ordinary for the spirit to learn contemplation from God not in a sudden flash but imperceptibly, by very gradual steps. And as a matter of fact, without the groundwork of long and patient trial and slow

progress in the darkness of pure faith, contemplation will never really be learned at all. For a few isolated, though intense, flashes of the spirit of understanding and wisdom will not make a man a contemplative in the full sense of the word; contemplative prayer is only truly what it is called when it becomes more or less habitual.

THE ordinary way to contemplation lies through a desert without trees and without beauty and without water. The spirit enters a wilderness and travels blindly in directions that seem to lead away from vision, away from God, away from all fulfillment and joy. It may become almost impossible to believe that this road goes anywhere at all except to a desolation full of dry bones — the ruin of all our hopes and good intentions.

The prospect of this wilderness is something that so appalls most men that they refuse to enter upon its burning sands and travel among its rocks. They cannot believe that contemplation and sanctity are to be found in a desolation where there is no food and no shelter and no rest and no refreshment for their imagination and intellect and for the desires of their nature.

Convinced that perfection is to be measured by brilliant intuitions of God and fervent resolutions of a will on fire with love, persuaded that sanctity is a matter of sensible fervor and tangible results, they will have nothing to do with a contemplation that does not

delight their reason and invest their minds and wills with consolations and sensible joy. They want to know where they are going and see what they are doing, and as soon as they enter into regions where their own activity becomes paralyzed and bears no visible fruit, they turn around and go back to the lush fields where they can be sure that they are doing something and getting somewhere. And if they cannot achieve the results they desire with such intense anxiety, at least they convince themselves that they have made great progress if they have said many prayers, performed many mortifications, preached many sermons, read (and perhaps also written) many books and articles, paged through many books of meditations, acquired hundreds of new and different devotions and girdled the earth with pilgrimages. Not that all of these things are not good in themselves: but there are times in the life of a man when they can become an escape, an anodyne, a refuge from the responsibility of suffering in darkness and obscurity and helplessness, and allowing God to strip us of our false selves and make us into the new men that we are really meant to be.

AND so, when God begins to infuse His light of understanding into the spirit of a man drawn to contemplation, the experience is often not so much one of fulfillment as of defeat.

The mind finds itself entering uneasily into the shad-

ows of a strange and silent night. The night is peaceful enough. But it is very strange. Thought becomes cramped and difficult. There is a peculiarly heavy sense of weariness and distaste for mental and spiritual activity. Yet at the same time the soul is haunted with a fear that this new impotence is a sin, or a sign of imperfection. It tries to force acts of thought and will. Sometimes it makes a mad effort to squeeze some feeling of fervor out of itself, which is, incidentally, the worst thing it could possibly do. All the pretty images and concepts of God that it once cherished have vanished or have turned into unpleasant and frightening distortions. God is nowhere to be found. The words of prayers return in a hollow echo from the walls of this dead cave.

If a man in this night lets his spirit get carried away with fear or impatience and anxiety, everything is lost. He will twist and turn and torture himself with attempts to see some light and feel some warmth and recapture the old consolations that are beyond recovery. And finally he will run away from darkness, and do the best he can to dope himself with the first light that comes along.

But there are others who, no matter how much they suffer perplexity and uneasiness in the wilderness where God begins to lead them, still feel drawn further and further on into the wasteland. They cannot think, they cannot meditate; their imagination tortures them

with everything they do not want to see; their life of prayer is without light and without pleasure and without any feeling of devotion.

On the other hand they sense, by a kind of instinct, that peace lies in the heart of this darkness. Something prompts them to keep still, to trust in God, to be quiet and listen for His voice; to be patient and not to get excited. Soon they discover that all useless attempts to meditate only upset and disturb them; but at the same time, when they stay quiet in the muteness of naked faith, resting in a simple and open-eyed awareness, attentive to the darkness which baffles them, a subtle and indefinable peace begins to seep into their souls and occupies them with a deep and inexplicable satisfaction. This satisfaction is tenuous and dark. It cannot be grasped or identified. It slips out of focus and gets away. Yet it is there.

What is it? It is hard to say: but one feels that it is somehow summed up in "the will of God" or simply, "God."

THE man who does not permit his spirit to be beaten down and upset by dryness and helplessness, but who lets God lead him peacefully through the wilderness, and desires no other support or guidance than that of pure faith and trust in God alone, will be brought to deep and peaceful union with Him.

The man who is not afraid to abandon all his spirit-

ual progress into the hands of God, to put prayer, virtue, merit, grace, and all gifts in the keeping of Him from Whom they all must come, will quickly be led to peace in union with Him.

JUST as the light of faith is darkness to the mind, so the supreme supernatural activity of the mind and will in contemplation and infused love at first seems to us like inaction. That is why our natural faculties are anxious and restless and refuse to keep still. They want to be the principles of their own acts. The thought that they cannot act according to their own pleasure brings them a suffering and humiliation which they find it hard to stand.

But contemplation lifts us beyond the sphere of our natural powers.

When you are travelling in a plane close to the ground you realize that you are going somewhere: but in the stratosphere, although you may be going seven times as fast, you lose all sense of speed.

AND so, as soon as there is any reasonable indication that God is drawing the spirit into this way of contemplation, we ought to remain at peace in a prayer that is utterly simplified, stripped of acts and reflections and clean of images, waiting in emptiness and vigilant expectancy for the will of God to be done in us. This waiting should be without anxiety and without

deliberate hunger for any experience that comes within the range of our knowledge or memory, because any experience that we can grasp or understand will be inadequate and unworthy of the state to which God wishes to bring our souls.

The most important practical question that people will ask at this point is: what are the signs that it is safe to abandon formal meditation and rest in this more or less passive expectancy?

In the first place, if meditation and affective prayer are easy and spontaneous and fruitful they should not be given up. But when they have become practically impossible, or if they simply deaden and exhaust the mind and will, and fill them with disgust, or if they involve them in many distractions, it would be harmful to force your mind to have special thoughts and your will to go through a routine of specified acts. For if you reflect on your state you will easily see that your mind is absorbed in one vast, obscure thought of God and your will is occupied, if not haunted, with a blind, groping, half-defined desire of God. These two combine to produce in you the anxiety and darkness and helplessness which make lucid and particular acts at once so hard and so futile.

And if you allow yourself to remain in silence and emptiness you may find that this thirst, this hunger that seeks God in blindness and darkness, will grow on you and at the same time, although you do not yet

seem to find anything tangible, peace will establish itself in your soul.

This alone may be a good enough sign that you should no longer trouble yourself with methodical forms of meditation, except at rare moments when you feel positively drawn to return to them.

On the other hand, if giving up meditation simply means that your mind goes dead and your will gets petrified, and you lean against the wall and spend your half-hour of meditation wondering what you are going to get for supper, you had better keep yourself occupied with something. After all, there is always a possibility that laziness will dress itself up as “prayer of quiet” or “prayer of simplicity” and degenerate into torpor and sleep. The mere absence of activity does not *ipso facto* turn you into a contemplative.

This is where a book may sometimes help you. If you find some paragraph or sentence that interests you, stop reading and turn it over in your mind and absorb it and contemplate it and rest in the general, serene, effortless consideration of the thought, not in its details but as a whole, as something held and savored in its entirety: and so pass from this to rest in the quiet expectancy of God. If you find yourself getting distracted, go back to the book, to the same sentence or to another. You can do this with Scripture, or with pictures, or with a few snatches of vocal prayer, best of all in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, but also

out in the woods and under the trees. The sweep and serenity of a landscape, fields and hills, are enough to keep a contemplative riding the quiet interior tide of his peace and his desire for hours at a time.

THE absence of activity in contemplative prayer is only apparent. Below the surface, the mind and will are drawn into the orbit of an activity that is deep and intense and supernatural, and which overflows into our whole being and brings forth incalculable fruits.

There is no such thing as a kind of prayer in which you do absolutely nothing. If you are doing nothing you are not praying. On the other hand if God dominates your interior activity and becomes its immediate principle, by the Gifts of the Holy Ghost, the work of your faculties may be entirely beyond conscious estimation, and its results may not be seen or understood.

Contemplative prayer is a deep and simplified spiritual activity in which the mind and will are fused into one. They rest in a unified and simple concentration upon God, turned to Him and intent upon Him and absorbed in His own light, with a simple gaze which is perfect adoration because it silently tells God that we have left everything else and desire even to leave our own selves for His sake, and that He alone is important to us, He alone is our desire and our life, and nothing else can give us any joy.

IN ANY DEGREE OF THE SPIRITUAL life, and even where there is no spiritual life at all, it can happen that a man will feel himself caught up in an emotional religious ferment in which he overflows with sensible, and even sentimental movements of love for God and other people. If he is completely inexperienced he will get the idea that he is very holy because of the holy feelings that are teeming in his heart.

All these things mean very little or nothing at all. They are a kind of sensible intoxication produced by some pleasure or other, and there is only an accidental difference between them and the tears that children sometimes shed when they go to the movies.

In themselves these movements of passion are indifferent. They can be used for good or evil, and for beginners in the spiritual life they are generally necessary. But even a beginner would be foolish to depend on them, because sooner or later he will have to do without them. In fact his spiritual life will not really begin until he has learned in some measure to get along without the stimulus of emotion.

EVEN when we enter into the contemplative life we still

carry our passions and our sensible nature along with us like a store of unprotected gasoline. And sometimes the sparks that fly in the pure darkness of contemplation get into that fuel by accident and start a blaze in the emotions and the senses.

The whole spirit is rocked and reels in an explosion of drunken joy or a storm of compunction which may be good and healthy, but which is still more or less animal, even though the spark that started the fire may have had a supernatural origin.

This blaze flares up and burns out in a few moments, or half an hour. While it lasts, you taste an intense pleasure which is sometimes deceptively lofty, but occasionally betrays itself by a certain heaviness that belongs to the human level and marks it for what it is: emotion. Sometimes it may even produce a good natural effect. A burst of spiritual exuberance can tone you up on a feast day, after weeks of struggle and labor. But generally the effect of this commotion is no better than natural. When it is all over you have no more profit than you might have got from a couple of glasses of wine or a good swim — and monks neither drink wine, (in America) nor do they swim. So to that extent it is a good thing.

But the danger is that you will attach the wrong kind of importance to these manifestations of religious emotion. Really they are not important at all, and although sometimes they are unavoidable it does not

seem to be prudent to desire them. And as a matter of fact everyone who has received any kind of training in the interior life knows that it is not considered good sense to go after these consolations with too heavy an intensity of purpose. Nevertheless many of those who seem to be so superior to the sensible element in religion show, by their devotions, their taste for sentimental pictures and sticky music and mushy spiritual reading, that their whole interior life is a concentrated campaign for "lights" and "consolations" and "tears of compunction" if not "interior words" with, perhaps, the faintly disguised hope of a vision or two and, eventually, the stigmata.

FOR anyone who is really called to infused contemplation this taste for "experiences" can be one of the most dangerous obstacles in his interior life. It is the rock on which many who might have become contemplatives have ended in shipwreck. And it is all the more dangerous because even in the houses of contemplative orders people do not always clearly understand the difference between mystical contemplation in the proper sense and all these accidentals, these experiences, these manifestations and curiosities, which may or may not be supernatural, and which have no essential connection with sanctity or with the pure love which is the substance of true contemplation.

THEREFORE the healthiest reaction to these outbursts is an obscure repugnance for the pleasures and the excitements they bring. You recognize that these things offer no real fruit and no lasting satisfaction. They tell you nothing reliable about God or about yourself. They give you no real strength, only the momentary illusion of holiness. And when you grow more experienced you recognize how much they blind you and how capable they are of deceiving you and leading you astray.

You will try to withdraw from them and to avoid the occasions that bring them on, if you can tell what might be likely to bring them on. But you will not upset yourself by offering a violent resistance; it is enough to remain peacefully indifferent towards them.

And when there is nothing you can do to prevent these feelings of intoxication and spiritual joy you accept them with patience and with reserve and even with a certain humility and thankfulness, realizing that you would not suffer such excitements if there were not so much natural steam left in you. You withdraw your consent from anything that may be inordinate about them, and leave the rest to God, waiting for the hour of your deliverance into the real joys, the purely spiritual joys of a contemplation in which your nature and your emotions and your own self-hood no longer have any part, but in which you are absorbed and immersed, not in this staggering drunkenness of the senses but in the clean, intensely pure intoxication of a spirit liberated in God.

THOUGH THE WAY TO CONTEMPLATION is obscure and arid and leads through many unexpected forms of suffering, and although contemplation itself can only be expressed in poetic language that tends to sound strange and dramatic, nevertheless neither the way to contemplation nor contemplation itself should be thought of as either dramatic or strange.

In fact, if we enter the contemplative life with our minds too full of the language and poetry of a St. John of the Cross we are apt to get side-tracked by our own imagination and wander for the rest of our days in an austere and misguided dream. If instead of translating the language of St. John of the Cross into practice we become attached to its figures for the poetic pleasure our own minds absorb from them, we shall be no further advanced than we were before. It is easy to stand St. John of the Cross on his own head by becoming attached to his doctrine of detachment.

It may well happen that the true test of your contemplative vocation may be your willingness to give up St. John of the Cross, for a time, in obedience to a director who does not understand him.

If you want to follow St. John of the Cross, follow him all the way. He says that "the soul that attains to the state of contemplation no longer has any systems or methods and cannot even be attached to such things." It no longer clings to a special manner of thinking about God or feeling and experiencing the things of God. "It has within itself all ways after the manner of one who possesses nothing yet possesses all things." (Ascent ii, 3.) Very well, then: why are you attached to any one book, or to the words and ways of one saint when he himself tells you to let them go and walk in simplicity? To hang on to him as if to make a method of him is to contradict him and to go in the opposite direction to the one in which he would have you travel.

IN practice the way to contemplation is an obscurity so obscure that it is no longer even dramatic. There is nothing left in it that can be grasped and cherished as heroic or even unusual. And so, for a contemplative, there is supreme value in the ordinary routine of work and poverty and hardship and monotony that characterize the lives of all the poor and uninteresting and forgotten people in the world.

Christ, Who came on earth to form contemplatives and teach men the ways of sanctity and prayer, could easily have surrounded himself with ascetics who starved themselves to death and terrified the people with strange trances. But His Apostles were workmen,

fishermen, publicans who made themselves conspicuous only by their disregard for most of the intricate network of devotions and ceremonial practices and moral gymnastics of the professionally holy.

The surest asceticism is the bitter insecurity and labor and nonentity of the really poor. To be utterly dependent on other people. To be ignored and despised and forgotten. To know nothing of decency or comfort. To live in much dirt, and eat bad food. To take orders and work hard for little or no money: it is a hard school, and one which most pious people do their best to avoid.

Many religious people, who say they love God, detest and fear the very thought of a poverty that is real enough to mean insecurity, hunger, dirt. And yet you will find men who go down and live among the poor not because they love God (in Whom they do not believe) or even because they love the poor, but simply because they hate the rich and want to stir up the poor to hate the rich too. If men can suffer these things for the venomous pleasure of hatred, why do so few become poor out of love, in order both to find God in poverty and give Him to other men?

NEVERTHELESS it must not be thought that no man can become a contemplative unless his whole life is always externally miserable and disgusting. To live frugally and laboriously, depending on God and not

on material things which we no longer have, and doing our best to get along with other people who do not, perhaps, treat us with uniform kindness and consideration, all this may add up to an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity and contentment and joy. There may even be a certain natural comeliness about it, and in fact the simplicity of a life of work and poverty can at times be more beautiful than the elaborate life of those who think their money can buy them beauty and surround them with pleasant things. Anybody who has been in the house of a French or Italian peasant knows that much.

LIFE in a Trappist monastery is fundamentally peasant life. The closer it conforms to the poverty and frugality and simplicity of those who have to dig their living out of the land, the more it fulfills its essential purpose, which is to dispose men for contemplation.

It is good for a monastery to be poor. It is good for the monks to have to be content with clothes that are worn very thin and covered with patches and to get worse food than the Rule allows and to have to depend on their fields more than on Mass-stipends and the gifts of benefactors.

It very often happens that an old brother who has spent his life making cheese or baking bread or repairing shoes or driving a team is a greater contemplative and more of a saint than a priest who has absorbed all

Scripture and Theology and knows the writings of great saints and mystics and has had more time for meditation and contemplation and prayer.

ONE of the first things to learn if you want to be a contemplative is how to mind your own business.

Nothing is more suspicious, in a man who seems holy, than an impatient desire to reform other men.

A serious obstacle to recollection is the mania for directing those you have not been appointed to direct, reforming those you have not been asked to reform, correcting those over whom you have no jurisdiction. How can you do these things and keep your mind at rest?

Pay as little attention as you can to the faults of other people and none at all to their natural defects and eccentricities.

THE big problem on which all sanctity depends is renunciation, detachment, self-denial. But self-denial does not end when we have given up all our deliberate faults and imperfections.

To keep yourself out of obvious sins; to avoid the things that are evidently wrong because they shame and degrade your nature; to perform acts that are universally respected because they are demanded by our very dignity as human beings: all that is not yet sanctity. To avoid sin and practice virtue is not to be a saint,

it is only to be a man, a human being. This is only the beginning of what God wants of you. But it is a necessary beginning, because you cannot have supernatural perfection unless you have first (by God's grace) perfected your own nature on its own level. Before you can be a saint you have got to become human. An animal cannot be a contemplative.

However it is relatively simple to get rid of faults that we recognize as faults — although that too can be terribly hard. But the crucial problem of perfection and interior purity is in the renunciation and uprooting of all our *unconscious* attachments to created things and to our own will and desires.

In fighting deliberate and evident vices a planned strategy of resolutions and penances is the best way — if not the only way. You plan your campaign and fight it out and reshape the plan according to the changes in the aspect of the battle. You pray and suffer and hang on and give things up and hope and sweat, and the varying contours of the struggle work out the shape of your liberty.

When it ends, and when you have a good habit to work with, do not forget the moments of the battle when you were wounded and disarmed and helpless. Do not forget that, for all your efforts, you only won because of God Who did the fighting in you.

But when it comes to fighting the deep and unconscious habits of attachment which we can hardly dig

up and recognize, all our meditations and self-examinations and resolutions and planned campaigns may not only be ineffective but even sometimes lend assistance to our own enemies. Because it may easily happen that our resolutions are dictated by the vice we need to get rid of. And so the proud man resolves to fast more and punish his flesh more because he wants to make himself feel like more and more of an athlete: his fasts and disciplines are imposed on him by his own vanity, and then strengthen the thing in him that most needs to be killed.

When a man is virtuous enough to be able to delude himself that he is almost perfect, he may enter into a dangerous condition of blindness in which all his violent efforts finally to grasp perfection strengthen his hidden imperfections and confirm him in his attachment to his own judgment and his own will.

IN getting the best of our secret attachments — ones which we cannot see because they are principles of spiritual blindness — our own initiative is almost always useless. We need to leave the initiative in the hands of God working in our souls either directly in the night of aridity and suffering, or through events and other men. This is where so many holy people break down and go to pieces. As soon as they reach the point where they can no longer see the way and guide themselves by their own light, they refuse to go any further.

They have no confidence in anyone except themselves. Their faith is largely an emotional illusion. It is rooted in their feelings, in their physique, in their temperament. It is a kind of natural optimism that is stimulated by moral activity and warmed by the approval of other men. If people oppose it, this kind of faith still finds refuge in self-satisfaction.

But when the time comes to enter the darkness in which we are naked and helpless and alone; in which we see the insufficiency of our greatest strength and the hollowness of our strongest virtues; in which we have nothing of our own to rely on, and nothing in our nature to support us, and nothing in the world to guide us or give us light — then we find out whether or not we live by faith.

And it is in this darkness, when there is nothing left in us that can please or comfort our own minds, when we seem to be useless and worthy of all contempt, when we seem to have failed, when we seem to be destroyed and devoured, it is then that the deep and secret selfishness that is too close to us for us to identify is stripped away from our souls. It is in this darkness that we find liberty. It is in this abandonment that we are made strong. This is the night which empties us and makes us pure.

Do not look for rest in any pleasure, because you were not created for pleasure: you were created for JOY.

And if you do not know the difference between pleasure and joy you have not yet begun to live.

Life in this world is full of pain. But pain, which is the contrary of pleasure, is not necessarily the contrary of happiness or of joy. Because joy flowers in the full expansion of freedom that reaches out without obstacle to its supreme object, fulfilling itself in the perfect activity of disinterested love for which it was created.

Pleasure, which is selfish, suffers from everything that deprives us of some good we want to savor for our own sakes. But joy, which is unselfish, suffers from nothing but selfishness. Pleasure is restrained and killed by pain and suffering. Joy ignores suffering or laughs at it or even exploits it to purify itself of its greatest obstacle, selfishness.

True joy is found in the perfect willing of what we were made to will: in the intense and supple and free movement of our will rejoicing in what is good not merely for us but in Itself.

Sometimes pleasure can be the death of joy, and so the man who has tasted joy is suspicious of pleasure. But anyone who knows true joy is never afraid of pain because he knows that pain can serve him as another opportunity of asserting — and tasting — his liberty.

And yet do not think that joy turns pleasure inside out and seeks pleasure in pain: joy, in so far as it is joy, is above pain and does not feel pain. And that is why it laughs at pain and rejoices in confounding pain. It is

the conquest of suffering by disinterestedness, by unselfishness, by perfect love.

Pain cannot touch this highest joy — except to bring it an accidental increase of purity by asserting the soul's freedom from sense and emotion and self-love, and isolating our wills in a clean liberty beyond the level of suffering.

And so it is a very sad thing when contemplatives look for little more than pleasure in their contemplation. That means that they will waste time and exhaust themselves in harmful efforts to avoid aridity and difficulty and pain — as if these things were evils. They lose their peace. And seeking pleasure in their prayer they make themselves almost incapable of joy.

FICKLENESS and indecision are signs of self-love.

If you can never make up your mind what God wills for you, but are always veering from one opinion to another, from one practice to another, from one method to another, it may be an indication that you are trying to get around God's will and do your own with a quiet conscience.

As soon as God gets you in one monastery you want to be in another.

As soon as you taste one way of prayer, you want to try another. You are always making resolutions and breaking them by counter-resolutions. You ask your confessor questions and do not remember the answers.

Before you finish one book you begin another, and with every book you read you change the whole plan of your interior life.

Soon you will have no interior life at all. Your whole existence will be a patchwork of confused desires and day-dreams and velleities in which you succeed in nothing except defeating the work of grace: for all this is, is an elaborate subconscious device of your nature to defeat God, Whose work in your soul demands the sacrifice of all that you desire and delight in, and, indeed, of all that you are.

So keep still, and let Him do some work.

ONE OF THE GREATEST SUFFERINGS of a contemplative is to feel the terrible, inescapable coarseness and grossness and inadequacy of the highest human modes of love and intellection when they are seen in the light of God, when they reach out towards God and fail.

Measure the sorrow, if you can, measure the sorrow of realizing that you have a nature destined by God for the gift of an existence, an activity, a beatitude which utterly transcend everything that you are and can ever be; of finding yourself left with nothing but yourself; of finding yourself without the gift which is the only meaning of your existence. Then the highest perfection of natural life, of human understanding, the purest and finest tension of the human will reaching out in desire for everything that is perfect, appears to you as something essentially vulgar and worthless. Even without your mistakes and your sins, everything that you are or can be or have or can possess appears to you as if it were nothing, because it has no value, no power to procure for you the immense gift which is utterly beyond you and which is the only real reason why you were created.

But when, on top of all that, you see that your nature is still twisted and disfigured by selfishness and by the disorder of sin, and that you are cramped and warped by a way of living that turns you incessantly back upon your own pleasure and your own interest, and that you cannot escape this distortion: that you cannot even deserve to escape it, by your own power, what will your sorrow be? This is the root of what the saints called compunction: the grief, the anguish of being helpless to be anything but what you were not meant to be.

Then, in prayer, all sweetness becomes a sickness. Consolation repels you because the smallest taste of it brings surfeit. All light brings pain to the mind by its insufficiency. Your will no longer seems able to dare to act. The slightest movement reminds it of its uselessness, and it dies of shame.

And yet, strangely, it is in this helplessness that we come upon the beginning of joy. We discover that as long as we stay still the pain is not so bad and there is even a certain peace, a certain richness, a certain strength, a certain companionship that makes itself present to us when we are beaten down and lie flat with our mouths in the dust, *si forte sit spes*.

Then, as peace settles upon the soul and we accept what we are and what we are not, we begin to realize that this great poverty is our greatest fortune. For when we are stripped of the riches that were not ours

and could not possibly endow us with anything but trouble, when we rest even from that good and licit activity of knowing and desiring which still could not give us any possession of our true end and happiness, then we become aware that the whole meaning of our life is a poverty and emptiness which, far from being a defeat, are really the pledge of all the great supernatural gifts of which they are a potency.

We become like vessels empty of water that they may be filled with wine. We are like glass cleansed of dust and grime to receive the sun and vanish into its light.

Once we begin to find this emptiness, no poverty is poor enough, no emptiness is empty enough, no humility lowers us enough for our desires.

Then our greatest sorrow is to find that we still attach importance to ourselves, still can be great in our own eyes. For we have begun to know that any shadow cast upon the transparency of a pure and empty soul is an illusion, and an obstacle to the unadulterated light of God. And we see that our knowledge is darkness by comparison with His light. Power is supreme weakness and makes us incapable of His strength, and all human desire deceives and disturbs us and turns us away from Him.

The more our faculties are emptied of their desire and their tension towards created things, and the more they collect themselves into peace and interior silence

and reach into the darkness where God is present to their deepest hunger, the more they feel a pure, burning impatience to be free and rid of all the last obstacles and attachments that still stand between them and the emptiness that will be capable of being filled with God.

It is then that the monk suddenly discovers the great value of even the simplest and most fundamental means of renunciation which his rule may offer him. His attitude towards all the things that are called penances begins to change. Before, he nerved himself for them with a kind of athletic tension, and depended much on the moral support of others doing the same thing, fasting and working and praying along with him. Now he turns to these hard and obscure and plain ways of penance and labor and poverty because they give rest to his soul, they pacify him; yet it is not because he conceives them as cleansing and perfecting his own heart that he seeks these means: he rests in them because he can no longer rest in anything that is his own will. His peace is in the will of another. His freedom is found in dependence upon God through another.

And it is the truly contemplative man who is nourished by obedience and finds his peace in the simplicity of a child or of a novice. Yet that comparison too is very misleading. A mature contemplative is far more simple than any child or any novice, because theirs is a more or less negative simplicity — the simplicity of those in whom potential complications have not yet had a

chance to develop. But in the contemplative, all complexities have now begun to straighten themselves out and dissolve into unity and emptiness and interior peace.

THE contemplative, nourished by emptiness, endowed by poverty and liberated from all sorrow by simple obedience, drinks fortitude and joy from the will of God in all things.

Without any need for complicated reasoning or mental efforts or special acts, his life is a prolonged immersion in the rivers of tranquillity that flow from God into the whole universe and draw all things back into God.

For God's love is like a river springing up in the depth of the Divine Substance and flowing endlessly through His creation, filling all things with life and goodness and strength.

All things, except our own sins, are carried and come to us in the waters of this pure and irresistible stream.

If we accept them in tranquillity, submitting to the pressure of the waters by a clean and unquestioning faith and a love perfect and detached from all resistance, God's will enters into the depths of our own freedom and carries our lives and all our acts and desires away on the tide of His own joy. And true peace is only found by those who have learned to ride and swim with the strong current of this stream. For them life becomes

simple and easy. Every moment is rich in happiness. All events are intelligible, if not in their details at least in their relation to the great wholeness of life.

But if we refuse to accept His will (and this is sin) we are nevertheless overwhelmed by the flood which no power can resist.

All sorrow, hardship, difficulty, struggle, pain, unhappiness, and ultimately death itself can be traced to rebellion against God's love for us.

WHEN the Gift of Understanding has opened our eyes in contemplation, we ought not to disturb God, in our souls, by the noise of our own temporal activity. We should receive His light in silence and tranquillity and deep thankfulness, realizing that at this moment the highest praise we can offer Him is to sacrifice every attempt to praise Him in human language and resist the temptation to reduce Him to the level of our own concepts and understandings. Not that our words and minds cannot praise Him: but in another order. We would have to withdraw from Him and emerge from these depths before words and ideas could separate themselves out and take shape in our minds.

So it is great praise of God to remain in His silence and darkness and when we have received this gift from Him it would be poor thanks indeed to prefer our own dim light and desire some feeling of Him that would give us some false and human sense of His being.

WE DO NOT SEE GOD IN CON-
templation — we *know* Him by love: for He is pure
Love and when we taste the experience of loving God
for His own sake alone, we know by experience Who
and what He is.

True mystical experience of God and supreme re-
nunciation of everything outside of God coincide. They
are two aspects of the same thing. For when our minds
and wills are perfectly free from every created attach-
ment, they are immediately perfectly filled with the
gift of God's love: not because things necessarily have
to happen that way, but because this is His will, the
gift of His love to us. *Omnis qui reliquerit domum vel
patrem vel uxorem propter nomen meum, centuplum
accipiet et vitam aeternam possidebit.*

We experience God in proportion as we are stripped
and emptied of attachment to His creatures. And when
we have been delivered from every other desire we shall
taste the perfection of an incorruptible joy.

And if you argue that some of the saints seem not to
have known this highest joy, then the answer appears
to be that God has left them with some other desire

than the pure love of Him alone — some desire holy in itself but less pure than the most perfect love; some desire that still travelled to God not directly, in Himself, but through the love and the active service of other men.

Yet as soon as this is said it falsifies everything: for it is an abstract and theoretical statement. In practice what sanctity, what experience of God, what love of God, what purity of soul can divide love against itself and separate the love of God in Himself from the love of Him in men? As soon as that separation takes place in practice the interior life falls to pieces and so does contemplation.

God does not give His joy to us for ourselves alone, and if we could possess Him for ourselves alone we would not possess Him at all. Any joy that does not overflow from our souls and help other men to rejoice in God does not come to us from God. (But do not think that you have to see how it overflows into the souls of others. In the economy of His grace, you may be sharing His gifts with someone you will never know until you get to heaven.)

IF we experience God in contemplation, we experience Him not for ourselves alone but also for others.

Yet if your experience of God comes from God, one of the signs may be a great diffidence in telling others about it. To speak about the gift He has given us would

seem to dissipate it and leave a stain on the pure emptiness where God's light shone. No one is more shy than a contemplative about his contemplation. Sometimes it gives him almost physical pain to speak to anyone of what he has seen of God. Or at least it is intolerable for him to speak about it as his own experience.

At the same time he most earnestly wants everybody else to share his peace and his joy. His contemplation gives him a new outlook on the world of men. He looks about him with a secret and tranquil surmise which he perhaps admits to no one, hoping to find in the faces of other men or to hear in their voices some sign of vocation and potentiality for the same deep happiness and wisdom.

He finds himself speaking of God to the men in whom he hopes he has recognized the light of his own peace, the awakening of his own secret: or if he cannot speak to them, he writes for them, and his contemplative life is still imperfect without sharing, without companionship, without communion.

And here too is where temptation can enter in, and our own coarse nature can ruin contemplation by a burst of ill-timed effort.

AT no time in the spiritual life is it more necessary to be completely docile and subject to the most delicate movements of God's will and His grace than when you try to share the knowledge of His love with other men.

And it is much better to be so diffident that you risk not sharing it with them at all, than to throw it all away by trying to give it to other people before you have received it yourself. The contemplative who tries to preach contemplation before he himself really knows what it is, will prevent both himself and others from finding the true path to God's peace.

In the first place he will substitute his own natural enthusiasm and imagination and poetry for the reality of the light that is in him, and he will become absorbed in the business of communicating something that is practically incommunicable: and although there is some benefit in this even for his own soul (for it is a kind of meditation on the interior life and on God) still he runs the risk of being drawn away from the simple light and silence in which God is known without words and concepts, and losing himself in reasoning and language and metaphor.

THE highest vocation in the Kingdom of God is that of sharing one's contemplation with others and bringing other men to the experimental knowledge of God that is given to those who love Him perfectly. But the possibility of mistake and error is just as great as the vocation itself.

In the first place, the mere fact that you have discovered something of contemplation does not yet mean that you are supposed to pass it on to somebody else.

Contemplata tradere implies two distinct vocations: one to be a contemplative, and another still to teach contemplation. Both of them have to be verified.

But then, as soon as you think of yourself as teaching contemplation to others you make another mistake. No one teaches contemplation except God Who gives it. The best you can do is write something or say something that will serve as an occasion for someone else to realize what God wants of him.

ONE of the worst things about an ill-timed effort to share the knowledge of contemplation with other people is that you assume that everybody else will want to see things from your own point of view when, as a matter of fact, they will not. They will raise objections to everything that you say, and you will find yourself in a theological controversy — or worse, a pseudo-scientific one — and nothing is more useless for a contemplative than controversy. There is no point whatever in trying to make people with a different vocation get excited about the kind of interior life that means so much to you. And if they are called to contemplation, a long, involved argument full of technicalities and abstract principles is not the thing that will help them to get there.

Those who are too quick to think they must go out and share their contemplation with other men, tend to ruin their own contemplation and give false notions of

it to others, by trusting too much in words and language and discourse to do the work that can only be accomplished in the depths of man's soul by the infused light of God.

OFTEN we will do much more to make men contemplatives by leaving them alone and minding our own business — which is contemplation itself — than by breaking in on them with what we think we know about the interior life. For when we are united with God in silence and darkness and when our faculties are raised above the level of their own natural activity, and rest in the pure and tranquil and incomprehensible cloud that surrounds the presence of God, our prayer and the grace that is given to us tend of their very nature to overflow invisibly through the Mystical Body of Christ, and we who dwell together invisibly in the bond of the One Spirit of God affect one another more than we can ever realize by our own union with God, our own spiritual vitality in Him.

One who has a very little of this prayer, the mere beginning of contemplation, and who scarcely even realizes anything of what he has, can do immense things for the souls of other men simply by keeping himself quietly attentive to the obscure presence of God, about which he could not possibly hope to formulate an intelligible sentence. And if he did try to start talking about it and reasoning about it, he would at

once lose the little that he had of it and would help no one, least of all himself.

Therefore the best way to prepare ourselves for the possible vocation of sharing contemplation with other men is not to study how to talk and reason about contemplation, but withdraw ourselves as much as we can from talk and argument and retire into the silence and humility of heart in which God will purify our love of all its human imperfections. Then in His own time He will set our hand to the work He wants us to do, and we will find ourselves doing it without being quite able to realize how we got there, or how it all started. And by that time the work will not absorb us in a way that will disturb our minds. We will be able to keep our tranquillity and our freedom, and above all we will learn to leave the results to God, and not indulge our own vanity by insisting on quick and visible conversions in everyone we talk to.

Perhaps it looks easy on paper, and perhaps it would really be easy if we were altogether simple and made no difficulties about letting God work in us and through us. But in actual practice one of the last barricades of egoism, and one which many saints have refused to give up entirely, is this insistence on doing the work and getting the results and enjoying them *ourselves*. We are the ones who want to call the play and make the particular effort and carry off the glory for the whole thing. And perhaps that was why some saints did not get to

the highest contemplation: they wanted to *do* too much for themselves. And God let them get away with it.

And therefore although contemplation like all good things demands to be shared and will only be perfectly enjoyed and possessed by each one of us when it is possessed in common by all who are called to it, we must not forget that this communion belongs only to heaven. It would be a disaster to try to force it into existence on earth by the erratic enthusiasm of a human friendliness and a human instinct for communication.

Be careful, then, of assuming that because you like certain people and are naturally inclined to choose them for your friends and share with them your natural interests, that they are also called to be contemplatives and that you must teach them all how to become so. The aptitude may or may not be there. Perhaps there is a strong likelihood that it *is* there: but if it is, be content to let God take care of its development in them. Be glad if He uses you as an occasion or as an instrument, but be careful not to get in His way with your own innate Rotarian instinct for companionship. For in this world it is not good to be too eager for the achievement of any, even of the best of ends; and one who knows by experience that God is always present everywhere and always ready to make Himself known to those who love Him, will not quickly prefer the uncertain value of human activity to the tranquillity and certitude of this infinite and all-important possession.

SO FAR, THOUGH NOT EXPLICITLY dividing them, we have spoken about three degrees of contemplation. They are three possible beginnings.

1. The best of these kinds of beginnings is a sudden emptying of the soul in which images vanish and concepts and words are silent, and freedom and clarity suddenly open out within you and your whole being embraces the wonder and the depth and the obviousness and yet the emptiness and unfathomable incomprehensibility of God. This touch, this clean breath of understanding comes relatively rarely. The other two beginnings can be habitual states.

2. The most usual entrance to contemplation is through a desert of aridity in which, although you see nothing and feel nothing and apprehend nothing and are conscious only of a certain interior suffering and anxiety, yet you are drawn and held in this darkness and dryness because it is the only place in which you can find any kind of stability and peace. As you progress, you learn to rest in this arid quietude, and the assurance of a comforting and mighty presence at the heart of this experience grows on you more and more, until you gradually realize that it is God revealing

Himself to you in a light that is painful to your nature and to all its faculties, because it is infinitely above them and because its purity is at war with your own selfishness and darkness and imperfection.

3. Then there is a *quietud sabrosa*, a tranquillity full of savor and rest and unction in which, although there is nothing to feed and satisfy either the senses or the imagination or the intellect, the will rests in a deep, luminous and absorbing experience of love. This love is like the shining cloud that enveloped the Apostles on Thabor so that they exclaimed "Lord, it is good for us to be here!" And from the depths of this cloud come touches of reassurance, the voice of God speaking without words, uttering His own Word. For you recognize, at least in some obscure fashion, that this beautiful and deep and meaningful tranquillity that floods your whole being with its truth and its substantial peace has something to do with the Mission of the Second Person in your soul, is an accompaniment and sign of that mission.

Thus, to many, the cloud of their contemplation becomes identified in a secret way with the Divinity of Christ and also with His Heart's love for us, so that their contemplation itself becomes the presence of Christ, and they are absorbed in a suave and pure communion with Christ. And this tranquillity is learned most of all from the Blessed Eucharist.

He becomes to them a sensible presence Who fol-

lows them and envelops them wherever they go and in all that they do, a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire in the night, and when they have to be absorbed in some distracting work, they nevertheless easily find God again by a quick glance into their own souls. And sometimes when they do not think to return to the depths and rest in Him, He nevertheless draws them unexpectedly into His obscurity and peace, or invades them from within themselves with a tide of quiet, unutterable joy.

Sometimes these tides of joy are concentrated into strong touches, contacts of God that wake the soul with a bound of wonder and delight, a flash of flame that blazes in the soul like an exclamation of inexpressible happiness and sometimes burns with a wound that is delectable although it gives pain. God cannot touch many souls with this flame, or touch even these heavily. But nevertheless it seems that these deep movements of the Spirit of His Love keep striving, at least lightly, to impress themselves on every soul that God draws into this happy and tranquil night.

IN all these three beginnings you remain aware of yourself as being on the threshold of something more or less indefinite. In the second you are scarcely conscious of it at all: you only have a vague, unutterable sense that peace underlies the darkness and aridity in which you find yourself. You scarcely dare admit it to yourself,

but in spite of all your misgivings you realize that you are going somewhere and that your journey is guided and directed and that you can feel safe.

In the third you are in the presence of a more definite and more personal Love, Who invades your mind and will in a way you cannot grasp, eluding every attempt on your part to contain and hold Him by any movement of your own soul. You know that this is God. But for the rest He is hidden in a cloud, although He is so near as to be inside you and outside you and all around you.

When this contact with God deepens and becomes more pure, the cloud thins. In proportion as the cloud gets less opaque, the experience of God opens out inside you as a terrific emptiness. What you experience is the emptiness and purity of your own faculties, produced in you by a created effect of God's love. Nevertheless, since it is God Himself Who directly produces this effect and makes Himself known by it, without any other intermediary, the experience is more than purely subjective and does tell you something about God that you cannot know in any other way.

These effects are intensified by the light of understanding, infused into your soul by the Spirit of God and raising it suddenly into an atmosphere of dark, breathless clarity in which God, though completely defeating and baffling all your natural understanding, becomes somehow obvious.

However, in all these things you remain very far from God, much farther than you realize. And there are always two of you. There is yourself and there is God making Himself known to you by these effects.

BUT as long as there is this sense of separation, this awareness of distance and difference between ourselves and God, we have not yet entered into the fullness of contemplation.

As long as we only stand on the threshold of the abyss of purity and emptiness that is God, we are still infinitely far from God, and the greatest graces still teach us little of Him.

From our side of the threshold this darkness, this emptiness, look deep and vast — and exciting. There is nothing we can do about entering in. We cannot force our way over the edge, although there is no barrier.

But the reason is perhaps that there is also no abyss.

There you remain, somehow feeling that the next step will be a plunge and you will find yourself flying in interstellar space.

WHEN the next step comes, you do not take the step, you do not know the transition, you do not fall into anything. You do not go anywhere, and so you do not know the way by which you got there or the way by which you come back afterwards. You are certainly not lost. You do not fly. There is no space, or there is all space: it makes no difference.

The next step is not a step.

You are not transported from one degree to another.

What happens is that the separate entity that was *you* suddenly disappears and nothing is left but a pure freedom indistinguishable from infinite Freedom, love identified with Love. Not two loves, one waiting for the other, striving for the other, seeking for the other, but Love Loving in Freedom.

Would you call this experience? I think you might say that this only becomes an experience in a man's memory. Otherwise it seems wrong even to speak of it as something that happens. Because things that happen have to happen to some subject, and experiences have to be experienced by someone. But here the subject of any divided or limited or creature experience has vanished. You are not *you*, you are fruition. If you like, you do not have an experience, you become Experience: but that is entirely different, because you no longer exist in such a way that you can reflect on yourself or see yourself having an experience, or judge what is going on, if it can be said that something is going on that is not eternal and unchanging and an activity so tremendous that it is infinitely still.

And here all adjectives fall to pieces. Words are stupid. Everything you say is misleading — unless you list every possible experience and say: "*That is not what it is.*" "*That is not what I am talking about.*"

Metaphor has now become hopeless altogether. Talk

about "darkness" if you must: but the thought of darkness is already too dense and too coarse. Anyway, it is no longer darkness. You can speak of "emptiness" but that makes you think of floating around in space: and this is nothing spatial.

What it is, is freedom. It is perfect love. It is pure renunciation. It is the fruition of God.

It is not freedom inhering in some subject; it is not love as an action dominated by an impulse germane to one's own being; it is not renunciation that plans and executes itself after the manner of a virtue.

It is freedom living and circulating in God, Who is Freedom. It is love loving in Love. It is the purity of God rejoicing in His own liberty.

And here, where contemplation becomes what it is really meant to be, it is no longer something poured out of God into a created subject, so much as God living in God and identifying a created life with His own Life so that there is nothing left of any significance but God living in God.

If a man who had thus been vindicated and delivered and fulfilled and destroyed could think and speak at all it would certainly never be to think and speak of himself as something separate, or as the subject of an experience.

AND that is why it does not really make much sense to speak of all this as the high point of a series of degrees,

and as something great by comparison with other experiences which are less great. It is outside the limit within which comparisons have meaning. It is beyond the level of "ways" that correspond to any of our notions of travel, beyond the degrees that correspond to our ideas of a progression.

Yet this too is a beginning. It is the lowest level in a new order in which all the levels are immeasurable and unthinkable. It is not yet the perfection of the interior life.

THE most important thing that remains to be said about this perfect contemplation in which the soul vanishes out of itself by the perfect renunciation of all desires and all things, is that it can have nothing to do with our ideas of greatness and exaltation, and is not therefore something which is subject to the sin of pride.

In fact, this perfect contemplation implies, by its very essence, the perfection of all humility. Pride is incompatible with it in every possible way. It is only something that a man could be proud of, or desire inordinately, or in some other way make material for sin, when it is completely misunderstood and taken for something which it is not and cannot be.

For pride, which is the inordinate attribution of goods and values and glories to one's own contingent self, cannot exist where there is no contingent self to which anything can be attributed.

How can a man be proud of anything when he is no longer able to reflect upon himself or realize himself or know himself? Morally speaking he is annihilated, because the source and agent and term of all his acts is God. And the essence of this contemplation is the pure and eternal joy that is in God because God is God: the serene and interminable exultation in the truth that He Who Is Perfect is infinitely Perfect, is Perfection.

To think that a man could be proud of this joy, once it had discovered him and delivered him, would be like saying: "This man is proud because the air is free." "This other man is proud because the sea is wet." "And here is one who is proud because the mountains are high and the snow on their summits is clean and the wind blows on the snow and makes a plume of cloud trail away from the high peaks."

Here is a man who is dead and buried and gone and his memory has vanished from the world of men and he no longer exists among the living who crawl about in time: and will you call him proud because the sunlight fills the huge arc of sky over the country where he lived and died and was buried, back in the days when he existed?

So it is with one who has vanished into God by pure contemplation. God alone is left. He is the only identity that acts there. He is the only one Who loves and knows and rejoices.

Can God be proud, or can God sin?

SUPPOSE such a man were once in his life to vanish into God for the space of a minute.

All the rest of his life has been spent in sins and virtues, in good and evil, in labor and struggle, in sickness and health, in gifts, in sorrows, in achieving and regretting, in planning and hoping, in love and fear. He has seen things, considered them, known them; made judgements; spoken; acted wisely or not. He has blundered in and out of the contemplation of beginners. He has found the cloud, the obscure sweetness of God. He has known rest in prayer.

In all these things his life has been a welter of uncertainties. In the best of them he may have sinned. In his imperfect contemplation he may have found sin.

But in the moment of time, the minute, the little minute in which he was delivered into God (if he truly was so delivered) there is no question that then his life was pure; that then he gave glory to God; that then he did not sin; that in that moment of pure love he could not sin.

Can such union with God be the object of inordinate desire? Not if you understand it. Because you cannot inordinately desire God to be God. You cannot inordinately desire that God's will be done for His own sake. But it is in these two desires perfectly conceived and fulfilled that we are emptied into Him and transformed into His joy and it is in these that we cannot sin.

It is in this ecstasy of pure love that we arrive at a

true fulfillment of the First Commandment, loving God with our whole heart and our whole mind and all our strength. Therefore it is something that all men who desire to please God ought to desire — not for a minute, nor for half an hour, but forever. It is in these souls that peace is established in the world.

They are the strength of the world, because they are the tabernacles of God in the world. They are the ones who keep the universe from being destroyed. They are the little ones. They do not know themselves. The whole earth depends on them. Nobody seems to realize it. These are the ones for whom it was all created in the first place. They shall inherit the land.

They are the only ones who will ever be able to enjoy life altogether. They have renounced the whole world and it has been given into their possession. They alone appreciate the world and the things that are in it. They are the only ones capable of understanding joy. Everybody else is too weak for joy. Joy would kill anybody but these meek. They are the clean of heart. They see God. He does their will, because His will is their own. He does all that they want, because He is the One Who desires all their desires. They are the only ones who have everything that they can desire. Their freedom is without limit. They reach out for us to comprehend our misery and drown it in the tremendous expansion of their own innocence, that washes the world with its light.

Come, let us go into the body of that light. Let us live in the cleanliness of that song. Let us throw off the pieces of the world like clothing and enter naked into wisdom. For this is what all hearts pray for when they cry: "Thy will be done."

Abbey of Gethsemani,
July 1, 1948,
Vigil of Our Lady's Visitation.

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