

A Thirst For Christ

Matt Talbot

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It was a Saturday in 1884. In Dublin, a small figure of a man was leaning on the rails of Necomer Bridge. He was shaking all over and was gazing into the dark waters of the Liffey River as it slowly wended its way to the sea. Thoughts of suicide? ...Who knows? When he walked away from the railing it was not to leap over it but to face up to the tempestuous storms that had brought him to this point: a human derelict at 28 years of age, finished and brutalized by the abuse of drink. He turned to face the storm, to prove to himself and to others that he was capable of taking himself in hand.

Who was this man? Three Trade Union leaders, a Pope, as well as the Yugoslav government, were all interested in him; two Presidents of Ireland paid homage to him.

The morning of the 17th June, 1925, found him slumped on a footpath in Dublin; his corpse was only recognized the following day.

In 1960 the Yugoslav police accused of subversive action a person who spoke about Matt Talbot - he who had taken part in a strike in 1913 - and the Procurator-General forbade the distribution of his biography because he considered it dangerous to the social and political foundations of the State.

The Irish Trade Union leaders declared that they were proud to place a commemorative plaque where Matt lived, since they considered him as one of the pioneers of their movement and looked on him as a beacon-light guiding workers to port as they battled the tempests.

And a group of pilgrims belonging to the Dublin Marian Association were surprised and delighted to hear Paul VI say: "I have read the life of Matthew Talbot and was moved by it. This man should be canonized. I will do my best to see this happens." That was the 11th August, 1971. Matt was declared Venerable in Rome in 1975. Who, then, was this Matt Talbot?

Brief family history

Matthew Talbot was born in Dublin on the 3rd May, 1856. That day, also, was a Saturday. There were to be many "Saturdays" in his life, before and after that day in 1884. He was to have a fire burning within him and a terrible thirst, but how those Saturday events differed one from the other!

Charles Talbot, his father, was a man in his thirties; small of stature like Zaccheus but with a very strong voice which could be heard miles away when he flew into a temper. Somewhat aggressive, he was at heart a good man and a good worker with a fairly regular job as a casual with a preferential call. But he became quite a hard man to get on with when he drank too much, which he did once a week at least, sometimes more often.

His mother, Elizabeth Bagnall, was not much more than twenty years old. Although not beautiful she was, however, a wonderful woman, a Christian to the very marrow of her bones, a martyr in her spirit of dedication - she really needed all these attributes to cope with her situation. Prayer gave her strength and courage and it never failed her.

They were married in the September of 1853 and, in the twenty years of marriage, there were born twelve children. They had to change dwellings at least eleven times, due in part to precarious economic conditions and partly because the family, somewhat rowdy as it was, needed plenty of living space.

John, the eldest son and the only one to grow up tall, was born in 1854 and inherited his mother's nature - calm, prudent, a non-drinker, an overall good man.

After Matthew, Robert was born in 1858. He died at the age of 28 in 1886. The first daughter, Mary, was born in 1860 and, together with Susanna, who was born in 1872, left some precious details concerning their brother's life. Of the other sons, he was only to remember Joseph, Charles, (known as 'Joe and Charlie'), and Philip, born in 1864. This wild lad, Philip, loved to do deeds of bravado and called himself "THE MAN" Talbot, by which name he was known to all.

This brief family sketch shows how this child of Charles and Elizabeth inherited not only the good qualities of both father and mother but in him we see the tares of alcoholism which his father carried within himself and which he left, as a sad inheritance, to his children. Two twins, born in 1862, died early. All the boys, except John, were heavy drinkers whilst being, at the same time, conscientious workers.

How Charles and Elizabeth succeeded in rearing such a large family is a bit of a mystery. It is certain that, as so often happens, the poor were their best friends. Elizabeth worked even harder than her husband and often did work outside the house. She had a hard time keeping peace in the family but she knew how to do it, so often suffering out of love.

It was Philip who gave her the most headaches. He was terribly pig-headed, especially when he was drinking heavily. As has been said, all the members of the family, except for the mother and John, drank heavily so it is easy to imagine how disturbed the home was at times. All the father did was to upbraid his sons for a defect learnt from him. Certain inconsistencies leave one undecided whether to laugh or to cry!

After Matthew's death an old man who was a sacristan at St. Agatha's stated: "He was always ready for an argument. On a Saturday when he had had too much to drink, he was a bundle of contrasts." This is the family into which Matthew was to grow to manhood. It is easy to imagine how.

Playing the truant

There were few schools and attendance was not compulsory. To add to this, to make sure that their children did not attend the National Schools, which were anti-Irish and anti-Catholic, parents did not send them at all. Only occasionally the Christian Brothers succeeded in organizing "special schools" for these poor youngsters. So Matthew or, as he was called by all, Matt, wandered the streets until he was eleven years old, free to do as he chose. Finally he was admitted, together with John, to a school that the Brothers conducted for a small number of boys on the 6th May, 1867. Here he learnt to read and write, a bit of grammar and arithmetic. He also got some religious instruction and was prepared for the sacraments. The pupils were given some subsidiary instruction:

a bit of sacred history, a few lives of the saints, some fundamental notions of science and hygiene, some stories and educational tit-bits, a few ideas on geography and a few curiosities.

At the beginning of his schooling, because it was the month of May, Matt learnt his first bit of poetry. It was a poem addressed to Our Lady. At school the boys were assembled at midday - following a very old custom - to sing hymns to Mary during her month. Matt, his friends recall, had a beautiful, strong voice, even though he was so small and was barely nine years old. He sang willingly and put everything into it because his mother had taught him to love Mary, the Mother of God.

But he could not be called a dedicated student. The young teacher wrote alongside his name in the register this sad note: "a Mitcher" (i.e. a loafer) because he played truant quite frequently. He was influenced by his previous free way of life and, so early in the piece, he began to walk the wrong path.

Subject to the tyrant, drink

At that time boys went to work at the age of 12 or even earlier. The Talbots, in succession, became messenger boys on a very small wage. So Matt, growing up in a very poor district, in the disturbed atmosphere of an army camp, in troubled times both socially and politically, went to work. He was still under-developed but in 1868 he had to join the labour force.

Incredible as it may seem he was found a job by his father in a warehouse stocking beer and wines where, as custom had it, the workers sampled the wares from time to time. In a very short time Matt had developed a real longing for drink. His father, in an effort to keep him from this vice, could find no arguments beyond the use of his hands. Matt took his punishment and went on drinking. A former employer recalls: "I could say nothing at all favourable about Matt Talbot in this, his first job."

His father then took him to work with him in a big custom warehouse. Matt discovered here that he had an even better opportunity to drink and he made good use of it. A sixteen-year-old he was already a confirmed alcoholic and nothing could divorce him from this passion. He was not interested in feasts, parties, dancing, playing cards; he lived to drink.

At eighteen years of age he became a labourer. He gained a reputation for being a hard worker - he had the reputation of doing more in half-an-hour than all the others in an hour. The boss often put him in front to set the pace.

With the passing of the years, his drink problem became worse. He spent nearly all his wages on drink, giving his mother a miserable pittance for board. He got heavily into debt, even pawning his shoes and shirt, to get money to drink. He even went so far as to rob a beggar of his violin to barter it for drink.

Yet his sisters agree that, even then, he had so many good points. His morality could never be questioned; he had a sense of dignity and honesty; he never used foul language. He was always gentle and affectionate towards his mother and sisters and caused no disturbance in the house, but drinking, especially in company, got the better of him. He did contract the bad habit of cursing and blaspheming, he no longer frequented the sacraments yet he went to Mass on Sundays and feastdays even if he had gone drunk to bed the night before. He later confided to his sister Susanna, that, in his own way, he always remained devoted to the Madonna and never gave up saying an occasional Hail Mary.

His friends recall: "Matt lived for one thing only: to drink. He would have done any work at all to get money to drink." So from his adolescence until he was twenty-eight years old he lived the life of a drunkard, a slave of the tyrant, drink.

One thought really caused him concern, as he sadly confessed some years later: "I broke my mother's heart." However, her heart was stronger than the vice that had trapped her son. With deep faith in the efficacy of prayer, like a modern Monica, she prayed for her prodigal son with a faith that moves mountains. She refused to admit the inevitable, the verdict that her neighbours, in their own way, pronounced: "Poor Matt, he's gone to the devil." She barred the way with a hedge of rosaries that she never tired of saying.

Swimming against the tide

On that Saturday morning of 1884, with which we opened our story, he was penniless because he had found no work that week, he was about to wring from his friends, who were returning home from work, an invitation to have a drink. His favourite pub - O'Meara's, now Cussack's - was in front of him, inviting. No-one stopped. Crushed and terrified he met refusal after refusal. They even laughed at him and "rubbished" him. That derision hurt far more than the refusal. He staggered to the railing on the bridge and stared into the dark waters. A small figure of a man, with stooping shoulders, his body racked by convulsive shaking.

He felt shattered completely, shaken by the unexpected... And the future? Before his befogged mind there passed those sixteen years of degradation, of slavery... But what was happening? He began to feel ashamed of what previously he had considered something to boast about. He began to loathe himself, the drunkard, and almost instinctively turned his face away from what he now saw and now did not see in the troubled waters... He walked away from the railing and headed for home.

His face grew stern and a plan began to form in his mind. He would take hold of himself. He would snatch himself away from his black past. He would show his mates that Matt Talbot was not spineless, a bound slave, incapable of controlling his destinies. He felt he still had some steel in his backbone. Should he bind himself by a solemn promise? By a vow?

The person surprised beyond measure and shaken by trembling hope was his mother when she saw him come home sober. His 24 year-old sister, Mary, testified: "When my brother came in my mother said: 'You're home already, Matt, and you're not drunk.' He replied: 'Yes, mum.' After supper he stayed home, which was unusual, then said to his mother: 'I'm going to take a vow that I will never drink again.' She smiled and said: 'Go, in the name of God.' And whilst he was leaving the house, she wished him well: 'May God give you the strength to keep it, my son'."

A covenant with God

He went to see Fr. Keane, a teacher at Clonliff College, the Dublin seminary. He went to confession and asked permission to take the vow. Fr. Keane suggested he take it for three months only, as a trial, and this advice he accepted. The next day was Sunday and Matt went to Mass and, after many year's absence, went to Holy Communion. During his thanksgiving he expressed a most ardent desire to offend God no more and, with His grace, to begin again. Words!... This is what many thought; he realized that his decision could lead to a lot of "rubbishing". And his palate, his stomach... what did they think about it all? How would they react?

Meanwhile, on the following Monday morning, he went to Mass at 5 a.m. to be at his job at the usual time of 6. He did this for all the rest of his life. After work, so as to avoid his mates, he went to a distant church and stayed there praying until it was time to go home.

His sister, Susanna, who was then 12 years old, recalls her surprise: "Matt was a new man after his vow. We no longer heard him swearing and blaspheming. His workmates were amazed when they heard he had taken a vow, and still further amazed when they saw that he intended to keep it."

Mary knew that Matt "went to the pub with his friends two or three times of a Sunday but drank only non-alcoholic beverages. At the beginning this cost him dearly, so much so that he told my mother that, when the three months were up, he would start drinking again." But he did not bargain with her Rosaries!

Fr. Faber has written: "Every conversion - and there are thousands every day - is a unique work of art, a real masterpiece. Whenever it occurs the veil that covers sin is lifted and man turns away with shame, detestation and humility from that odious sight. His gaze rests on the crucified Redeemer. Fear gives way to hope, and the heart gains courage to make a change. Faith tells him that his resolutions have been accepted and he is free to love. How could he not love Him who has received his poor resolution? An invisible, all powerful and all holy hand is placed on him for an instant. Man has made a few, stumbling steps and the work of art is complete; he is a convert. All the angels of heaven rejoice. God looks upon him with love and unutterable desire..."

This page, written many years beforehand, seems to mirror Matt's conversion on that marvellous Saturday of 1884. He always treasured a most vivid reminder that it was due to his mother's rosaries and that it took place on a Saturday. His mother and Mary joined forces to bring him back to life, that is true. And it is probable that it was also a Saturday in May because, in June, Fr. Keane was elsewhere.

A desperate struggle

The "rubbishing" by his mates did not hurt him and soon their attitude was one of admiration. The enemy was within: the inveterate habit of alcohol. It was a bitter struggle. He felt the sharp pangs of an almost irresistible longing, the sight of his mates drinking obsessed him. He suffered intolerable agony. Desperate, he fled to the other side of Dublin, entered a quiet church, threw himself at the foot of the Crucified One, and prayed and wept: "Mary, loving Mother..."

The battle was certainly an interior one: a cruel craving produced by sixteen years of the uncontrolled mastery of wine and beer. Yet, night after night, he returned to that tabernacle in which the Saviour seemed to be a mute spectator of that real agony of thirst. At times it seemed that the Crucifix whispered to him: "I thirst."

This is not a product of his imagination - these are facts he himself hinted at or confided to his closest friends, especially his mother.

Matt wanted to "infect" others. He tried his brothers but without much success. He then tried his friends. Here is one example.

Pat Doyle, one of his drinking mates, returned to Dublin after an absence of some two or three years. He straightaway looked up Matt. But let him tell the story. "Not finding him in the pub, I began asking his whereabouts from others. They all said: 'Oh, Matt is no longer what he was, he's a changed man!' "The evening prior to my meeting with him I had had an argument with a road-

worker and, although he was twice my size, I had knocked him flat. And then I met Matt who said to me out of the blue:

'So you've fallen again?' 'Into what again?' 'Into brawls!' 'And why not?' 'Forget it, Pat, forget it!' "In the meantime we had come to a pub and I invited him to enter. 'No, Pat. You can go in if you want to, have a drink, and then come with me.' 'Where to?' 'Go on, have a drink, and then come.'

"I thought he did not want to enter the pub because he owed some money there. He waited for me. I did not ask him where we were going. He began telling me what had happened at Mayo where he had been living. Suddenly I found we had stopped in front of a church. A priest was reading a book in the entrance. "Matt said to him: 'He's for you, Father. I brought him along to make the promise.' "Before I could say a word I was already on my knees, made my confession and then left in a hurry, even leaving my hat on the grass... "

There was one, however, who was not going to tolerate the insults of this "pig-headed teetotaller" and Matt had to undergo a severe testing. One Sunday morning, whilst he participated in the first Mass at St. Francis Xavier's in Gardiner Street, he felt a voice within him mocking him and deriding his useless efforts. He got up to go to Communion but a mysterious force stopped him. Dismayed, he left the church and went outside. He went to a second and a third church but the same icy experience was repeated each time.

Matt did not give in. He returned for the 9.45 Mass at St. Francis Xavier's. He threw himself down on his knees at the entrance and cried: "I am certain, Lord, I do not want to return to my old ways." He entered and prayed to Mary. He assisted at Mass and the invisible barrier dissipated like a mist. Matt received Holy Communion and experienced a sense of deep joy. He was to love Mary from the bottom of his heart for this grace.

At full steam down the narrow path

"A new man", yes, by will-power but the old Matt still remained, a highly-strung wisp of man, of a somewhat irascible temperament, prone to shouting and blustering like his father, a hard worker like his mother.

He had only a rough-and-ready elementary education; he was only a poor bricklayer's labourer, employed in putting up brick buildings. But he had begun on his own accord on a new "building" which he tried to keep as hidden as possible. The height he was seeking to reach was a lofty one and steep yet he was an experienced labourer. He climbed up it like an acrobat with a heavy load, aided only by the advice of excellent spiritual directors.

Matt did not know how high his building would eventually be and how beautiful it would become or how he would surprise a Paul VI and attract the admiration of the whole world. He was not looking for this. He was seeking only to please Jesus and Mary, and because of this he was a good labourer, a workman dedicated to his trade. He needed time to do this interior work beyond the time for the exterior work. He was jealous of his time, always at work without wasting a minute, making every one productive of great good.

The source of all his strength, his resistance and his constancy would be a mystery to anyone who could not follow every step he took, who could not observe him in church or alone in his room.

That he was "another man" was plain to everybody and we will try to follow him along the narrow, steep road and his work of construction. He had forty years ahead of him to tread this road and

complete this building and his pace never slackened until he dropped dead and then the work was completed.

Let us keep pace with him... if we can.

A bold planner

There are few witnesses of the first years of his conversion because Matt did not display in public his 'plans' for an interior construction. But those plans can be read by inspecting his building materials that he kept on putting together and which allowed him to build on the deep foundation of his spiritual sanctuary dedicated co-jointly with Jesus and Mary.

Far more solid and precious materials than marble and plaster were for Matt hard constant work, almost uninterrupted work, mortification and daily penance, intense and solid spiritual reading, operative charity enlivened by gentleness and affability, an exquisite and joyful sense of brotherhood: all this with the passionate love and the zeal of a consecrated person helped to put together this interior sanctuary of Matthew Talbot.

All his friends believed this change of life was but a nine-days wonder! a sober Matt could not be imagined. A Matt so different from the past bewildered them and their astonishment grew with the passing of the months. They realized that he was deadly earnest about his vow. But what they did not realize was that an internal change was taking place in him and that he had set himself to work with a furious zeal. He was indeed serious! He was undergoing a real martyrdom, was being burnt by a fire from within and without.

The grace of conversion had not changed his nature as it never does. He had changed his will; and it was this, set on fire by a most ardent love for Jesus and Mary that worked on his nature to transform it, to conform it to Christ.

He was always the first to work, so much so that he was called "the best labourer in Dublin". If the boss put him out in the front so the others could pace themselves, surely the Lord will put him before the world as an example to shake it out of its lethargy.

What went on inside this humble and somewhat taciturn Matt we do not know directly, but the progress made and the transformation enacted bears witness in itself. Saints are only born of a great idea and of a greater love. The true Matt Talbot is all here.

The morning of a new life

Because the new life led by Matt had no great highlights - we could even say adventures - that many of the saints have, but was distinguished by a rather monotonous mediocrity, if you like, of a simple labourer, we will look at his apostolic life in sectors rather than follow it in a chronological order. We will make an exception for two periods: one at the dawn and one at the sunset of his life as a convert.

Looking at Matt at the dawn of his new life has the advantage of putting before us almost a synthesis of the 'project' that he kept working on with a growing ardour. To look back from the closing of his life helps us to appreciate its unity, the true meaning and prospective of the beautiful sanctuary he had built over those forty years of passionate work.

It will be perceived that the opening and closing dates of his 'converted' life have a religious significance. The Saturday-Sunday of his conversion, that were to become, as it were, a rhythmic

passage over the forty years. Then it was Trinity Sunday that he died and it was the Thursday of Corpus Christi on which his body was returned to the earth as a fertile seed.

In 1884 Matt had already a steady job and this became the stable basis of his spiritual construction, more solid than the bricks that he carried hour after hour. Matt has every right to be called a 'labourer' in the broadest possible sense of the word. And that same tenacity, those muscles he built up and the energy he expended as a bricklayer's labourer became the driving force of his spiritual life.

His were days of work and prayer: work that was prayer, and prayer that was an interior building force. Pat Doyle justly remarks: "Matt took nothing lightly." The unfathomable source of physical energy that amazes us, the indomitable will-power with which he was gifted whilst he was previously caught up in the one thing that then mattered: drink, now was changed into another totally different 'only thing': his intimate secret, the goal of his vow: to give himself to God - a thirst for God.

Mass at five in the morning began his life outside of the house but he was already at prayer at least two hours before that. His family knew this quite well. His sister Mary attests that, in the house, he spent nearly all his time on his knees praying or reading, even when he was taking his Frugal meals. He fasted often and slept on the top of a table.

Every Saturday, after finishing his work at midday, and all day Sunday saw him kneeling in front of the tabernacle, motionless, upright. He was there to carry on a bitter struggle against drinking, with ruthless violence. One evening he felt this drive to drink almost unbearable. He was to tell Bob Laird himself why he never carried money with him since that evening.

"Shortly after my conversion, I was passing in front of a pub and was sorely tempted to break my vow. I walked back and forth in front of it three times, feeling the money in my pocket and feeling a desperate need to have a drink. I could not stand it any longer and went in. No-one knew me there. I waited for some time but no-one came to serve me. Suddenly I made for the door and went to a church nearby and stayed there until closing time. From that day on I resolved never to carry money in my pocket."

His mother became his confidant, his support, with a faith and firm hope that could not be measured. She urged him to have faith in Jesus and Mary. The three months of his first vow passed, the struggle became more and more desperate but his trust in the help of Jesus and Mary gave him hope of a final victory and he renewed his vow for another six months, then for a year and finally for life.

A joyful penitent

In 1884 Matt went to live in a room on his own, near his married sister Mary, who did some sewing for him and looked after his room. She noticed a big plank against the wall and a log of wood on the floor and, curious, asked him what they were for. He replied with a smile: "They're there for a purpose." But one day she found the plank on the bed, covered with a sheet, and the log of wood in the place of a pillow. This is how he slept!

His room was very poor - an iron bed, a table, a seat, a crucifix and a couple of holy pictures. He dressed very poorly and never used an overcoat but was, all the same, ever neat and tidy.

Wanting to imitate Christ, he got rid of everything that impeded him from following Him closely. He not only gave up alcohol, thus keeping in check the intense longing that tormented him, but also gave up smoking. He confided to a friend that the first months after his conversion were the worst he had ever experienced. He said that giving up smoking cost him even more than giving up drinking.

In Matt there were to be no compromises. He did everything with all his strength. As he was once a victim of drink and subjected everything to that mad desire, now he concentrated on prayer, spiritual reading, charity and gave it every atom of his attention - all for the love of Jesus and Mary. His friends summed up thus: "Matt was not accustomed to doing things just for the sake of doing them."

Certainly, his was a special vocation, a distinct calling from the Lord, controlled by excellent spiritual directors and no-one has the right to deride it, still less to consider him a maniac. Matt was a very stable person and God sustained him with His exceptional grace. One may feel it would be absolutely impossible to imitate him but this is never demanded of us as we study the lives of the saints. It is not demanded in the sense that we must ape their gestures, their actions because no two men are the same, neither do any two share the same vocation, conditions of life and of ambient, a particular mission.

Matt takes his place in the lineage of the great Irish saints whose spirituality has been, on the one hand, emotional and bodily punishing whilst, on the other hand, has been lived out in a spirit of exuberant and intensely Christian joy.

What is a stimulus and an invitation to imitation is the integrally sustained commitment of the will relying on God's help, a life of deep love and prayer. Often we stop, looking at a repelling spiny hedge without looking beyond to see the beautiful garden it is protecting. Beyond these impressionable and terrible penances we must see the love of God and his neighbour which was so much a part of Matt's life.

He did not love mortification for its own sake but what it stood for. He imitated Christ, this is true; Christ who loved His Father and His brothers so much as to die for them. He did not love the bitter chalice from which He turned in dread. Only love, stronger than any other feeling, gave Him the strength to drink it. That was what Matt wanted to do.

Had he not been an impenitent 'drunk'? Then he decided to drink in large draughts to make himself God's 'drunk'. Had not his body made a slave of the spirit? Then he would put his body in chains. For the rest, his harsh penances could not have been excessive since he was able to work with undiminished energy right up until his last years.

Rich in good humour and affable with all

I have mentioned his interior 'garden'. The beautiful perfume which came from it was perceived by those who even did not see it directly. One of Matt's nephews states that Matt was always in a good humour and often heard singing in his room of an evening. He stresses that he was on good terms with everyone, in particular with the other tenants of the flat, whom he greeted with pleasant words and a 'God be with you' or a 'God bless you'.

He was an open and straightforward man who seemed incapable of telling a lie. Even the hardest of renunciations he made joyfully since he was always happy and contented. Although he ate very little he was always healthy-looking and was a most pleasant man to meet. The same nephew states

that, before he got married, he used to visit him often and always found him very kind, ready for a joke, and that he never saw him angry although he knew how to be severe if the occasion merited it.

He recounts: "I had asked him for a small loan and, not having repaid it on my first pay-day as I had promised, I did so on the second pay-day. He took the money and gave it back to me saying: 'This is what you promised to pay back. Now take it', he added with a smile, 'it's yours. Remember that you should always stand by your promises... and make sure you do not get into debt.' This was in keeping with his own code of conduct."

At all times humble and cordial, he knew how to laugh and joke; open and sincere, he always said what he thought to people and, if by chance a harsh word escaped his lips, he always politely begged pardon because he had no intention of hurting anybody.

Probably in 1909 he changed jobs and went to work with Martin's, timber merchants. He did this because he could start work at 8 instead of 6, so he would have more time for Mass and his devotions in church. Daniel Manning, who lived with his family within the grounds of the merchant, near the carriage entrance, and who knew Matt from 1904 to 1925, states that he was very popular with the workers, who esteemed him very much for his industry, his good humour, his gentleness and for his... holiness. And that's saying a lot from rough workmen!

Manning adds that Matt was most punctual and opened the shop himself and was always very genial and ready to do a favour. And with pleasure adds that he had a special liking for his small daughter, Teresa, and loved to show her around the shop holding her hand, teaching her prayers and asking her to be as good as St. Teresa.

Paddy Laird, his co-worker, recalls that Matt loved to return home from work with the other workers and even accompanied them to their homes and along the way often invited them to make a brief visit to a church. He conversed pleasantly and loved sharing a joke. He took an interest in their problems and their favourite sports. He was pleasant company. He was a bit of a wag and far from being a 'sour-puss'.

From his lips there never came an improper word but he loved using the pleasant slang phrases common at the time. One such phrase: "Go and get your hair cut" became one of his favourites and he used it quite often, with a smile, whenever anyone bothered him at work. Foul talk really upset him and he intervened tactfully and firmly, so much so that his mates learnt to respect his candour and his openness and listened to him when he spoke.

He wanted to consider himself a consecrated soul

A niece, Mary's daughter, tells us that he turned down a proposal of marriage in the first years of his conversion. A young girl, impressed by his good qualities, his reserve and goodness, thought of proposing to him, seeing that he had means and could set up a house. She felt she would be very happy with him. Matt kindly asked her to await an answer until he had made a novena to the Blessed Virgin for enlightenment. At the end of the novena he said he had been convinced he should not marry. To a confidant he said that it was the Blessed Virgin herself who had told him not to get married. Did he not already have his great loves?

At that time he was a little more than thirty years old and had acquired a maturity far superior to his years, especially if you consider the erratic years of his life as an alcoholic. He refused other offers of matrimony because he felt it would be impossible to live the life of a married man and the life he had decided to follow.

That novena does indicate, however, that he was not averse to marrying but he preferred to follow God's will and had recourse to prayer to resolve his problems and before he took any important decision. His conversion was deep-rooted.

He also decided to join the Third Order of St. Francis. On the 18th October, 1891, he took the name of 'Brother Joseph Francis'. At the same time he joined the Association of Mary Immaculate and worked hard to get others to join, especially certain 'hard cases'.

A Jesuit priest at Gardiner Street was giving some talks to the Marian Association that electrified his hearers. His topics were centred on the problem of faith, the old religious traditions of Ireland and patriotism. Matt was enthusiastic about him and often said to his workmates: "Were you at Gardiner Street last night? Fr. Tom Murphy was terrific! I'm sure you would have enjoyed him." At the right moment he would approach a mate and suggest: "You should come along to Gardiner Street this evening; you will hear things that are well worth listening to."

He was also enrolled in other religious associations, such as that of a Good Death, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Apostolate of Prayer. He was most faithful to all the meetings right up until his death. This is not surprising as his whole life was so methodical and varied: that is, methodical in the exterior forms yet marvellously varied in the lights he received to form his interior life which opened up new horizons all the time.

A formidable yet careful reader

I can well imagine someone saying: this is too ambitious a statement. Yet this is the truth and I cannot gainsay it. Not only did he leave behind a shelf full of hundreds of books, big and small, some comprising several volumes but he had read many others lent to him by his spiritual director or friends.

The most popular of these books were biographies. It is good to note that he studied hard to read with profit and that, as he himself confessed, he often asked the help of Mary and the Holy Spirit so as to understand the difficult passages and this grace seems to have been abundantly given. This is attested to by many different people who consulted him.

He set himself to study the Bible with superhuman tenacity and concentration, absorbing its contents carefully. He prayed that he might understand and be nourished by the Word of God. He had several editions of the complete Bible, several copies of the New Testament and a pocket edition which he always had in his possession.

His favourite books were Deuteronomy, some of the Psalms and the Gospel of St. Matthew whose name he bore. In the margins he noted the texts that particularly struck him and opened his soul most effectively to God.

He read many spiritual books written by the best authors, books of theology, and so well did he digest the contents that he became an expert in questions of religion and the spiritual life.

He widened his range of reading to cover social and industrial questions. His workmates consulted him on current matters under debate and Matt spared no time or work to make sure that he gave the correct and exhaustive answer. Once he spent a whole week's wages to get a book from New York so as to be in a position to give an answer to a particular question.

And it should be noted that his family used to see him always reading and studying on his knees, in the attitude of a penitent sinner. With the light that came from above, because reading is also prayer,

almost a school of the Lord, with his efforts to enlarge his mastery of words and concepts, he succeeded in gaining mastery of an ever-growing range of books.

He always loved the lives of the saints and he read many great collections of them. He felt at home with the saints and, like a bee, gathered from each one of them something and transformed it into gentleness of character, fervour of spirit, apostolic generosity. By this means he became kind and affable with everybody. And it must be said that his impulsive nature was held in check with a rigour that cost him dearly.

A tremendous worker yet he went on strike

Matt was always an untiring worker and, after his conversion, his work had for him not only a human and social aspect but a religious one. He united his work, especially when he started working with timber, with that of Christ "the carpenter, the son of a carpenter" (Mark 6:3; Matthew 13:55). He reminded himself of this every morning at Communion. He worked with a spirit of loyal collaboration, with true love, with his workmates.

After his death it was said: "But Matt never stood up for his workmates." Absurd as this accusation is, it circulated and, as so often happens, repetition made it undeniable, without people taking the trouble to verify it.

However the fact is altogether different. He would not have been so much esteemed and loved by his mates if he was not accepted as one of them. They consulted him on social questions, as we have seen, showing that they felt he was interested in their affairs. Many, in the Process of Beatification, affirmed that his interest in his fellow-workers was outstanding, an interest full of understanding and solidarity.

Once one of the directors of the firm for whom he worked asked him if he had seen one of the workers arriving late. Matt replied: "I'd prefer you did not ask me questions like that." But as soon as the director had gone away, Matt said to the workman who was hiding nearby: "Did you hear that? I did not want to lie to cover up for you."

Another time, a lady saw in Matt's pocket a "Social Catechism of Work" and indignantly attacked him as a socialist. Matt replied with some scorching words and this was the only time he lost his self-control. But the lady discovered his complete loyalty to the workers and to the Church and that he was prepared to defend it vigorously.

Another two significant episodes: One of the firm's guards was talking with Matt and, seeing one of the bosses coming along, wanted to walk away lest he be accused of wasting time talking with a workman. "Stay where you are", Matt said to him, "There's only one Boss you have to take notice of", and he pointed his finger to the sky. A colleague speaking of one of the owners called him "Master". Matt quickly retorted: "He is not my master, he is only the man who gives me work. I have only one Master... in heaven."

Most loyal in everything and to everyone, he still went on strike in 1900 for a cause he considered just. Whilst the others gradually drifted back to work, Matt stuck it until the workers' requests were accepted.

A co-worker comments that Matt's shoulders were quite stooped and he had to make quite an effort to carry the timber yet he did not spare himself. And this is the man with a clear conscience who took part, with his mates, in a strike in 1913. He did it for them, for all the workers, without

considering his own interests, so much so that he did not want to accept the strikers' allowance; but his colleagues - this is surely an indication of esteem - forced him to take it but he passed it on to poorer workmen, those with families.

Certainly his companions did not expect him to man the picket lines, both because of his age and because he abhorred every form of violence. Matt spent the time in front of the tabernacle and the crucifix, to intercede for the workers' rights, for true justice for all.

A great heart open to all

He had a great admiration for his parents and loved them intensely, as he also loved his brothers and sisters. He who, before his conversion, only handed in a few pence to his home, now was most generous with them all, with his relatives and all the others. And when his two brothers Joe and Charlie, both incorrigible heavy drinkers who had gone through all their assets, died, Matt paid all their expenses.

From the very beginning of his conversion Matt had paid all the debts he had contracted in his drinking days at various pubs and with his mates. He recalled the 'crime' of robbing the old beggar of his violin to 'turn it' into alcohol and went to no end of trouble to trace him and when he was convinced that he was dead he had several Masses said for the repose of his soul. He attended these Masses himself.

When his father died, at 75 years of age, in 1899, Matt went to live with his mother, who moved into new lodgings. She became the spectator and witness of the thorough conversion of her dear son, for whom she had prayed so much as Monica had prayed for her Augustine. When she died, at the age of 80, he cried tenderly as he had done for his father. He continued to weep for and pray for his dear departed ones, having abundant suffrages offered for them.

At home he was always very kind to visitors, welcoming them with a pleasant manner, talking and laughing readily, making sure not to make public his penances, his fastings, his unceasing prayers. In no way could he be said to be strange.

He spent little on himself and was most generous with others. He often paid for a good pair of shoes for a workmate and, although he never carried money with him, was quick to subscribe to any appeal.

He paid for a beer for a young man, saying: "A bottle of beer did no harm to any man" but would not shout for anyone addicted to drink. He was ready to make a loan of several pounds (a large enough sum in those days!) but would refuse the 'restitution', politely saying: "Keep it, if you need it." This was a wonderful way of helping one's neighbour.

Once a priest went to the firm where Matt was working to ask for donations. It happened to be payday and Matt handed over the whole lot even though the priest did not want to accept it.

He was most generous to the Missions and paid for the studies of several aspirants to the missionary apostolate. He gave up buying flowers for Our Lady's altar, saying: "I'll give the money to the Missions instead." He kept up this work of charity until his death.

With children he was most kindly. Sean Thomas O'Kelly, twice President of Eire, spoke of the times when he was an altar boy, between 1890 and 1897, from the age of 8 to 15: "I knew Matt Talbot personally and spoke to him often over the years. He knew the altar boys by name. He often asked us a catechism question and gave us good advice. Sometimes the boys teased him but he did not

resent it. He was kindly and gentle. We were not scared of him because he was so kind. I was ten and one day he took me by the hand and led me around the church: he was a pleasant man, approachable, courteous. I never saw him upset; he was calm and serene. Over the years he often stopped to talk to me if he met me on the street."

He had a great love for Ireland and for prayer for its freedom. He did nothing just to be noticed but, sometimes, the interior exuberance broke out in exterior manifestations.

In his heart, prayer raised its tone, became an intimate song and passed through the wall of silence, flowing forth in an audible voice. Again President O'Kelly attests: "I have seen him make the Stations of the Cross. He prayed a great deal and sometimes he prayed aloud. More than once I saw him praying with outstretched hands, aloud, his eyes fixed on the crucifix. I would say that he was as close as possible to a person in ecstasy as I imagined that state. His fervour, his recollection, was extraordinary."

If there was a lull in his work Matt was seen by his mates to retire to a quiet corner among the stacks of wood to recite his rosary on his knees.

To satisfy the growing love he had for Jesus and Mary he asked for the great gift of prayer and received it in great abundance. He succeeded in praying for many hours a day, always on his knees, with joyful fervour. His mother attests that Matt often got up at two in the morning and prayed until it was time to go to Mass. Often he was waiting for the church to be opened, again on his knees, no matter how long he had to wait. This can be said of very few saints.

Every Sunday saw him hurrying along the streets of Dublin to go to as many Masses as possible. These he offered for many different intentions. He only broke his fast in the early afternoon. Daily the emaciated figure of Matt, for forty years or so, could be seen at St. Francis Xavier's, participating at Mass with never flagging devotion.

Matt at prayer, in immediate contact with the Father, with Jesus and Mary, could be defined as 'the man of prayer', whilst at work he was - and this was the opinion of all - 'the man of integrity'.

After Fr. Keane had become a Dominican, Matt went to confession every week to Fr. Michael Hickey for many years and became his very close friend. Of this priest who guided Matt along the path of God, Fr. Hyles Renan was to write: "He was a man as close as you could get to St. Pius X as I have known in my fifty-four years of priesthood and I knew both men well. His kindness, courtesy, comprehension and his counsel were beyond anything you could imagine."

This statement is important for us to understand that Matt in all that he did never followed his own whims, he did not consider penance as a goal in itself but only as a means amongst so many, and his aim was the love of God alone to whom he wished to conform himself, keeping in mind the invitation: "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself daily, take up his cross and follow me" (Mt 16:24). At the school of Hickey, from whom he had learnt how to read the Bible and spiritual books, Matt learnt how to transform everything into prayer.

Asked one day if he had ever had extraordinary experiences, he replied with all simplicity: "Only once. I was awakened from my sleep by a voice which told me to pray for a workmate whom I had tried in vain to bring to God. I prayed. That man died suddenly that very night."

"My good queen"

In the last twelve years of her life, Elizabeth, Matt's mother, went to live with her son. It was to be the last of the moves in her nomadic life. And it is to her that we owe some of the most beautiful secrets from her son's life.

The vigilant mother, now so happy to see her son so transformed by all her rosaries, sometimes got up at night to observe him. She found him in prayer, his arms outstretched, and many times in lengthy conversations with the Madonna. She thought he saw Mary but he would never admit this to anyone. However, his great love for the Virgin Mary made him say to his mother, whilst he held in his hand a little statue of Mary with the Child which he greatly admired: "No-one knows what a good Queen Mary is to me."

He never forgot that his conversion took place on a Saturday and for his Mother he cultivated an intimate and deep devotion. All that he did for Mary - prayers, fasting, novenas, feast days and all kinds of acts of charity - were an expression of a perpetual thanksgiving for that conversion, for that Saturday that saw him break away so abruptly from alcohol, from a life of sin. He always said he could never do enough for that marvellous intervention of Mary in his life.

Every Saturday he fasted in her honour even though he already observed an habitual fast. If this seems extraordinary it is because we do not realize how much supernatural sustenance was gained by his filial love. It can be said that Matt, as few saints, is in our day a concrete verification, one can almost say physically so, of that affirmation of Christ: "Not by bread alone does man live but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

The entire rosary was his daily homage to Mary. The unending rosary that Matt recited had its birth in that of his mother and the two of them vied in rendering Mary tribute.

Again in a testimony from President O'Kelly: "When, as an altar boy, I opened the church doors in the morning, Matt was there already on the steps, rosary in hand. Entering the church he went to pray at Our Lady's altar. You could always find him in front of that altar. Speaking to us boys he asked us if we said the rosary and urged us to do so."

Edward Fuller, one of his workmates, says: "Matt often spoke to us about Mary whom he called 'the beautiful Mother of God'. But what outsiders did not realize was his deep love and his intimate life with her. The rosary was not the only prayer he used. There were many others, starting with the Angelus which he never omitted and he said many aspirations such as these which were written on his hand: 'O Virgin I ask three things from you: the grace of God, the presence of God, the blessing of God' and 'O blessed Mother, obtain for me from Jesus that I may participate in His folly'."

His mother found that of an evening, as he went to bed, he held the statue of Mary and Child tight to his breast. Jesus and Mary were his loves.

Irresistible thirst for Christ

Once converted another thirst devoured and completely dominated him: the thirst for Christ. To this he sacrificed all he had and was. How this thirst refined him, how much dignity it gave to a very simple workman, how it transformed him interiorly and exteriorly! God alone knew his soul but others saw the change in his life, in his bearing, in the brilliance that surrounded his whole person, even to make people note he did not smell of tar which is usual for those who handle treated timber as he did. He left the yard neat and tidy as if he continually preserved within himself an uninterrupted dialogue with Christ. For Him he longed, for Him he kept himself spotless.

His daily desire for the Eucharist anticipated by twenty years the call of Pius X. Their lives ran parallel for almost sixty years. Although so different, they were so much alike in their love for Jesus in the sacrament of His love.

Innumerable were Matt's rosaries, the Masses in which he participated every Sunday - not to count weekdays - and on Mary's feast days. Jesus and Mary were joined together in his faith, in his spirituality, in his filial expressions of devotion.

Even during his drinking days - in everyone's opinion - Matt always maintained his purity. When he found his true love, Jesus, the Son of Mary, he gave Him everything, making Him his spouse with absolute and joyous dedication. He spent as much time as he could before the Blessed Sacrament, motionless as if he were undergoing a sun-cure that Christ may penetrate him, purify him and nourish him with its light of love.

When he was in hospital in 1923, as soon as he could get out of bed, he spent up to seven hours in the chapel. To a lady who said how sad and desolate she felt after her only brother had gone to America, Matt replied with a surprising expression of love: "Alone? How can you feel alone when Jesus is in the tabernacle?" Every evening, before the church was closed, he had a long talk with his Eucharistic Lord who was the very centre of his life.

Flames of light, the harbinger of sunset

In 1920 Matt's health began to decline. He was 64. His strict ascetical life and his hard work had undermined his robust constitution. It is not to be forgotten, as well, that his drinking habits for over sixteen years had taken their toll.

In the ward at Mater Hospital visitors were accustomed to see the rosary held in the worker's hands. Dr. Henry Moore had this to say after Matt's death: "Matt was patient to a remarkable degree. He was an extraordinarily religious man, a saint, the most gentle person I have ever met. I was proud to call him a friend." Matt recovered and once more took up his ascetical practices.

In 1923 he was twice in hospital, but again recovered but did not cut back on his commitment. In 1925, the first week of June, Dublin had to suffer waves of searing heat. Matt needed to go to hospital once more for further care but he took up his work again, saying that he felt fairly well.

On the 7th June, Trinity Sunday, he participated at the 8 a.m. Mass and went to Communion. He returned home pale and unwell. A fellow tenant advised him to have a rest. But an hour later he raced off so as not to miss the 10 a.m. Mass at the Dominican chapel. Halfway along Granby Lane, a few yards from the church, he fell, struck down by a heart attack. No-one in the district knew him. An ambulance took him off to Jervis Street Hospital.

Thunder after sundown

Examining his body, the doctors discovered that he had a chain tightly twisted around his body. Only the morning after, his sister, Susanna, not finding him at home, was informed of this accident and went and recognized his body.

The funeral was held the following Thursday, the Solemnity of Corpus Christi. He was buried in the habit of the Third Order of St. Francis. His marvellous inner sanctuary was complete. Now the angels and saints admired this loving sanctuary of Jesus and Mary. Matt gives us an example of total witness.

A headstrong boy who skipped school, who had liberated himself from the chains of alcohol, faithful to his word given to God, willing to work hard at a very lowly job, a passion for religious and social reading, joyous and affable, an interested friend to all, an undeniable solidarity with the worker, a layman committed to a life truly christian, a tender yet strong love for Jesus and Mary, constancy in his new way of life, a man who reached the highest peaks.

In 1931 the diocesan process to examine his holiness was begun. On the 25th February, 1947, the Apostolic Process began at Rome, the same day as Bartolo Longo: another outstanding layman. In 1975 he was declared Venerable.

Many have obtained favours and graces of conversion through his intercession, prayers to this 'great workman' have come from hearts drawn by his great human qualities.
