

# Before The Threshold

## On the Threshold of Prayer

By Leonard Boase, S.J.

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THE inward life of prayer is our truest life. It is our life with God, our life in relation to God; it is the seed sown in the soil of time that will grow into our eternal happiness.

The Threshold of Prayer was the name given to a little book about how to pray with the mind and heart: it is in allusion to that name that this pamphlet is called Before the Threshold, for it is to be about something in our inward life that must come, in a certain sense, before we cross the threshold of prayer: it is to be about the spiritual training that fits us for prayer. True, this training does not end when we begin to pray; it goes on all our lives, just as the endless practice at which a great musician toils goes on all his life, even when he has reached the pinnacle of his glory and is holding the world enthralled by his playing. Nevertheless, there is a true sense in which our spiritual training comes before the threshold of our inward life, just as it is true that the musician's practice comes before his playing.

Anyone who knows a little about physical training knows how useless, if not dangerous, it is to put oneself into the hands of an incompetent instructor. And it is almost as true that a book giving a system of physical training is of very little use without a living instructor. In the same way, these notes on spiritual training are valueless compared with the direction of a living director. And yet how few are the souls who realise that they need some sort of direction, either through the spoken or through the written word. The fields are white to the harvest; countless, indeed, are the good Christian men and women, plain folk, homely folk for the most part, who only need the guidance of a skilful hand to make them radiating centres of the light of Christ, powerful transmitters of His redemptive strength. It is for them, to lead them to seek for such a guiding hand, that these notes are written.

Where shall we Begin?

Where, then, shall we begin? Let us suppose that for some considerable period of time you have been going regularly to confession. But every time there is more or less the same pitiful tale to tell, changed a little, perhaps, as different circumstances have brought different temptations and different occasions of sin, but, on the whole, much the same each time you go. You are tempted to give up; you begin to wonder secretly, is it worth while? You are depressed and inclined to despair. Then one day light breaks: a chance word in a sermon, perhaps, some phrase in a book, or, most likely of all, the effect of a retreat, something brings it home to you that your inward life, your spiritual life, must be a growth, that it is a life, is subject to the laws of our life, and therefore must not stand still, but must go forward, must develop, must grow. Let us begin there.

What must we Do?

What are we to do? Well, the first thing to do is to take stock, to try to understand the task that is before us. If you want to plant a garden, you begin by studying the space at your disposal, finding out what kind of soil you have, and selecting the plants and flowers that will best thrive in it and best suit the surroundings. You take advice, then you plan, you prepare the ground and you plant and sow the seed. Then, you wait. In somewhat the same way, we have to get to know ourselves, to plan out our spiritual life and get to work. Then, as a rule, we have to wait, sometimes very patiently, while the cuttings strike and the seeds take root.

#### The Master-Thought.

There is one master-thought that must control everything in our inward life. Just as a mother's way with her children is ruled by the great fact of her love for them, just as all the decisions of a general in war-time are governed by the supreme necessity of Winning the war, so must this master thought rule and govern our life in all its ways. It is this: God first, God first and foremost in all things, at all times.

Need we say why? Because He has made us, called us out of nothingness into being, given us all that we have and all that we are; because outside Him, without Him, we are meaningless scraps of nothingness, torn pages ripped out of a book, bits broken off from a design and fit only for the rubbish-heap. In Him, in relation to Him, and only so, are we truly what we should be. He is the centre; He is the all.

God first and foremost. This does not mean that we are to go about looking glum and sanctimonious. It does not mean that we are not to find joy and gladness in life. Quite the contrary. But it does mean that at times we shall have to wrench ourselves free from things that are dragging us away from God. It may be, for instance, that a certain person's company leads us into sin; we shall have to break that bond. Or again, that the warmth and cosiness of bed on a winter's morning keeps us from the Mass that we might attend; we may have to drill ourselves into springing gaily and lightly out on to a cold linoleum at the first tingle of the alarm.

But we must not think that putting God first means bidding a fond farewell to all the things that make life pleasant. Not at all. The guiding principle is this: if a thing is drawing me away from God, then I will give it up; but if it is leading me towards God, then I will accept it with joy and thanks. Normally, all good things, like sunshine and flowers, and food and drink, and friendship and love, will lead us towards God. The difficulty is about the abnormal case, but unfortunately, because of the Fall of Man, we are each and every one of us more abnormal, more 'out of true,' than we like to think.

#### Sizing up Ourselves.

That is why when we set to work to take stock of ourselves we begin by asking what is wrong with us. The question has been made only too easy by the helpful forms for examination of conscience that are to be found, as a rule, in prayer-books. Of course, these forms are useful, especially for such as have been a long time away from confession, or are lazy and slack. But if, as we have here supposed, one is not in such poor case, then they are liable to do as much harm as good. They make going to confession too much like writing out a shopping list. They mask the living unity of the soul, dividing it up into sections like a departmental store. And, what is more serious, they tend to mask the real roots of our failings. For it is often true that the roots of our sins look smaller and less dangerous than the branches that grow out of them, and instead of pulling up the roots, we go on endlessly lopping off the branches. For instance, we may endlessly accuse ourselves of breaking the

Church's law by eating meat on Fridays, and may never observe the fact that the root of that sin is cowardice, being afraid to advertise the fact that we are Catholics. [This particular law has now been changed into an obligation to do SOME penance on a Friday, but the point being made is easy to grasp in any case.]

Hence, when we begin to take stock of ourselves, it may be better to put the prayer-book away and not follow the form for examination of conscience. How, then, are we to begin? Here the advice of a confessor, or one who knows us well, can be very precious. Yet, however valuable, it cannot replace our own honest, sincere, courageous looking in the mirror.

It is not possible to give a rule of thumb, which will suit everybody, a universal formula for finding the roots of one's faults. But many people have one dominant defect, and so it is often useful to look, not for all our faults, but for the key-weakness. In one way or another it will be a form of selfishness, because all sin is at bottom a wrong love of self; but it may not be easy to recognise our special weakness as selfishness. Cowardice, for instance, does not at first sight look like a form of self-love, but it is: it is a love of one's own comfort, or a fear of being hurt. Therefore, in hunting out our key-weakness, it may be useful to ask ourselves: What do I cling to most obstinately? What am I most afraid to lose? What am I most touchy and sensitive about? Or again, it is useful to begin by trying to see what general type one belongs to. Am I of the cave-man variety, smashing my way through everywhere with a cool disregard for others? Or am I of the timid kind, with a pack of petty meannesses slinking along at my heels? Our general characteristics often reveal themselves in the way in which we lack humility. We all lack humility, but some of us lack it because we have a blustering aggressive pride that boasts and asserts itself; others among us lack it because we are walking 'inferiority complexes,' always painting ourselves a little blacker than we really think we are, in the secret hope that someone will say: 'Oh no, not at all; you aren't a bit like that, really.' If you look close enough you will see that it is often pride which is at the root of this sort of thing.

But, as we said, there is no universal formula. Each one must study himself, and on the sincerity and honesty of that summing up will depend much of the growth that may follow.

The Strategic Point.

But why is it so good to discover our dominant fault? Because in the developing of our inward life, as in business or in a battle, or in a course of study, success follows from skilful ordering, or rationalising, or strategy. In order to build up our spiritual character with success we must plan, we must concentrate our attack. If we try to overcome all our faults at once, we shall probably fail; we have to pick out one point and hammer away at that. And, therefore, obviously it should be a strategic point.

But notice, our dominant fault is not necessarily the most serious sin that we fall into. A man may fall once in a way, not as a habit, into serious sin through drink, and yet the fault, which he would be well advised to deal with first, may be something quite different, say a bad temper. A dominant fault is one, which is the root of many others: dig that out and the rest will die too.

The faults of which we are speaking are habits. Diamond cuts diamond: habits are only cured by habits. Therefore, it is not enough to review our progress once a week or once a fortnight, when preparing for confession. We have to keep the matter more constantly before our minds: we ought to make an examination of conscience every day, and that with particular attention to the dominant habit we are trying to overcome. This self-inspection should be relatively brief; there is a danger in excessive introspection. Saint Ignatius of Loyola, in a letter to a Portuguese priest, once wrote, 'If

by the grace of God our Lord the soul is at peace with God' (that is, if it is free from mortal sin) 'make the confession short, without entering into details.' So, too, a daily examination of conscience must not be made the occasion of exasperating one's nervous system. We should give more time to asking God for pardon and help, and to strengthening our resolves, than we give to the actual examination of our conscience.

The Work is God's.

But no amount of strategic skill will lead to true development of our inward life if we go about it in a self-sufficient way. God resists the proud. Yet there are few of us who do not carry in our hearts at least an unconscious pride. It needs more than a big effort for us to grasp how completely dependent on God we are, and pride consists chiefly in not recognising that dependence.

It needs more than a big effort; in fact, it is, humanly speaking, impossible. Our minds cannot grasp the idea of infinity; they cannot grasp how our created wills can be free; nor can they grasp how our being and our actions can be at the same time wholly ours and yet entirely God's. Least of all can they grasp how in the domain of the spiritual life our actions depend entirely on God's freely given grace, and yet remain truly our actions. We cannot grasp it; worse than that, we can hardly believe it. We may indeed accept the idea in theory, but to act on it in practice, fully and completely, is to achieve the perfection of humility and to be among the saints.

Yet it is true, and vitally important: the work is God's.

God begins it. Perhaps the best way to picture to ourselves God's activity will be this. Imagine a magnet and a sheet of paper covered with iron filings and lying in the magnetic field; when the filings are more than a certain distance from the magnet the force of attraction is not enough to overcome the friction between the filings and the paper; once this friction is overcome, the filings fly to the magnet; yet even before it is overcome, before the filings begin to move towards the magnet, the magnet is already attracting them. So it is with God's work in our souls. That in us which corresponds to the friction is our lack of good will; once good will is present, then God draws the soul to Himself, but even before it responded He was already attracting it; indeed, His action is present at the very first beginning of the movement of will that submits the soul to grace.

And as God begins the work, so does He continue it, and so will He bring it to its end. And for us the practical consequence of this truth is: unbounded confidence and courage in our inward life; there is nothing, there can be nothing, which should make us afraid, nothing except our own stupidity in rejecting the help of God. And even that stupidity He will help us to avoid.

The Work is also Ours.

The work is also ours. What follows from the fact that it is God's work is an unshakable confidence; what must follow from the fact that it is also ours must be a measureless diffidence. Because it is God's work we must not fear; because it is ours we must 'work out our salvation in fear and trembling.' (Philippians 2:12)

Christianity is full of these apparent contradictions. 'He that will lose his life shall save it,' Christ Himself said. Christ, the Church teaches, is truly God, yet He is also truly man. Marriage is good, she tells us, yet consecrated virginity is better; still, anyone who despises marriage in order to exalt virginity is being untrue to Christian thought. G. K. Chesterton drew attention to this way of putting clean-cut white by clean-cut red and not sinking to the pale pink of compromise. So is it with the double truth that underlies the spiritual life: unbounded confidence and diffidence without measure,

springing from different causes, must go side by side in our inward life, and neither must weaken the strength of the other.

If you like, we are walking a narrow bridge over a terrifying abyss; we are in danger of falling over as much on one side as on the other; therefore, with head up and eyes on the far bank we must walk straight down the middle of the bridge. The work is ours: therefore, we must be tireless in toiling for success, labouring as if all depended on ourselves. The work is God's, therefore, we must be sure of victory, calm as if the field were already won, utterly trustful as if everything depended on God alone.

Face to Face with Sin.

When Our Lady appeared to Bernadette Soubirous, the burden of what she taught her was – penance, penance, penance! It is not enough for us to approach God in a spirit of humble recognition of our dependence on Him; truth also requires that we come striking our breast, and saying: 'O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.' Not one of us has an adequate idea of his own sinfulness. Those who have come nearest to having such an idea, the saints, have sometimes seemed mad to their fellow-men, so much have they been crushed with horror at the sight of their sins, few and trifling though these have appeared to their fellows. From the outset, our inward life must be lit by a humility burning with repentance; indeed, the normal beginning of a more intense spiritual life is a conversion, an explosion, an earthquake, a blaze of light, which shatters our self-complacency and brings us face to face with our sins.

Nevertheless, there is a danger here. If our sorrow is lacking in sweetness, if it leaves a bitter taste in the heart, if it holds an anger against ourselves that is mingled with resentment, with a spiteful annoyance against the fate that has made us sinners, then let us beware. True contrition is sealed with peace. It is bitter-sweet. It is a sorrow that melts in the warmth of God's mercy and forgiveness.

So, too, we must be careful when we dwell on the thought of the evil that is in us. We have been taught from childhood that our natural inclinations are prone to evil and will carry us to hell if they are not resisted. There are phrases in the letters of Saint Paul, to mention no others, which give authority to such a way of speaking. It is sound and true on one condition: it must be understood aright.

One of the earliest heresies that the Church had to grapple with was the horrible doctrine of the Manichees. They taught that all matter was evil in itself; therefore that our flesh was evil in itself; therefore, among other things, that parenthood was evil. They were swirled over the brink into the abyss. How low they sank can be judged from the fact that some of them taught that all foulness should be indulged in, to humiliate this evil flesh.

We have to be fearfully careful. Again we must grasp firmly two balancing truths that seem to contradict each other, for only in their blending can we find the entire truth. It is true that we are prone to evil, but it is also true that nothing which God makes is evil, and all our being comes from His hands. In this matter, as in so much else, we must avoid what the French call 'simplisme': there is no exact English translation for it: "excessive simplification" is as near as we can get. It is a word, which warns us that, though the truth is always simple, it is never simple through an impoverishment which throws away essential elements.

All that God makes, then, is good. The evil that is in us is a failure, a falling short, a lack of what should be, a disorder in what is.

And the practical point of this truth in our inward life is that, while we must never tire of hating our sins, we must never fall into the error of hating ourselves. If you start with the feeling that it is the very texture of your being, which is evil, not only do you dishonour Him who made it, but you leave yourself open to despair and to gross temptations of the flesh.

True contrition, let us repeat, is full of peace and hope and joy.

We Must Know Our Nature.

It is necessary to have true, balanced ideas about the evil in our lives.

It is also necessary to have sane, realist ideas about our nature. We are not angels, neither are we brutes; we are men, that is we are flesh and blood, animals with intelligence and will. It is fatal in the inward life to forget that we are much more than animals, but it is also dangerous to forget that we are animals.

In forming sane ideas about our nature, a study of psychology can help, but for the practical purposes of the spiritual life, it is common sense that counts. Common sense will tell us what we need to know, and what we need to know is how our nature was meant to work, by God who made it. We need to know this because in order to see clearly what is wrong with a thing, one must know how it goes when it is going right. We have to find out what is wrong with ourselves, and to do so we must know what would be right. Sin is disorder; to correct it, we must know the right order of our nature.

Sin is disorder. It is the disorder of forces, which are good in themselves. We have in us two chief forces, one of which reaches out to things and draws them to ourselves, and one which smashes through obstacles and resistances. When we fail to put God first, the power, which reaches out to things, grows disordered in us, and from this spring all the forms of selfishness, greed, lust, and all their kind. When we fail to put God first, the power of smashing through resistances also becomes disordered; either it grows weak, and we become cowardly, despondent, timid, or it grows uncontrolled, and we fall into anger, hatred, revenge, and such-like faults. In planning our spiritual life, we must first see clearly in what general way these forces are disordered in us, in order that we may know how to control them.

These forces in us act often through instincts. We are animals and have instincts, but they are unlike the instincts of the brutes in that they must be guided by our mind and will. The chief examples are the instinct for taking food and drink, the instinct of self-preservation, and the instinct of sex. It is very important that we should recognise the existence of these instincts, important not only because, recognising them, we can more easily control them, but even more perhaps (for such as those for whom these notes are meant) because, recognising them, we will not be filled with paralysing fears, imagining that there are evil forces at work within us, where in reality, there are only good and natural forces needing to be controlled.

The Voice of Conscience.

It is we who control the forces of our nature, by the help of God's grace. It is our mind and will that control them. These judgments of our mind, declaring that such and such a desire, such and such an emotion, must be controlled; these judgments are what we call the voice of conscience. Conscience

is not a voice within us other than ourselves. True, God helps; God may speak within us; His angel watching over us may speak to us, or guide us by a touch, but conscience in itself is our own voice. It is by our own conscience that we shall be judged, but we shall be held responsible if we have muffled it. Progress in the inward life must include a progressive education of our conscience, and this we achieve through listening to the voice of God, both as He speaks outside us through His Church, and as He speaks, or moves us, from within.

Natural and Supernatural.

All, or almost all, that we have said so far might have been said by someone who had never heard of Christ. We have spoken of our nature as men. We have said nothing of the supernatural.

Let us make a comparison. Supposing these notes had been notes on the art of painting, then, all that we have said so far would have amounted to some remarks on the preparation of the canvas on which the pictures are to be painted, remarks on the qualities of the different canvasses, on the treatment necessary to fit them for receiving colour. Now, at this point, we should begin to speak of the colours themselves, of the various hues that were obtainable, of their selection and blending, of the tricks of light and shade. So in these notes, we have spoken of the natural; we are now to speak of the supernatural. But we shall say nothing of the pictures themselves. Every single soul is a masterpiece of the Divine Artist; words are too poor to tell of the beauty of a soul in grace; we shall say nothing of the finished work. Our aim is but to speak of the simple colours out of which the masterpieces are designed.

There is a difference, vast beyond our conceiving, between the natural and the supernatural. It is a difference unsuspected by those who have not the Faith. 'The sensual man,' says Saint Paul, meaning the man who does not see with the eyes of faith, 'perceives not the things that are of the Spirit of God; for it is foolishness to him and he cannot understand.' Yet it is not upon the difference that I would put the emphasis here; it is upon the union, the blending, the interpenetration of the two.

Images can Mislead.

It is useful to compare our nature with a canvas, as if it were the canvas on which the Divine Artist painted. It is essential also to assert the all-but-infinite abyss between the natural and the supernatural. But it is doubly dangerous to make the mistake of thinking of the natural and the supernatural as if they were two things apart. It is dangerous, first because it exposes us to a temptation of discouragement when we seem to see no results in our lives that we can recognise as supernatural. It is dangerous, secondly, because it masks the value of our ordinary, natural, everyday actions.

To speak of the natural as a canvas is to use an image and, like all such images, this one is partly enlightening, partly misleading. To bring out the truth that it hides we might make use of another image; we might liken the natural to a diamond and the supernatural to light. Light falling on a diamond illuminates it, penetrates it, is refracted by it. In the light, we see the diamond, but it is the diamond, not the light, that we see. It is the diamond, which scintillates, flashing green and blue and red, and shining with white light. So, too, it is the supernatural which ennobles the natural, but when we see a saint, it is a man we see. Those who walked with Christ in Galilee beheld the perfect man, but His divinity remained in light inaccessible.

In this life we shall probably-never begin to know what the supernatural is in itself; maybe if God should grant us the gifts of the highest prayer we should know something of it, but such gifts are for the few. Our task is to prepare our souls for God's transforming work. We must not look to find too obvious evidences of the supernatural in our lives; it is enough for us to strive to bring order and beauty in our tangled nature; we cannot measure the growth of grace in our souls; we can more easily measure our progress in patience and kindness and courage; we see them more from the human side than from the side of grace. But it is not wise to dwell too much on such things: 'a watched pot never boils.' The important point is that we must never grow despondent, even when a long series of Holy Communion seems to bring no result.

#### The Apostleship of Toil.

It is also of the highest moment that we should see with the eyes of Faith the value of our everyday actions. The supernatural man is not a different man; it is ourself, but supernaturalised. Grace is not a colouring painted on from without. It is a quality that penetrates and permeates and ennobles the very texture of our being, the reality of our actions. If we understand this, we shall not be staggered to read in Saint Paul's first letter to Timothy these words written of woman: 'Yet she shall be saved by child-bearing, if she continue in faith and love, and sanctification, with sobriety.' We shall guess something of the mighty power of atonement rising in the torrent of human toil, in that great mass of grinding, unending labour, which began when Almighty God spoke our sentence: "In the sweat of your brow you shall earn your bread," and which acquired its redemptive power when God the Son took flesh to save His people from their sins.

#### The Sacraments.

Our spiritual life is the joint work of God and of ourselves; in His considerate way He invites us to work with Him.

We see mostly the human side; we only guess at the presence of grace from some of its effects. It is for the human side that we are responsible, and that is why in these notes we have spoken in the main as if it were a growth in human goodness that we were to plan. But that is far from the truth; it is the supernatural side, the work of God, which is all-important. Therefore, to help our weakness, to make it easier for us to remember that it is the supernatural, which really counts, God has chosen to give us the Sacraments. The Sacraments are precisely things that we can see and hear and feel, and that are yet at the same time the instruments of that supernatural life, which we cannot see or hear or feel. He has taken the simple things of our life, cleansing water, food and drink, oils of anointing, and made them most marvellously the means by which He gives us grace. Therefore, the most important part of a rightly ordered spiritual life is the frequent reception of the Sacraments.

We see the human side, but even in that human and visible side, grace is at work. For the natural and the supernatural are inextricably blended, and it is precisely by the action of grace that God heals our stricken nature, even in those habits and ways of acting that seem to be but natural. We may feel, for example, that a growth in patience comes from habits we are forming through our own deliberate acts, but in truth, it will be due chiefly to the action of supernatural grace.

Perhaps this comparison will bring out the truth. Imagine an old-time kingdom in which taxes were paid to the king in person, but were not paid by those of noble rank. Imagine that for some signal service rendered, the king desired to free a certain servant from taxation. He could do it simply by declaring him exempt, but he could also do it by raising him to noble rank. So God, who might have healed our nature without raising it to the supernatural, has chosen rather in His abundant mercy to



do it in this grander way, so that “where sin abounded grace might more abound,” and the ills of our disordered nature be set right by an endowment raising it above its rank. In doing so, He was in point of fact restoring us to a rank in which He had set us at the creation of race, and from which we had fallen through the sin of our first parents, but this does not alter the fact that is here of importance, namely, that it is by the gift of grace that He enables us to overcome our sins.

Growth is Slow.

The Sacraments, then, are the principal factor in the growth of our inward life; they are God’s immediate instruments in achieving the share in the work, which He has reserved for Himself. But because these notes are chiefly an answer to the question: ‘What must we do in order to take our share in the work?’ it is rather on the human side that the emphasis is laid. In this field of humble human effort, nothing is more necessary than patience. God has so designed our life that our spiritual growth follows closely the lines of our natural growth: it is normally slow. There is a little gem among the parables of Our Lord, which teaches this lesson. ‘So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the earth, and should sleep and rise, night and day, and the seed should spring, and grow up whilst he knows not. For the earth of itself brings forth fruit: first the blade, then the ear, afterwards the full corn in the ear. And when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest is come.’ It is while we sleep and rise, night and day, and while we know not, that the work of grace goes on in us, unnoticed, and the character is formed and fashioned to that beauty, which it shall wear forever. And in this slow and secret growth, time is a divinely appointed factor.

A superior of a certain religious institution, admiring the reliable qualities he thought he saw in the men of another, asked of one who held responsibility for their training: ‘What do you put into your training which brings these results? The answer was brief.

‘Time,’ replied the other.

Be Content to be Human.

It is a lesson that is hard to learn. Called, as we are, to a life that is nothing less than divine, it is only too easy to forget that we must be content to be human. Our pride also pricks and prompts us to impatience. We admire the ideal and we think to reach it in ten strides. Ten thousand weary ploddings may not bring us there.

We must be content to be human, seeing with sorrow but without bitterness our countless falls, our idling by the way; never ceasing to endeavour, but never souring our endeavour with that violence that comes of angered pride.

You might draw a ship through water with a silken cord if you pulled gently and steadily enough, but even a hawser would break if the jerk were too sudden and too violent.

We must be content to be human also in this, that we must not try to be what we were never meant to be. God breaks the mould when He has made a man, for each of us is unique. You cannot copy all the saints, and it is in their virtues, not in their peculiarities, that one should strive to be like them. And the real saints were never stiff and starched, nor even too prim and too proper. Love is the great commandment of the Law, and it is by listening for the voice of God within us, not by adopting an outward pose, that we shall grow in holiness.

Positive Development.

It is wise to begin a serious endeavour to grow in holiness by singling out some weakness in ourselves and dealing first with that. There are, as usual, two extremes to be avoided: one is abandoning an attempt before a habit has even begun to be formed, flitting from one plan to another like a restless butterfly; the other is grinding away at one fault long after the effort has ceased to be proportionately useful, like a little dog without an appetite gnawing a bone from a misplaced sense of duty. But how are we to know when to change? How are we to know when it is best to stop paying special attention to one point in our character and to turn to another? Again, either through guidance from a director or through our own common sense assisted by grace. For common sense assisted by grace is nothing else than the cardinal virtue of prudence.

Change, then, is desirable, at the proper time, since we must be content to be human, and human nature cries out for a certain measure of variety. And it is also desirable not only to change our special attention from one fault or failing to another, but also at times to fix it not on the overcoming of a fault so much as on the building up of a positively good habit, such, for instance, as the habit of frequent prayer by means of short ejaculations as we go about our daily work. It is a good thing to concentrate our effort, to keep one idea at a time especially before our mind, but it is also good that this idea should be from time to time that of some positive development, and not always the somewhat discouraging idea of a fault.

Penance and Self-Denial.

Yet it is not enough just not to do wrong things, nor even just to do right things, glorious as that is. We are sinners we must approach God with penance. We are fallen men: we must do a certain violence to ourselves. No inward life will come to maturity without the iron of self-denial.

It was this lesson, perhaps above all others that Christ came to teach, and He who died upon the Cross declared: 'If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me.'

It is this lesson, which is perhaps hardest of all to learn today. We fight shy of the very words penance and mortification.

Let us try to understand them; they are two different things, and between them, they hold the secret of the Cross.

Sin has two consequences: one is that by it we offend God; the other is that we damage our own nature. Because we have offended God, we deserve punishment; because we have damaged our nature, we need to have it restored to health and right order. In His mercy, God has given us suffering, for suffering is the current coin of atonement; by bearing as a punishment for sin whatever pains His Providence imposes on us, and even by adding freely to such pains, we make in union with Christ, atonement for sin: that is penance.

For most of us, penance lies chiefly in glad submission to the pains that God imposes on us, including the fasts and abstinences ordered by the Church: and by the gladness of our submission, we can make up what is wanting to the severity of the pains.

The saints down the ages have practised penance to an extent that seems terrifying to us, adding to the hardships of their lives incredible austerities. We are even tempted to pass judgment on them and to see in their austerities the excesses of imprudence. It is dangerous. It is better to humble ourselves and recognise that we do not understand the love that drove them to such lengths.

But there is also another danger: common sense tells us that such austerities are beyond our reach, therefore we give way to discouragement and, letting our hands fall to our sides, give up the hope of approaching towards holiness. It is a subtle temptation. Again, humility is the surest safeguard: it may indeed be that God does mean us to be only very small flowers in His garden; if it is so, let us be content with that. It is better to be the daisy that He wishes us to be than to fade from discouragement because we cannot reach the beauty of the rose.

Pain, or the renunciation of good and lawful things, imposed upon ourselves as penance, these things are like medicine; it is not well in such matters to prescribe without guidance for ourselves. There is enough opportunity for penance, to begin with, in bearing patiently with the weather, and our illnesses, and our work, and the contrariness of our neighbours (as they have to bear with ours). "It is the spirit which quickens." It is the sorrow and submissiveness with which we atone for our sins that make the atonement pleasing in God's eyes.

#### Mortification.

Pain and the renunciation of good and lawful things is a medicine to be used with caution. Mortification is as harmless as exercise and fresh air. For mortification is nothing else than that self-discipline in rooting out our faults which has been the chief topic of these notes. We call it mortification, a word that suggests death, but it might have been called vivification, a word which suggests life. It is the death of something, which is in itself a kind of death, to give light and air to the life that is our truest life. Christian tradition, taking its note from the stern words of Christ himself, and from the vivid imageries of Saint Paul, has dwelt rather on its aspect of death, in order to emphasise the need for vigorous effort that it entails. But it is simply the wrenching back into God's appointed order of the disordered inclinations of our nature. It can be painful, and then the pain can be offered to God as a penance. The drunkard, for instance, fighting against his craving for drink, may have to suffer mental agonies, and of these agonies can make atonement for his sin. But the process is not necessarily painful; indeed, there is a great delight in feeling that the powers of our nature are working as God intended them to work. When we have so far conquered our faults that it no longer hurts us to resist our inclinations towards them, then the name mortification seems less appropriate, and we tend to speak rather of building up virtues. But it is one process: not a process of killing nature in order to make room for the supernatural, but a process of setting nature right in order that grace may be grafted upon it. It is nothing very terrifying; but it is something very necessary.

#### Outward Regularity.

It is comparatively easy to reach a top note in singing; the difficult thing is to hold it. Similarly, the difficult thing about self-denial and the inward life is to keep it up. That is one reason why a director is needed: we shall hardly keep ourselves up to the mark without one, and an attempt at the spiritual life, which lasts no longer than a fashion in ladies' hats is not much use at all. A director is needed, and so is some measure of outward regularity, regular confession and Communion, self-examination, prayer – something simple and practicable, not a repertoire of so-called pious practices which make one a nuisance to everyone around. Remember the sad example of the religious who kept the whole community waiting in going up stairs by stopping on every step to recite an ejaculation. Prudence must guide us, and prudence is sanctified common sense.

#### Routine the Sheet-Anchor.

Routine, a certain measure of outward regularity, is needed as a sheet-anchor. The spiritual life often starts in sunshine; it almost invariably grows bleak after a while. The winds of desolation begin to howl. You get 'the blues,' and begin to see all sorts of reasons for being sorry for yourself. Next comes a stage of dryness in which nothing seems of any interest, least of all the business of preparing for a happy eternity; indeed, the thought of any sort of eternity is enough to make you scream. 'Inferiority complexes' develop, and you crawl around wondering how you can endure your miserable self any longer.

After that, things begin to brighten up a bit, and there follows a period in which you discern with remarkable acumen the absurdities, the foibles, the foolishness – of other people. You find your critical faculties awakening and are able to make with facility caustic comments on the institutions that surround you and hamper your liberty, and on the people who run those institutions. Self-satisfaction returns, and with it a tendency to strut and play to the gallery, and a strong taste for pleasures of a less than spiritual kind, not to say of a worldly flavour. After that, you begin to feel a little better. You begin to see yourself once more in something more like the light of truth, and the judgments you pass on others become less sparkling and witty and a good deal closer to objective fact. Finally, by the mercy of God, the sun shines out again, and life becomes good and sweet. You have been over-tired, and nature has taken the rest-cure into her own hands, that is all. But heaven help your inward life if during that storm you have not had some very definite and practical routine to hold you off the rocks.

#### Causes of Desolation.

Not everyone goes through the cycle outlined here; there are more varieties of desolation in the inward life than there are of the common cold. Nor is it true that these bleak periods are always due to fatigue or to being run down. They may be a trial directly caused by God, but that should not readily be supposed. God works normally through secondary causes, such as our state of health, in this connection. The bleakness may be due to the fact that we have grown lazy and given up the attempt to lead an inward life, or have been led astray by some jack-o-lantern, some interest, some enthusiasm, some affection, that has not been leading us to God. The cure in that case begins with the removal of the culpable cause; the trouble is that there may be nothing to make us want to remove it. When the spiritual life is flat because it is swamped by the life of cinemas and theatres, or of sport and money-making, or of frocks and frills and 'chitter-chatter', or even by a too great absorption in useful work, then it takes something providentially explosive, like a powerful sermon, to lift us out of the rut.

But often desolation is due to fatigue. Then we must rest. The cure for over-work is not to go on overworking. Do not suppose that because God sends you desolation through no fault of your own, He does not expect you to take steps to get rid of it. He does. The first necessity is not to be impatient under it; but after that, you have to do what you can to get rid of it, just as God expects you to get rid of hunger by eating, of sleepiness by sleeping, and of sickness by taking care of yourself. Desolation is a great enemy of cheerfulness, and cheerfulness is an apostolate in itself. For cheerfulness is a means of waking joy in others, and to bring joy to others is to continue the work of Christ. Therefore, when the signs of fatigue appear, be wise and take some rest – if you can.

#### Anxiety.

Akin to desolation is anxiety. There are people who habitually keep their nerves as frayed as an old rope's-end. They fidget over their confessions, whether they have told everything, whether the

confessor has understood, whether they are truly sorry, they worry about their fitness to receive Communion, they fret about the perfection of their souls, and in general they go about the business of salvation as if Almighty God were a querulous schoolmaster and not the tenderest of fathers. At the root of this is unrecognised pride and the wish to be self-sufficient. After all, if our salvation depended mostly on ourselves, who would not despair? No, it is not the will of our Father in heaven that one of His little ones should perish, and He is infinitely powerful, infinitely wise, and infinitely kind. He is quite capable of looking after us if, like children, we will trust ourselves to His care. Fretting is dangerous because it can be the beginning of the disease of scruples.

Anxiety-ridden persons are a great burden to a director, but they are especially in need of his help. For the function of a director is not only to advise. He is also a sort of lightning-conductor or safety-valve. He is there in order that one may open one's soul to him, and by so doing not only be saved from error, but also be eased from a growing pressure of conscientiousness, which, if not discharged, might become anxiety or even turn to scruples. For both these reasons, to mention no others, it is of capital importance to be absolutely frank and honest with him. But we must be content to be human, and be satisfied with making a clean breast of things in a human way, not endlessly endeavour to convey every shade and detail of the facts. It cannot be done.

Obedience.

After frankness, obedience. It is a waste of the priest's time to ask his advice if you do not intend to follow it and, on the other hand, God usually rewards the humility which takes advice. Admittedly, a director (as distinct from a priest acting strictly in the capacity of a confessor) only gives advice, and not commands, but the advice should normally be followed. Experience indeed may prove to us that a certain director is doing us more harm than good, and prudence may dictate a change of directors; but it must be prudence, not caprice.

The capricious creature who flutters from one director to another is hardly more of a nuisance than the chatterbox. One of the perils of direction is that it may foster that subtle form of selfishness, the love of talking about oneself. Learn to be brief and businesslike; it is an excellent, form of mortification. Do not take more of the priest's time than you need; others may be in trouble, and it is the duty and privilege of the director to help those who are in trouble; you may need him terribly yourself one day.

A director is there to help; he is not there to save us the trouble of living our own lives. 'Many put themselves into the hands of another for their own pleasure and ease, wherein they are mightily deceived,' wrote that shrewd Frenchwoman, Marguerite Acarie (Blessed Marie of the Incarnation, who died as a Carmelite nun). A good director, as Pere Léonce de Grandmaison has remarked, teaches people how to do without him. A director may be something like a nurse, but he is not meant to be a perambulator; it is not his function to save us walking on our own legs, and the director who tries to live other people's lives for them is a menace.

When all is said and done, the supreme director of souls is the Holy Spirit. Men are but His instruments. His guidance is constant, but it is very gentle. Our Lord drew attention to His own meekness, and the Spirit of God is meek; He will never force His guidance upon us. We must not expect Him to show us what we are to do if we do not listen to what He tells us through His Church, through the Commandments, through the normal judgments of our conscience, but even when we have 'kept all these things from our youth' we must not think that He will usually direct us by means of words that we shall hear in our hearts. You may make a retreat and at the end of it seem to

have learnt nothing new, to have heard no special message. Do not be discouraged; imperceptibly but surely your mind will have grown clearer and your will stronger, and it will be when next you are faced with some more difficult decision, some choice that calls for greater light and strength, that you will become aware of the increase that God has given.

The Spirit of God is meek and gentle. He gives His special guidance not as a burden but as a reward. It is by listening that we come to hear Him, and the reward of listening is that we hear more clearly. Therefore, the grand and simple secret of the inward life is prayer, constant prayer, prayer that comes more and more to fill our lives, to fill them in its own wonderful way not by emptying out what is good, but by penetrating and transforming and illumining all. 'Non eripit mortalia qui regna dat coelestia,' (He takes not away earthly kingdoms of mortality, who bestows heavenly ones, kingdoms of eternity) sings the Church in one of her hymns; He who brings us the kingdom of heaven takes from us none of the dear human things that He Himself has given. He enriches all. A life of prayer sheds a radiance on our world. The radiance comes from God. He is so good, so kind, so wise, so powerful, that our most ecstatic dreams of Him are pale beside His truth, and when it is in His light that we see life we see it anew, clothed in a beauty that outruns desire. He is the light of our life, our wonderful God, and we can do nothing better than to fill our minds and hearts with glorious thoughts of God.

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