

# Between 13 and 20

By Rev Robert Nash, S.J.

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THESE two figures represent a critical period in one's life. A boy or girl round about that age is often a problem and an anxiety. Parents are distressed to notice unpleasant changes. – 'Tom used to be so candid and full of innocent fun, and, generally, did what he was told and smiled his way through. Lately he has grown sullen and obstinate. He is irritable and impatient of a word of advice or even a suggestion of correction.' He flares up in temper and says harsh and caustic things to mother and father, which pain and humiliate them. What is coming over him at all?

Or it's Mary, who, like Tom, is moving up along in teenage. Clearly, she knows better than parents every time, and she makes no effort to disguise the fact that she regards them as outdated and outmoded. Sometimes she assumes an attitude of tolerant condescension, sometimes the pose of an unappreciated martyr who makes magnanimous allowance for those who cannot be expected to understand modern youth and its problems. Why then don't they learn to keep their meddling fingers out of youth's pie?

Let father or mother or teacher try to assert their authority and the most they can hope for by way of response is a mere external compliance. When they are out of earshot, their words are parodied and ridiculed and, so far as leading to a practical way of acting is concerned, completely ignored. Perhaps a girl will stand and listen in stony silence; perhaps she will register her protest against the tyranny by disappearing and running away.

We are well aware that such disagreeable traits do not show up in every case, possibly not in the majority of cases. Still they are sufficiently common to justify a generalisation. There is the modern boy or girl a mentality all out to win a reputation for contempt of law and order and complete disregard of convention. This is the age when a young person gets 'fed-up' with religion. Prayer is either dropped altogether as being suited only for kids or ancients, or at best it degenerates into a boring meaningless dry-as-dust formula. Sacraments are insipid and Mass ceases to have any value or significance. It can easily be omitted, especially if the young person goes to live in an alien or hostile atmosphere. Confession on a very occasional Saturday night, late, and to the priest who has fewest penitents, is an ordeal submitted to just in order to avoid a row at home.

A word of warning is here called for. This booklet is far indeed from being an attack on our young people. Of such attacks there are enough and to spare. In these first few paragraphs, we are merely trying to set out a picture of a type of young person that is common today. We attach no word of blame, and till now we have suggested no remedy or course to follow. We are describing certain traits, which we have observed, and we think everyone, young people themselves included, should be able to recognise the pattern.

The boy we have in mind wants to be a 'hell' of a fellow. The girl is the plaything of her imagination. She feeds on thrills and seems incapable of concentrating on any serious subject. So it's rock and roll and jive and the latest dance craze. It is the unending blare of radio, yelling in the

street at any hour of day or night, the later the better. It's deafening sounds in dance-hall, sounds devoid of melody or musical content, and often enough calculated to stir up in the heart, feelings and desires, which may pave the road to evil.

Who cares? This is life! Let's enjoy it! We're going to be young only once, so give us freedom, the lawless, irresponsible, dare-devil freedom of the jungle! This is the new gospel, broadcast on radio and media, screaming in the headlines, taken for granted in TV and in the movies, picked up by youngsters from conversations heard and from slimy literature read with avidity, learned from conduct observed in those knowing persons who have discovered how to have a 'good time', and are willing enough to initiate the ignorant.

Between 13 and 20, youth is on the threshold of a new life. It begins to travel in a land of mystery. This is a region hitherto unexplored, the very existence of which was not even suspected till now. What more natural for youth's adventurous spirit than to find out all about it, to taste every new experience that offers, and to boast loudly of its superior knowledge to kids a year or two younger who have not yet grown up? This is a transition period during which God gives new powers, sacred powers, imparted for a sacred and holy purpose.

These powers may not be tampered with. They may not be used, except in accordance with the Law of the God who gives them. No-one may presume to anticipate the time when their use becomes holy and beautiful and sanctifying – in marriage. But youth chafes at the delay. Anybody who is anyone seems to find that this delay is intolerable. Strong tendencies, unknown till now, begin to assert themselves. There is a new interest in persons of the opposite sex. What is all this about? What can be wrong in wanting to have this natural curiosity satisfied, once and for all?

Hoodwinked.

Our heart goes out in affection and sympathy to the young person in this critical position. He or she is often sorely perplexed and quite at a loss to know where to turn for guidance. The easiest way out seems to be to follow the crowd, to keep one's eyes wide open and one's ears alert, and learn all about it and then decide for oneself. Many a boy or girl, as a result of this fatal decision, deep down in the heart is lonely, and bewildered, and mystified. They do not know how to solve their problem; possibly, they do not understand even how to put their problem into words. What they do know is that the problem exists and that nobody seems to be interested in helping them to find the answer.

The bad manners we complain of, the shyness or slyness, which creates a gulf between them and us, the fantastic attire and the affectation of a boisterous superiority, the open defiance and the seemingly heartless jibe – all these, in many cases, are a smoke-screen, a camouflage. These young people are in sore need of direction. They do not understand themselves and they grow indignant and intolerant, pretending to a knowledge they do not possess, too big to ask questions, or, more commonly, able to find no place to learn except the garbage bin.

A mongrel, always hungry, walked down the street in front of me this morning. He stopped at every rubbish heap, pawing and smelling. The comparison is not flattering, but I think it is fair. He reminds me of the poor boy or girl who seeks for knowledge of their problems and the answers from foul conversations, from novels and papers that reek with sex and sensationalism, from lewd jokes and objectionable pictures and cartoons. These are the evil-smelling garbage bins and they are filled to overflowing in all conscience.

It must surely be clear from all this, that on parents devolves a most important duty, to impart to their children, in the best manner and at the most suitable time, correct and adequate sex instruction. Far too many parents, excellent in all other respects, fall down here on the plea that they do not know how to give this instruction, that their children are ‘all right,’ ‘still innocent,’ and can find out for themselves according as they grow up.

Their reluctance to tackle this problem with their child is, possibly, intelligible, but it is certainly inexcusable. The late Holy Father, Pius XII, insists in more than one place that if young people are not reverently and fully instructed by proper authorities – parents or priests or Catholic teachers – they will find out for themselves, and with the gravest risk to their virtue. Two thousand American boys were questioned as to how they learned ‘the facts of life.’ It was found that when they were instructed by parents or such persons, the effect was excellent in 94 per cent of the cases, and where the knowledge was acquired ‘by themselves’ it led to disaster in 75 per cent of the cases investigated.

No Catholic parent can presume to shirk this duty, more especially in view of the wholesale publicity of sex on every side of us. There is plenty of helpful literature. Before me as I write lies a pamphlet by Father Pickering entitled: ‘Sex Instruction in the Home.’ It is published by the English Catholic Truth Society.

Mercier Press, Cork, has ‘Sex and Innocence,’ and Father Lord, S.J., has treated this delicate question in several of his books and pamphlets – most fully in his ‘Practical Notes for the Guidance of Parents.’ There is also ‘The Catechism Key,’ published by Gill, 50 Upper O’Connell Street, Dublin. [Now Gill & Macmillan, Hume Avenue, Park West, Dublin 12, Ireland.]

A little boy of seven was helping with the hay-making. The man with whom he worked chatted as they moved along together, and they discussed football and fishing and swimming. Suddenly, like a bolt from the blue, the youngster began to describe all the fun he used to have with little girls his own age. The man, a good Catholic, was alarmed and some time afterwards made it his business to say a word of gentle warning to the mother of the boy. He failed to convince her, though he rightly considered the evidence was overwhelming.

‘I think mothers are very foolish who allow their little girls to ramble off in the fields and lonely places with little boys, on the plea that they are innocent. If a habit of this sort is not dealt with in time, it can lead to disaster and then advice and instruction will come too late.’

‘Too Big for Us.’

The world our young people are facing assumes that the sex instinct is irresistible. ‘It is so violent and persistent as to be beyond our control. Hence, the only solution, the obvious one, is surrender. Nobody stands up successfully to this thing, and don’t you expect you are going to be different. It is too big for us and, unless you want to drag out an existence of unending strain and tension, you had better fall into line with the rest of us and give up this pretence. All young people must sow their wild oats.’

Boy meets girl in the movie. You are expected to take for granted that, as soon as they begin to get interested in each other, they will automatically, as a matter of course, proceed to indulge in passionate love-making. ‘They cannot help it! The impulse is too strong and nothing can hold it in check.’ The same lie is stuffed down your throat in the evil papers and books that abound, in the conversations of bad companions if you have the misfortune to associate with them. On all sides,

the doctrine is the same – ‘make up your mind that this urge is so strong that it is quite impossible to control’. So forget about your ‘guilt complex’ and forge ahead.

Who can estimate the amount of vice for which this lying pernicious propaganda is responsible? Where shall we find words to convince you that it is foisted on the human race by the father of lies? With full cognisance of the peculiar difficulties of our modern way of life, recognising fully the presence of dangers and occasions of sin to which another generation was a stranger, we assert emphatically that there is no boy or girl of good will who should doubt or question for a moment the truth that perfect observance of the Sixth Commandment is possible today.

If pessimists shake their wise heads and deplore the waywardness of modern youth, it might be well worth their while to give some sympathetic consideration to our young people’s difficulties. It is hard to live in an infected area and not catch disease and young growing-ups today breathe, for the most part, an atmosphere little conducive to a life of vigorous Catholicism. Old standards have been removed; old landmarks have disappeared; there is a greater spirit of independence, more freedom in relations between boys and girls, less supervision. It is only fair to remember that they come into this environment, which they did nothing to create, and that therefore God will not fail to give them the grace and mercy they need to grapple with their own particular problems.

Youth is Strong.

God does not fail to give. Many, very many, of our young people do not fail to accept and use His gift of grace. They grow up into Catholics of whom Christ’s Church is proud, on whom He can depend, to whom He can turn with assurance and invite them to labour with Him for the salvation and sanctification of souls. Admittedly, there is the dismal side. But there is authority, not less than that of the Vicar of Christ, for saying that many young people are more sinned against than sinning. It would be disastrous to fasten one’s gaze on the side of the hedge where darkness and gloom abound, and forget the glorious rays of sunshine on the other side.

A young man came to Our Lord one day, ‘and Jesus, looking upon him, loved him.’ Why? Because of the magnificent grit in him, which, with the never-failing support of divine grace, had brought him unscathed through the fierce fires of temptations so often experienced in the adolescent period. ‘I write to you, young men,’ says Saint John, ‘because you are strong and have overcome the wicked one.’

Many a young man and young woman will read this and their conscience will bear them testimony that it is true. Treat with contempt the lie that the world whispers in your ear when it tells you purity is impossible. That is a personal insult. Many a splendid young person is living a pure life in face of evil example – in his own home, perhaps, or from fellow-workers or even boys with whom he plays games. He has to listen to filthy language in the factory where he works, but no-one ever heard a sinful expression from his own lips.

Personal difficulties and struggles bring home to him the truth that he has plenty of red blood in his veins, but he glories in the fight and in the victory and he realises gratefully that each victory makes the next round easier to win.

The present community in the Cistercian Monastery in Kentucky numbers nearly three hundred. The life is austere; there is perpetual silence, much fasting, penance, and laborious toil. There is continuous prayer; the monks’ day of prayer begins at 2 a.m. There is an ever-increasing demand for admission from young men aspiring to this hard way, impelled by the motive of love of Christ and

Mary. In the past ten years there have been five new foundations from this one – all of them are flourishing, all of them have large fervent communities.

This single fact alone is more indicative of the character of modern youth than the boorishness and boisterousness of ‘teddy-boys’ and ‘teddy-girls’ who have not yet learned how to behave as grown-ups. It is also a devastating argument to fling in the face of a lying world which sniggers at chastity and mouths the falsehood that purity is impossible or only for prudes.

Another Lie.

The other lie is this – that Religion has nothing to contribute to your problem. ‘You may have heard a lot of fine talk about prayer and sacraments and devotions, all guaranteed to help you to stand up to temptation and win through. Don’t you believe it. It just doesn’t work. Your problem is in outer space and the Church and Religion are notoriously conservative, doggedly pursuing the beaten track.’

I wonder. One thinks back again to that army of noble young men in Cistercian abbeys, and, indeed, in every Religious Order and seminary. This profession calls for the perfect and perpetual observance of chastity, and the aspirant binds himself to this observance by a vow. How is it done? By his own grit and will-power? He himself would be the first to deny it. Priests and Religious are able to keep this sacred and difficult obligation because they depend on divine grace and on the means of growing in grace, or recovering it if lost, because, in a word, the Church and Religion have, very definitely, the answer to youth’s problem.

You’ve read about Saint Maria Goretti, canonised at the age of twelve by the late Holy Father Pius XII? She was attacked, and several times, by a man who had evil designs on her virtue. He tried intrigue, he gave fair promises, he appealed to her womanly sense of sympathy – he tried all the tricks in the pack, and all to no use. The child of twelve withstood whatever he could do by way of temptation. Finally, his impure love turned to hatred. He attacked the little girl with a knife and gashed her innocent body till she died. Don’t you think the ‘Church and Religion’ had something to do with this indomitable power of resistance in a child of twelve?

There is also Saint Dominic Savio, who, like Saint Maria Goretti, was raised to the altars by Pope Pius XII. He was only fifteen when he died. He was noted for his love of the Blessed Eucharist and of Our Lady. From this love, there flowed a hatred of sin and a manliness in resisting it. His motto was: ‘Death rather than sin.’ He never lost his Baptismal innocence, but do not imagine that this just happened. He had to prove himself every inch a man. He was acutely conscious that his hold on his purity was tenuous indeed, so he rolled up his sleeves and prepared for a strenuous fight.

In winter, he would throw off the extra blankets ‘because the Crib was cold and on the Cross Jesus had but scant covering.’ People had to keep a vigilant eye on Dominic, a delicate boy, to make sure he ate enough. If he did not practise control of his desire for food and drink, maybe, he argued, he would weaken, too, in his resistance to the allurements to vice. Is it extravagant to suggest that, in Dominic’s case also, the ‘Church and Religion’ had something, much even, to help in solving his problem?

The plain fact is that while without Christ and His grace we can do, literally, nothing, it is none the less true – as Saint Paul assures us – that in Christ who strengthens us we can do all things. To His Church our divine Lord has entrusted His seven sacraments, inexhaustible sources of His grace.

These He has instituted in order to communicate His grace, to restore it if lost, to foster its growth, to provide for the varying changes and trials, which we encounter along the road of life.

You never yet met a person who persevered in faithful and worthy use of the means of grace afforded by the Church who did not succeed, perhaps after many difficult battles, in learning how to control his passions.

One remembers the verdict of Father Edward J. Flanagan of Boys-town that no boy is hopeless. No girl is hopeless either.

In every single case, however unpromising it seems, you can be certain there lurks a deep fund of goodness, which perhaps has never been tapped. It would be easy to set down several instances of young persons who, at first apparently incorrigible, under the tactful handling of someone who obviously and sincerely loved them, were gradually and permanently transformed. 'It is only what we love that we long to see perfect; what we dislike can go to the dickens by any road it wishes.' The secret of success with young people – indeed with any people, – is to love them, or, perhaps more correctly, to love Christ in them.

Dancing.

"Young people need relaxation and amusement, and dancing supplies the need. If there were no dance-halls, many of these young people would sit by the hour in a 'public-house', soaking themselves in excessive drinking. It is surely much better for them to have the exercise and the laughter and the thrill of the dance. Dancing develops the social life and leads to happy Catholic marriages. Priests often run dances and that fact alone seems to justify us in believing that dances have the approval of the Church. We might even cite the fact that King David danced before the Ark of God, and that expert dancers exhibit their art in some Spanish churches."

These are some of the arguments advanced by the 'fans' in favour of dancing. There is much to support them and we may return to them later. But, for the moment, we would like to make, further, a fair statement of what is to be said on the other side. Our view must not be lop-sided.

A visitor called to see a friend of his, a Tuberculosis patient in hospital. The sick man, aged twenty, admitted that it was through his own fault he had caught the disease. After coming out from the dance-hall, perspiring and overheated, he used to loiter along the road on the way home, in the cold of the small hours of the morning. The inevitable happened. In the same ward, in the next three beds, were three other young men, all with exactly the same story to tell.

Nature itself dictates that night is the time for rest. The birds seek their nests and the animals lie still in the fields and fall asleep. But boys and girls who frequent dance-halls and regularly arrive home jaded and over-excited at two or three in the morning – or later – how can they imagine that nature will not take from them its toll? Things have reached such a pass, indeed, that there are those silly enough to make it a boast that they were out all night. Recently a young girl proudly declared: 'We left the dance-hall at two, and it was nearly five before we got in home!' Applause, please, somebody.

If the writer of these pages was never a priest, it seems to him he could bring up many unanswerable arguments against dances of this sort, merely on grounds of reason and common sense. No one has any quarrel with properly controlled dances, enjoyed in moderation, and finishing up at a sensible hour. But what person, unless he goes around our land with his eyes blindfold and

his ears stopped, can flatter himself with the delusion that these are the dances demanded by the majority and catered for by the organisers?

It must be clear that anyone between 13 and 20, faced with the problem we have already discussed earlier, must have a definite policy to follow in this question of dancing. Too many girls, for instance, are either ignorant or innocent, or both, and are sadly unconscious of the harm they may do to their partner by 'close dancing.' It is very hard for him to resist; the girl is always the one who is to control the situation.

The weighty words of our Irish Bishops, spoken over thirty years ago, have lost none of their force today. 'We know too well the fruit of these halls all over the country... more especially in the general lack of control during recent years...

'[These halls] have deplorably aggravated the ruin of virtue... The occasions of sin, and sin itself, are the attendants of night dances in particular... To say nothing of the special danger of drink, imported dances of an evil kind, the surroundings of the dance-hall, withdrawal from the hall for intervals, and the dark ways home, have been the destruction of virtue in every part of Ireland.'

We have no intention of exaggerating; we want, merely, to get the picture in correct focus. It cannot be denied that the objectionable type of dance, condemned by the Bishops, is nothing else except a gateway leading to grave sin and imminent danger of the loss of one's soul. It should not be necessary to elaborate with details, or to quote the testimony of eye-witnesses who were sickened at certain dances by an orgy of drunkenness.

What man or woman with even the most scanty knowledge of the power of human passion can believe that young people, returning home after moving for hours in an atmosphere charged with suggestion and temptation, will avoid sinning? How can they possibly withstand the onslaught of the attack they are sure to encounter when they find themselves, boy and girl alone, seated together in a parked car or walking along dark unfrequented roads?

Our Wounded Nature.

There is no defence, no sound argument by which to prove that we are not here face to face with an occasion of grave sin. Young people may resent being told this; they may charge us with being tyrannical, unreasonable, puritanical or Victorian. All right. But when all is said and done, human nature is wounded as a result of sin; we are sick and convalescing, and we cannot afford to take risks. To say that these young people, if they did not have dances and the walk home afterwards would take to drink is no argument. As well might you advise that a man determined to slit his throat with a razor should be given a loaded revolver instead.

The Church is no 'kill-joy' and she does not forbid dancing indiscriminately. But, to quote Father Davis, a recognised moral theologian: 'If, by its very nature and form [dancing] incites to sins of sensuality... it must be avoided under pain of sin. Even in cases of harmless forms of dancing, if the company is bad, there is the same obligation of avoiding them.'

A priest explained all this to his people from the pulpit. He pointed out, in lucid language, free of any suspicion of exaggeration, that to run a dance-hall of this sort placed a fearful responsibility on the conscience of the persons owning and letting out such a hall for such a purpose. He explained, in carefully measured words, the sheer folly of making money at the cost of providing for many people a free proximate occasion of mortal sin. He reminded his hearers of our Lord's terrifying warning:

‘Woe to the scandal-giver... It were better for him that that man had not been born... better that a millstone were tied about his neck and be buried in the depths of the sea.’ (Matthew 18:6)

And scandal means alluring one’s neighbour into sin, conniving at his sin, encouraging him, providing the occasion for his sin.

With such forcefulness did that priest speak, with such limpid clarity and with such evident anxiety for the eternal salvation of the souls of his hearers, that the owner of such a dance-hall, after the sermon, called round to the sacristy and handed the key to the preacher.

It is only by drowning the voice of conscience that specious reasons are listened to by means of which to justify, or seek to justify, what the Bishops describe as ‘the sport of the evil spirit for those who have no true self-respect.’ The man who gave up that key realised his folly because his dormant conscience was thoroughly aroused. Assuredly, it is in no spirit of recrimination that this subject is discussed in these pages. They are written with one only object in view – to set all of us whom it concerns examining our conscience seriously.

A good friend of mine, a priest, is always impressing on his flock of young people – whom he loves greatly – that the particular purpose of the Sacrament of Confirmation is to give grace to overcome temptations. Doesn’t it seem reasonable? You have become His living temple. He has entered into your soul with His Seven Gifts. One of these is fortitude, that manly courage with which He sustains you in the fight and leads you on to victory. ‘I write to you, young men,’ to quote Saint John once more, ‘because you are strong and the Word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one.’ And again: ‘Greater is He that is in you, and you have overcome the wicked one.’ And again: ‘Greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world.’ In the world is Satan, and his minions. In you is the Holy Spirit of God whom you have received in Confirmation. On that day, you were made a soldier of Jesus Christ, and the Spirit of God equipped you fully to meet every obstacle, every enemy, and to win right through.

The boy or girl who recognises the soul as a living tabernacle is filled with a sense of deepest reverence – for self and for others. Youth’s problems are solved, not by flinging oneself into the noise and tumult and casting aside all restraint, not by the easy way out, which decides that passion is irresistible. The solution is nearer home, right in the very centre of the immortal soul, radiant with the beauty of sanctifying grace, sharing in God’s very life, destined to see Him face to face, to be borne onwards towards Him on a wave of mighty love, to possess Him, to hold Him fast and never let Him go.

In the realisation of these magnificent truths, new strength is found, new courage is generated, a vivid understanding in the light of which, a boy or girl sees how completely beneath contempt the counterfeit is when contrasted with the reality.

This realisation is a new arm, invincible to strike and to smite and to fill with confusion an enemy whose principal argument is lying or empty boasting or vain promises and assurances. Seek for the remedy from within, not from without.

Young people flock into places like the Cistercian Monastery in Kentucky because they have wakened up to realise that, in comparison with God, whatever the world and passion can promise and even guarantee to give, is shoddy. Esau sold his birthright for a mess of pottage. It was a fool’s bargain. He found that out, but only when it was too late. You, thank God, are in time still.



What is that birthright of yours? Our Lord Himself assures you through the words of Scripture that 'eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered into the heart of man, to conceive what things God has prepared for those who love Him.' (1 Corinth 2:9) Some of the implications of this magnificent text we shall try to indicate by reminding you of life's story, from here, into eternity, and beyond.

Your Three Birthdays.

Your first birthday was the moment you entered into this world. You had received from your parents the gift of natural life. You were now strong enough to emerge from your mother's womb. You were capable of living on your own, though you still needed imperatively the assiduous care of others to keep the feeble flicker of life aflame.

Through no fault of your own, you came into the world seriously handicapped. Your soul was in sin. Adam and Eve, our First Parents, had sinned, and all their children, except alone the Blessed Mother of God, were conceived and born 'children of wrath.'

It is worth while pausing and trying to recognise that in this there is no injustice done, either to Adam and Eve, or to ourselves. What happened to our First Parents when they sinned was that they lost sanctifying grace. This is an entirely free gift of God. They had no sort of claim on it. Adam was fully a man, with all the qualities demanded for complete manhood – without grace. Eve was fully a woman, possessed of every power and faculty required for complete womanhood – without grace. You can have a human being, equipped with everything needed for human nature – without grace. Grace is something added on to human nature, something over and above, raising it wondrously, as we shall presently see, far and away above the condition native to it.

God granted this gift to Adam, therefore, not because it was due to him, in any way, as part of his equipment as a human being, but simply and solely because He loved him. Since it was given thus entirely gratuitously, there surely can be no difficulty in seeing that no injustice was done when it was taken away again. The withdrawal of it was part of the punishment deserved because of sin.

No injustice, then, was done to them. Neither was any done to us, their children. For Adam was the head of the human race, and grace was given to him, not merely as an individual, but as the parent from whom the race was to descend. When he culpably lost it by sin, grace was cut off at the source of our human nature. We were deprived of it, necessarily, by the very fact that the head of the race had lost it.

But the gift was restored to us, and again the only explanation is the immense love and mercy of God for His creatures. Without grace, we are merely His creatures; when grace is in our souls we are His children, sharing in a real way, in the very life of our heavenly Father. Christ is His Son by nature: we by adoption.

Jesus Christ is God, and, on entering into this world, He became the second Head of the human race. By His obedience and death, He atoned for our disobedience – the disobedience of the race, and of Adam, its first head. Henceforth, grace will once more be communicated to us, and this communication is brought about by contact with Him, the Source and Fountainhead of this divine gift. 'I am come,' He says, 'that they may have life and may have it more abundantly.' He is the Vine and we the branches. Just as the sap flows from the vine into the branch and makes it a living thing, so grace flows from Christ into us and communicates a real share in His divine life.

Your second birthday, therefore, was the moment when contact was established between Him and you. This contact was made at your Baptism. Our Lord assures you, as He assured Nicodemus, that you are 'born again.' 'God so loved the world as to give His only-begotten Son.' Through the Son, equal in all things to His heavenly Father, grace has been brought back again into the world. In Baptism He shares it with us.

We are now no longer mere creatures of God. We have received a completely new status. We live on a new level. We share in the life of God, our Father and His Father, and, as such, we are, in a most true and real sense, sons and daughters of God.

As sons and daughters we have a new heritage; we are destined to enter with Christ, our Elder Brother, into the Kingdom. This is assured to us, on the one condition that our soul is still living with the life of grace at the moment we leave this world. We pass naturally from grace to glory. Glory is simply the development of grace, as the flower is the development of the seed, as the blazing noon-day sun is the development of the first streaks of light in the eastern sky.

The Second Birthday.

Baptism is thus epoch-making in the history of a soul. You are launched on an era of a new life elevated as much, and far, far more, above the natural life given you by your parents, as an animal would be if he received the gift of intelligent speech. Through grace, you acquire the power to be able to gaze on the infinite Beauty of God, and to endure such splendour without being overcome by the sight. 'No man shall see God and live.' You can look and see and drink deep draughts into your thirsting soul, and do all this throughout eternity, because you are not a mere man. You have been 'divinised' by grace on the glorious occasion of your second birthday.

It is a pity not to reflect much more on these marvels. It is our firm conviction that if they became in your way of life the realities they ought to be, you would turn away in disgust, and as it were instinctively, from the cheap and the shoddy upon which too many of us lavish affection and attention. Incidentally, I am trying to show you what a magnificent thing it is to be a Catholic. You surely see that it is immeasurably more than giving a mere subservient obedience to a code of regulations.

Of course, this new life can be lost. This misfortune is brought about by mortal sin, by a disobedience to God in a grave matter. When a person disobeys thus, what he says is, in so many words: 'I clearly recognise that I cannot hold, at one and the same time, God's gift of divine life and all the marvels that flow from it, and the pleasure I hope to get from sinning. All right. My mind is made up. Like Esau I'm quite willing to sell my birth-right for a mess of pottage. Who cares? Certainly not I!' Can't you see the black ingratitude of sin, the insolence, the madness, of strangling the true life of the soul, of thwarting God's plan, of perpetrating spiritual suicide? When sin is seen in its true colour, we can no longer wonder that it brings shame and misery to the sinner.

'Know and understand that it is an evil and a bitter thing for you to have left the Lord, your God.'  
(Jeremiah 2:19)

Suppose a corpse is washed up on the shore after a ship-wreck. It is a dead body. What can it do, of itself, to recover the life it has lost? Just nothing. If it is ever to live again, life must be restored by a miracle. God Himself must intervene. Now that corpse serves well to illustrate the condition of a soul in mortal sin. It is absolutely helpless. There is nothing whatever it can do, of itself, to get back the treasure it has so senselessly bartered away.

But surely, it can repent? Surely, we are always taught that God will forgive a truly repentant sinner and restore it fully to His love and grace?

Of course, this is correct. There is no sin, which God, in the excess of His love, is not prepared to forgive. It would be easy to run off a long list of names of saints who once were steeped in vice – Augustine, Margaret of Cortona, possibly Gabriel of the Seven Sorrows, and a host of others. But, be it well observed, all these repented only because God's grace gave them the first impulse towards repentance. He had to intervene, just as He would have to intervene to restore the life of that dead body. The sinner is helpless, entirely incapable of having even the desire to repent, unless God inspired that desire and continued to sustain the soul all along the rest of the route. 'Without Me, you can do nothing.' This sentence is true, in its most literal and absolute sense.

From this, it follows that a whole lifetime, an eternity, will not be long enough in which to realise the immensity of our indebtedness to Jesus Christ. Suppose your newly-born brother or sister, or when you are married yourself, your first-born child lies hovering between life and death. Suppose that through the skill of the doctor the little infant begins to respond favourably to treatment, improves steadily each day, and at the end of two months is pronounced completely out of danger. Suppose, further, that the child had actually died, and that to some saintly person God granted the power to restore its life. The event is hailed as a miracle, and you vow that to your dying day you will never forget your debt of gratitude.

And yet this occurrence, even a miraculous cure, is almost negligible compared with the work done by Jesus Christ in a soul dead in sin.

Only a divine Physician could do it, and He has gladly put at the disposal of His patient all the accumulation of His graces, to awaken, at one time sorrow, at another shame, at another remorse, at another fear, at another love. And, having once aroused his dormant conscience, the Physician sustains and encourages the patient during the difficult operation that may have to be performed. He assures him or her of its success, and His assurance cannot fail.

What degree of divine life is restored when the sinner repents? How much grace is given to him? Does he have to begin all over again, as on the day he was baptised, and develop gradually and painfully from spiritual infancy? No. The life of grace in his soul recommences from that point to which it had arrived before his mortal sin. Till that sin he was like a man with a valuable cargo on board, heading directly for the harbour and home. With that mortal sin, everything was lost. It was just as if the boat had capsized and all that precious treasure buried in the depths of the sea.

But when he sincerely repents? What then happens may be compared with what would happen if, after the shipwreck, somebody managed to dive to the depths and recover all that had been lost and place it once more, securely, on board. Indeed, many theologians consider that when a sinner truly repents, he receives back even more grace than he had before his sin. The act of sorrow, they think, and the humility of his confession, merit for him more than he had when he sinned.

Birthday Ahead.

In the movies, death is curtains. It is regarded as the end of all that is worth living for. It is met by the friends of the deceased in a stony silence or with wild and extravagant indications of uncontrolled grief. I recall, off-hand, two deaths in 'Gone with the Wind.' In both, there was mute agony. Those bereaved clearly considered death as a cruel unmitigated misfortune. Not a

suggestion, even from those who were supposed to be devout Catholics, that it might be a blessing, that they should kneel and commend to God the soul of the person they loved.

All such reactions were ruled out and death was faced with grim despair, a misfortune, which could not be escaped. It had caught up with its victim and strangled him mercilessly.

The 'Martyrology' is a bulky volume containing brief official accounts of the principal saints commemorated each day in the Church. Very often, it describes the day of the saint's death as his or her 'birthday!' How reasonable this is, and how beautiful, when you sit back and begin to think about it. Turn to your missal and look at the Preface of the Mass for the Dead. There you find an attitude leagues removed from the despair and the horror and the terror so common in Hollywood.

Maybe you have not your missal near you just now, or perhaps you might not remember to look up the passage, so please allow me to set it down here: 'In Him [Christ Our Lord] there has dawned for us the hope of a blessed resurrection, and those of us who feel saddened by the fact that death is certain are heartened too, by the promise of an immortality to come. The life of those who remain faithful to You, Lord, is only changed by death, not finished; and when their earthly dwelling-place falls apart, an everlasting mansion stands ready waiting for them in heaven.' {Another translation puts it this way: "In him the hope of blessed resurrection has dawned, that those saddened by the certainty of dying, might be consoled by the promise of immortality to come. Indeed for your faithful, Lord, life is changed not ended, and, when this earthly dwelling turns to dust, an eternal dwelling is made ready for them in heaven."}

For far too many, death is a sort of ghost that is all the time pursuing us from behind. We spend our days staring straight ahead and doing our best to forget that he is there. But suppose death is not the end but the beginning? Suppose it is the entry into your birthday, the third and the last and the most wonderful of all the three? Suppose you have long habituated yourself to the thought of death, that you have come to think of it as simply the gate through which you must pass on your way home?

This present life is then clearly recognised for what exactly it is – a mere waiting-room where you spend a short while, every moment expecting the door to open and summon you into the Presence. It is like a railway-platform where you stand for a brief period, till the train pulls into the station. When it appears, you can scarcely have the patience needed in getting aboard. You step on delightedly because you well know that the next station is going to be Eternity and God and Home.

A nun once told me about her sister who had a lingering and very painful death. This poor woman lay completely helpless in bed for months, struck down with acute spinal trouble. Presently she developed a horrible ulcer. She went under a difficult operation after which she lived for some weeks, prostrate with weakness and pain. Death finally arrived to release her. She bore all this with a smile and solemnly assured her sympathising friends that it was not nearly as bad as they seemed to think.

Indeed, she added, with light shining in her eyes, she never in her life had experience of such deep happiness and unruffled peace of soul.

Here is a passage from the Life of Saint John of the Cross: 'Brother Albert of the Virgin, porter of the convent, was at the point of death. His countenance was aflame and it shone with a celestial light, which made it so marvellously beautiful that all were enraptured... Suddenly, he called out: "Ah, I have seen it. I have seen it," and immediately lowered his arms and crossed them over his breast. As he was about to close his eyes, our venerable Father John of the Cross hastened to ask

him this question: "Brother Albert, what have you just seen? Tell me." And he answered "Love," and remained in ecstasy till he died.'

For a soul like Saint Paul, enamoured of Jesus Christ and consumed with a longing to see Him and possess Him, this life is made endurable by one consideration only. It holds the one and only chance we shall ever have of co-operating with Christ in the divine work of saving and sanctifying souls. Soon that one chance falls for ever out of our hands. While it lasts, it makes the exile from home more bearable.

Each new day brings the third birthday closer. Each night there is the eager expectancy that before another dawn the soul may find Him who is the soul's ceaseless quest. The ear is always alert listening for the first sound of His footstep. The heart thrills with joy as often as it recalls that, at any moment, He may be here!

Father Doherty.

Those of us who were privileged to be near to the late Father Doherty in his last illness will long remember his attitude of eager expectancy. The deep spirit of faith that characterised his whole life reached its climax as the end approached. To visit him and pray with him was a spiritual tonic, as helpful as a retreat. He was radiantly happy at the thought of 'the third birthday', which he knew was just around the corner. He assured us he would not change places with anyone in this world. Told about a doctor who had some remarkable successes with cancer patients, he commented, with a twinkle of the eye: 'Thank God, he didn't try his treatment on me!'

He was the edification of nurses and doctors, who declared he was dying like a saint. Nor did his sense of humour ever forsake him. When his aged mother dragged herself in to visit him, he twitted her: 'Mother dear, what are you fretting about? Sure you'll probably be on the next old bus yourself anyhow, and all I'm doing is going on ahead to hold the gate open for you!' Broken-hearted though she was at the prospect of losing him and still crushed with sorrow for the death of her husband only a month earlier, she smiled, and came away, like everyone else, filled with happiness and consolation.

The secret of a happy death is detachment. 'We have not here a lasting city but seek one that is to come.' The mind that habitually feeds on that truth is not afraid when the soul is called to enter into a new life. In Eternity, there is no past. In Eternity, there is no future. In Eternity, there is present only. The celebrations for the third birthday go on always and it is impossible that they ever should pall.

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