

ritual or a mere observance of rubrics. For the whole of the Church's worship is sacramental, grouped around the central mystery of the Eucharist: the Church who is herself a sacrament, the sacrament of Christ who is the Sacrament of God.



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IN a time as overshadowed as our own by the *angst* of the day and its despair, there has recently been published, among many inspiring Catholic works, one which in a sense is unique, an antidote, it might be termed a counterblast, to anguish. A Paris journal announces its sale up-to-date of sixty thousand copies.

By the late Auguste Valensin, S.J., famous abroad if scarcely known to the general public in this country, by no means the least of the facets of its unique quality is the fact that the book¹ consists of the personal meditations, without 'points' or formalities of any kind, *written* day by day, by someone of obvious holiness and culture, published since his death in 1953.

To those of us nurtured in any degree on the too-usual style of much of earlier French spiritual writing, this may be far from an alluring introduction. In reading *La Joie dans la Foi*, we should indeed find ourselves behind the times—Père Valensin writes what he feels, not what we might expect him to feel, still less what he might have believed us to expect. He is strictly orthodox (witness the double imprimatur given the book), but before the originality and gentle fearlessness of his mind the conventional, or the timid, might falter. To the author, life is far from 'a dream in the night, a fear among fears', but the meditations vary from day to day and have no specific bearing on the subject, it is in the warmth and confidence of the text that the help for the 'anguished' is found.

This childlike, though far from childish, attitude is the more remarkable as being that of a writer whom posterity, it was said,

¹ *La Joie dans la Foi*, par Auguste Valensin. (Aubier, Paris.)

would hail as one of the most eminent philosophical and religious thinkers of our time, 'a metaphysician as they are no longer made'. This view should be remembered as ill-health prevented Auguste Valensin from leaving any outstanding record of his thought. Two severe illnesses and an operation at the age of twenty-eight, followed by many years of incapacitating headaches, were said to have broken his career. He was, at any rate, unable to proceed with two planned monumental works. Yet the *dossier*, by others, of his work and personality is so large as almost to embarrass a chronicler.

Père Valensin is said to have produced little, his writings lacking any imposing length. But if not as important in volume as they would have been but for the Act of God, there are listed many shorter important works, besides countless articles—*A travers la Métaphysique, Essence de la théorie de la Science, Autour de ma Foi* and others. *François*, a best-seller abroad published in 1938, was the only one to reach England in any considerable measure, 'the documents of a short life which might have been that of a Saint or a genius, perhaps both . . . wrote André Thérive, a secular critic; 'he was dazzlingly gifted'. François certainly was, but the crowning gift of his eighteen years of life was obviously *le Père* (as his adherents always called him), who watched over, directed and above all restrained the boy too brilliant for a precarious health gaily and carelessly borne. Passionately in love with life but likewise with God—'Dieu! Dieu!' François wrote in a little note-book, *Ivresse de Dieu*—Père Valensin must have loved him, if not recognized in him a kindred soul; he alludes often to François in *La Joie*; charming as was the boy, he was no weakling. 'Of what pagan passions', *le Père* wrote (in *François*), 'of what violent loves would have been capable later on this boy for whom all visions of beauty were a searing' (*une brûlure*).

If the theme, so to call it, of *La Joie dans la Foi*, is the overwhelming and, to us, the inexplicable love of God for ourselves, it is, of course, far from exclusive to Père Valensin; very many spiritual writers stress it. We may take perhaps, however, as the lining, as it were, of his brilliant and subtle mind, words in a meditation on death read publicly over his tomb at his burial. 'I go to meet God (*à la rencontre de Dieu*), to meet my Father, to meet Kindness, Tenderness itself.' He had hoped that this would be his thought at the last.

What differentiates the theme from others is its personal, intimate application to the writer—but one in which we can share—writing for himself alone, and the fact that he half seems to stress this ‘tenderness’ of God *almost to the exclusion of justice*. That he does not in sober reality do so is obvious.

A robust commonsense in the author dominates an evident extreme sensibility so that *The Thing as it is* is likewise his theme. There may be here and there in the text a French-ness of expression alien to us, but not a false note or a conventionality. ‘Father’, the book opens, ‘I take refuge with you, in the hollow of your tenderness. . . . If I were in a state of sin, I should only have to say “Forgive me”. If I am merely tepid and without real lovableness, with the dust of venial sin stuck to my skin, then still I must believe that Love looks upon me—as his mother a mischievous child, his face still covered with stolen jam.’ No high-flown false sentiment here or elsewhere in *La Joie*. ‘When one thinks of it’ (the love of God), ‘the infinite Being, infinitely powerful . . . has for me, for me individually, who write at this moment, the feelings of a Father who is a mother, he loves me as my mother did *and even more still*. It is mad!’ Not because the writer felt unworthy, he was loved simply because the creature of God who is Love. ‘God loves the poor weak man but one who’, he hastens to add, ‘does not accept the state of mortal sin. As for the real sinner, as long as he is not fixed for ever in hatred in death. . . . The vilest soul may turn to the Father *et son regard rencontrera celui de Dieu*.’ The writer’s best-loved Gospel story is most obviously that of the Prodigal Son—the aged father mounting to a high tower to spy out the erring son’s return.

Le Père had likewise what to many of our generation is a longed-for belief in the ordinary-ness, if one may dare so to call it, of Heaven—that is, a continuation there of our human relations. To our Lady he writes: ‘You are for all eternity the Mother of Jesus and that itself for me is a guarantee that eternity does not change our intercourse born in time. There is no reason’ (the Saints) ‘should be less interested in the salvation of the world, of that humanity *to which they still belong*.’ (Not italicized in the text.) . . . ‘But there are also the saints unknown to the world, known and well-known to us, Magali’ (a young girl he had converted and helped to die), ‘François, our mothers . . . Magali, François, you whom I helped, help me now; the rôles are reversed.’

To readers of *François, La Joie dans la Foi* when it appeared was something of an event, it did not disappoint. The death of its author was, in his native Midi, also an event, and almost a tragic one, so great was his influence, his 'radiation' in intellectual and other circles and among friends so varied and of such differing religious beliefs. Such were Valéry, Gide, Bergson, Roger Martin-Du Gard, famous author of *Les Thibauds* and 'reluctantly' an atheist; André Billy, the Goncourt Academician who, in the public *Hommage au Père Valensin* at Nice, wondered what would have happened had he been one of le Père's pupils, for if ever he were converted it would have been due to le Père; Emile Henriot, the academician, who on the same occasion proclaimed the extraordinary charm and 'the marvellous confidence emanating at one and the same time from his intelligence and his kindness. I never met a man of sacred learning so discreet and so respectful of the opinions of others. . . . It seems to me this valiant priest asked only that minds should be honest and that, on this condition, he held them to be almost saved.' It would be tedious to quote more from the speakers except, perhaps, the Mayor of Nice who gave the whole outer man in a phrase: listening to the debate with his 'courteous but "closed" expression as if miles away when anything poor or common-place was advanced and, on the contrary, with that glance, lively, curious and almost amused that he had when anything interested him . . .'

If the lecturer inspired such affection, he responded too and without apparent effort, which was remarkable as that glance 'lively, curious and almost amused' was not absent from his judgment of people. How sarcastic he might have been but for charity one may wonder—he was not meek; it once took him an hour with his crucifix for him to forgive someone he calls X! He was *un homme du Midi* with all its warmth without the undue exuberance, scorned, and perhaps envied, of the colder North. Most writers in France feel an irresistible urge for living in Paris; le Père never did. He got on quite well, said a wag, without having been born on the boulevards; he had, as a matter of fact, never even been there! Quite recently, however, to the surprise even of his friends, his name as subject of a lecture sufficed to fill a hall in the City of Light.

The son of a distinguished journalist, Auguste Valensin was born at Marseilles in 1879. As a little boy he seems to have been

pious, judging by brief allusions in *La Joie*. At the age of twenty he entered the novitiate at Aix-en-Provence where there had preceded him a brother, Abert, to whose sanctity he often refers and 'wished he lived nearer'. After Aix, his life followed a perhaps unusual course in his Order in moving from country to country—philosophy in Jersey where he 'dazzled masters and pupils', then Ore Place at Hastings with the Jesuits exiled under the foolish and vicious Combes laws of the turn of the century. Then Monaco; a year in the shadow of the palace of the Popes at Avignon; Louvain; Valkenburg in Holland and, from 1920, for fifteen years he taught philosophy in Lyons.

Yearly sojourns in Italy must have fostered his love of Dante and of the *Divine Comedy*, on which work he became a recognized expert. He did not live to produce his great tome on the subject, but his *Christianity of Dante* has appeared since his death, and other of his work is promised for the near future.

It was at Nice that he became famous as a lecturer or giver of conferences; he is said to have been incomparable, his name alone, as lately in Paris, filling halls, his subjects by no means of the over-popular class. His way of conveying his thought, however subtle, was such that *anyone*, it was said, however 'limited', could understand it and was only equalled, he writes, by his own difficulty in receiving information! 'I am an intelligent man and an imbecile, the imbecile predominating. This is my strength and my weakness. My strength when I explain difficult matters to others', his weakness to grasp *à demi-mot*, to understand an expression that did not exactly render a thought; such was his 'imbecility', he demanded, in fact, of others the clarity he himself possessed. He strongly disapproved what his friend Valéry called 'irresponsible inspiration'; too-voluble poets he termed 'typists of the Muse'.

This writer of soft-flowing words in *La Joie* shirks nothing, faces up to facts, his commonsense prevailing. If he feels tepid or cold, he says so—it is not the coldness that matters but the *desire* not to be cold: 'I know that dryness, that emptiness of feeling and even disgust. . . .' Elsewhere he writes on a day: 'Dryness and emptiness. I have opened the Gospel, tried my book of prayers, tried to get hold of (*accrocher*) a meditation. Nothing.' A verse of a French hymn he tries makes him see red so to speak, 'Literature! Falsity! How can one find taste or help

in a mis-statement?' But 'no coldness', he says, 'touches our dealings with God'; the essential matter is the will.

The reader may certainly deduce from *La Joie* that, however respectful of the views of others le Père might be, he certainly respected his own and was quite firm in applying them. 'One can always be disgusted with oneself enough to examine oneself closely. Is it from an unconscious fear that I always avoid this? On the whole I gain something from being, on the whole, certain of my poverty and not being overcome by it. Everything that lowers is bad. I must keep and develop my own spirituality, it is what is best for me, it is not for me to suggest it to others as the best, others ask more of themselves, have a more delicate conscience. . . . I don't look so closely into things, I don't know the terrors of conscience. . . . So long as I do not lose that faith I have in the maternal care and the maternal—blind—affection of my Father, all will go well. And this faith I shall not ever lose, for I pray every day not to lose it.' Needless perhaps to repeat that his trust in his Father did not lessen his fear of sin or his watch for faults in himself—his examination of conscience was gone through twice a day.

Père Valensin seldom alludes to personal suffering; he states once, however, that he will never 'be the thing of suffering', drawing from it, on the contrary, what will enlarge him. Mademoiselle Rougier, a professor at the Lycée at Nice, who for thirty years acted as his amanuensis, enlightens us in the matter in private correspondence: 'He knew the lowest depths of suffering, and he lived with the day-to-day thought of death, for he was always in bad health.' Again, she who probably knew him as well as anyone, adds: 'I never met a like "compassion" . . . The man was a limitless kindness, warm, always ready' (for others) 'and who "shared" all their sufferings. Of an extreme delicacy of feeling. *Très grand seigneur. Mais d'une simplicité exquisite.* Above all a Father.' M. Emile Henriot gives a snapshot that reproduces the outer man 'in the memory I keep' of le Père in the last year of his life, aged seventy-four. 'Some of us were to lunch with a friend. I was on the pavement. Le Père on a motor-bike came flying along, soutane in the wind, stopped, as it were landed beside me. Setting foot to the ground, hands out, his look alive, warm, gay. "Eh bien", he said. "What news? What's being said? What have you read?" It should have been we to question him

... but no, it was always others that he waited for, that he hoped in, and I believe that *that* is love.'

If he lived with the thought of death, it was a joyous thought, and when death came it was triumphant. Suddenly ill, he was moved to the Augustinian nuns' clinic and there, to his amazement, was tended, he said, like a prince, nor could he get over his Superior's attentions, once looking in at one o'clock in the morning. The telephone from all over France rang all day, anxious enquirers wore out the doorstep, the Archbishop in person brought his blessing. A watcher kept an hour-by-hour record; le Père's patience and gratitude for any care, his indomitable spirit. 'Quick, quick', he reminded Mlle Rougier when once she came to his bedside, 'the proofs of Père Albert must be done in twenty-four hours', as well, it must be added, as an incredible amount of work! 'Go back to the Lycée', he commanded her another time; no slackness on his account, dying or not. He prayed, of course, incessantly and 'Oh! you have spoilt my death, I was so ready', he told one of the doctors who said he was a little better.

'God granted Père Valensin to die as he had hoped and asked for', wrote the daily watcher. 'Oh! no, please! Let in the light, let in the sun!' Père Valensin said when a nurse would have closed the shutters against the morning. 'It is a joyous annunciation, that of death'; that of the meeting with his Father of which he had written, with that of the kindness and tenderness of God. 'His death', wrote the witness of his last days, 'is the most luminous and priestly lesson of his shining career.'



THE HOMILIES OF ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM ON THE PASSION: I¹

AND it came to pass, when Jesus had ended all these words, he said to his disciples: You know that after two days shall be the pasch, and the Son of man shall be delivered up to be crucified.² This was a good opportunity for him to speak of the Passion. He had been reminding them of the Kingdom and its reward, and of

¹ Homily 79 on St Matthew's Gospel.

² Matt. 26, 1-2.