

gladly bear, as Christ did, a redeeming cross'.² Order and peace rest not with governments, democracies, dictatorships, right or left movements, but to the degree in which we have come to understand love: Love therefore is the fulfilling of the law.

REMEDIES FOR SIN

BY

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ACHARIAS, in the most 'Christian' passage of his prophecy, describing the Orient who is to come to cleanse sins, says, 'Behold the stone that I have laid before Jesus¹: upon one stone there are seven eyes: behold I will grave the graving thereof, saith the Lord of hosts; and I will take away the iniquity of that land in one day'. (3, 9). The prophet is describing the rock of Christ and his saving graces, and he puts before us the principal Remedy for sin in a way which we may find echoed in the *Ancren Riwele*. After analysing the deadly sins and having realised their proximity to the very core of our being, we may be easily carried away into a negative war against vice, wholly human in its inspiration and, in consequence, Stoic in its effects. We must strive to overcome the evil tendencies of nature, certainly, and we must use to intensity the ascetic practices of mortification, specially designed for the overcoming of the flesh. These are particularly to be looked for in the first way of purgation, which is *par excellence* the ascetic way. But such activities are primarily penalties for past sins, and as such are medicine rather than the health which the medicine is supposed to produce. St Thomas in a beautiful chapter of the *Contra Gentiles* (4, 158) begins by showing how necessary penalty, pains and suffering are for the overcoming of sin, but concludes by showing how all the need for penalties can be swept away by the positive love of God. The vehemence of the love of God can to a greater or less degree exclude the necessity for satisfaction; and moreover he rounds this off with the truth that since the love of friendship binds men together in unity, one man can satisfy for another, which in fact explains the power of Christ's satisfaction.

Evidently towards the end of the purgative way this positive remedy for the lurking subtleties of sin should increasingly pre-dominate. And having traced these evils back to the source, namely

² *Eve and The Gryphon*, by Fr Gerald Vann, O.P.

¹ The high priest clothed in sordid garments in his vision.

man's sinful state arising from the wounds of original sin, logically we seek the first remedy in the One who conquered this sin. By the disobedience of one man sin entered the world, so by the obedience of one man grace comes to cleanse sin. So the stone of Zacharias is the means whereby iniquity is wiped away in one day and this stone has seven eyes. So John of the Cross described the need of mortification for overcoming the spiritual form of the seven deadly sins. But he pointed out that this is insufficient of itself to eradicate the vices. We need God himself to lead the soul away from sin, and this he in fact does at the end of the purgative way by leading it into the 'dark night of the senses'. The senses are denuded of all the covering consolation, meditation becomes impossible, darkness descends. But the darkness St John calls *contemplation*—the seven eyes of the gifts looking out from the stone and piercing into the core of the soul to the spots where the remains of the primary sin are still lurking.

The *Ancren Riwele* does not yet envisage the dark night of the senses but it does insist on the primacy of the Rock which is Christ as the first remedy, the Rock which is reached across the bridge of meditation. Notice the order in which the remedies are given here according to the rank of their importance:

medicines and remedies are, under God's grace, meditations, inward, incessant and anxious prayers, and strong faith, and reading, fasting and watching, and bodily labour and comfort from others . . . and all virtues are weapons in this fight, and singleness of love above all others. (p. 181).

The meditations begin with one's own sins and the pains of hell but end with God's goodness. And the author insists that these first meditations on evil in life should not make his anchoresses shy like the horse, which 'blancheth at a shadow upon the high bridge and falleth down into the water' (p. 182). These meditations on personal evils are only shadows; the realities are Christ himself and his precious Mother (compare pp. 70 and 182). He encourages a considerable use of very vivid images as the groundwork for this meditation. And so it is that during the greater part of this period the mind needs to be constantly nourished by the right sort of images obtained through a process which ranges from straightforward spiritual reading, particularly the reading of the Scriptures, to a well-planned discursive meditation. St Thomas shows how the soul reaches the one final act of contemplation through the many preparatory acts of which meditation is one of the primary (II-II, 180, 3); and there have been many varieties of method organizing these acts so that they may lead more quickly to the simple sight of truth which is contemplation. While the *Riwele* adopts no detailed rule of reading and meditation,

leaving the details to be worked out by the individual, it insists on the portrayal of fearful or loving pictures:

Think what thou wouldst do if thou sawest the devil of hell stand openly before thee and gape widely upon thee. . . .

As if thou sawest Jesu Christ and heard him ask thee what were dearest to thee after thy salvation. . . . (p. 182.)

These are typical of the type of meditation required to frighten away temptation and to place the soul in prayerful state.

Vices are therefore removed at this time principally by a regular practice of mental prayer in the form of discursive meditation built up on spiritual reading and designed eventually to gain control of the lower powers of the soul, in particular of the imagination. But it must be always understood that these pictures in the mind are only means which must eventually be discarded. One considers the presence of our Lord 'as if thou sawest'. It is possible to become attached to one's own mental pictures and confuse them with the reality of the presence itself. Our Lord *appears* in the imagination, gentle face, short beard, flowing robes and all, but he *resides* in the centre of the soul which alone can perceive the reality of his presence. So eventually the soul must be weaned from the sweetness and comfort of its thoughts by entering into the simpler way of the dark night of the senses, abandoning methods of discursive meditation and all those practices which were essential to the first stage of the spiritual life. But this appears later in the *Rivle* in part VII—'Of Love'.

The next remedy, closely bound to that of meditation on the positive reality of our Lord's life and presence, is that of the prayer of petition. This prayer of course plays its part in every approved form of meditation. Yet it is often despised even by those who set out to reach the heights of the life of grace, as being self-centred and expressive of personal needs instead of the selfless love and praise of God. Chesterton in his youth was inclined to despise this approach to God. At the age of twenty he wrote:

The mountains praise thee, O Lord!

But what if a mountain said,

'I praise thee;

But put a pine tree half way up on the left.

It would be much more effective, believe me'.

It is time that the religion of prayer gave
place to the religion of praise.²

The truth contained in this Godward attitude is outweighed by the lack of understanding of the nature of the prayer of petition. Our Lord's own prayer which begins, like all true liturgical prayer ever.

² Quoted in the *Biography* by Maisie Ward.

since, with the expression of praise, is couched entirely in petitions. And he himself has told us to ask: Ask and you shall receive.

The *Riuce* seeks its weapons against evil on this same level so that the second means follows the traditional reliance on petition:

Inward, unintermitted and fervent prayers soon obtain succour and help from our Lord against carnal temptations; and be they ever so rudely fervent, or so coarse, the devil of hell is much afraid of them (p. 183).

And as an example of the power of prayer the author gives the example of Puppius and what might be termed the devil of the flying-bomb—the holy man's prayers ascending towards heaven stopped the devil in mid air. The anchoress is advised to add tears to her prayers for tears goad and constrain the Lord into granting the required peace (pp. 184-5).

Now all this insistence on the prayer of petition is very salutary in making progress through these evils; for it is very easy to rely almost entirely on human powers and efforts in making progress and eradicating sin. There are so many vices to be uprooted and so many virtues to be acquired that the beginner sets about the task as he would on taking up new employment. He learns the rules and discovers the hours, the horary, and puts his mind on the work until he has mastered the technique and achieved success. But this is no human work, it is divine; and his reliance must be on the power of God rather than on his own ability to acquire virtue. He must learn to place all his trust and reliance in the merciful hand of God, which alone can stay the demons of pride and lust. He must turn to this stone with seven eyes. And petition produces in the soul the right disposition for receiving this divine assistance.

It may seem that by making frequent demands upon God's mercy and power a man is seeking to bend God's will to his own human purposes. But this is of course untrue. The two commonly accepted descriptions of prayer, as the raising of the mind and heart to God (the prayer of praise) and the seeking of good gifts from God (prayer of petition) are in fact reducible to the same. For in seeking these good gifts a man is not asking God to descend from heaven to act as some magical genie on earth; on the contrary he is exposing his own personal desires and wishes to the divine measure of God's holy, instantaneous and utterly changeless will. Once a man has opened his heart to God in this manner then any desires which are evil or which are not in accord with the divine desire become untenable. We do not go to a baker and ask for rat poison; to express to the baker the desire for poisoning rats would at once reveal the incongruity. To approach God the giver of all good gifts and demand some-

thing that is not in itself good for us would expose the incongruity and bring repentance of the desire. That is why we are constantly encouraged by our Lord to *ask*, to seek, to knock. In this way the right form of asking does not bring God's will down to human ends but it raises man's will to the divine level so that man's desires become more approximate to those of God—raising the mind and heart to God.

So perseverance in the prayer of beseeching cleanses the soul of evil tendencies and desires. But it does not do so through human power or merely through the persistency shown by the man himself. It is a cleansing which is worked by the divine power of grace. To express desires in this way is to open the heart to God's influence and direction, making it possible for him to work in the soul. Even to ask perseveringly for fine weather is to express the dependence of the child upon God his Father, a dependence which in every petition emphasises more forcibly the implied condition, 'Nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt'. To ask for grace to overcome evil tendencies and to grow in the virtues requires no condition, for such things are necessarily according to the divine will and should be asked for absolutely. I can ask for patience or for continence without fear of expressing only my own desires, and therefore I am disposing myself for these virtues, opening my will so that God can infuse them, because the frequent expression of a true desire will make that desire more fervent and the soul more ready to react to the breath of God upon it. And God himself is working in that very desire as St Thomas says: 'Although man cannot by himself know what he ought to pray for, the *Spirit* . . . *helpeth our infirmity*, since by inspiring us with holy desires, he makes us ask for what is right' (II-II, 83, 5 ad 1.)

The power of petition for the things which concern the spirit and with which we are here concerned, has our Lord's guarantee of effectiveness: 'You shall receive . . . it shall be opened unto you'. Asking for the virtues and graces, which are of themselves good for the soul, will infallibly obtain the virtues and graces as long as the asking is honest and persevering. For this reason prayer of petition remains one of the strongest of the guardians against the subtle lurkings of evil within the soul and the most important remedy for such diseases.

As Solomon saith, 'The humble man's prayers pierce through the clouds'. And to the same effect St Austin saith, 'O great is the effect of sincere and pure prayer, which flieth up and cometh into the presence of Almighty God, and doth the errand so well that God commandeth all that she saith to be written in the book

of life'. And St Bernard beareth witness and saith that our Lord retains her with himself, and sends down his angel to do all that she asketh (p. 185).

The Church prays frequently in the Divine Office 'That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ'. And this is surely one of the most encouraging promises: that our prayer will be heard and heard more effectively than the demands of children to their human fathers. We must therefore be frequently occupied in the prayer of petition during this period of purification. The consciousness of sin arising from an increased self-knowledge must be counteracted or balanced by an increasing sense of dependence upon God. If I frequently discover pride in my heart I must the more earnestly beseech God to give me his virtue of humility. For this reason the next remedy given by the *Rivle*, that of faith, is closely bound up with the childlike prayer of petition; this faith is the same as trust or hope which is so intimately connected with prayer. 'Be confident of God's assistance' (p. 187).

The *Rivle* has already briefly indicated the close connection between silence, hope and prayer (pp. 60-61) and here it in fact shows the application of the doctrine. For faith in all the dogmas of the Church inevitably leads to a greater trust in God who is thus revealed as being so powerful and so merciful as to be at once Trinity and Incarnate. The faith teaches that God 'So loved the world' as to bear all men's burdens and to organise a system of salvation which is a life rather than an organisation. True faith leads to true hope, and this second of the theological virtues obviously demands the greatest attention at this period. It is this virtue which is often so neglected and yet which at the time of struggle with evil and the acquiring of virtue should be constantly in operation. Moreover hope is one of the theological virtues which must characterise the contemplative life towards which the soul in the purgative way is moving to the best of its ability.

The soul must rest upon the divine mercy as it strives to overcome the evil within itself. Often the constant sight of failures, broken resolutions, emergence of unsuspected weakness and sins will make a man despondent almost to the extent of giving up the struggle. Despondency at the sight of one's own failure flows from a self-reliance which is not divine and does not rest on grace but merely on the weakly functioning human capacities. Such despondency is often necessary in order to overcome the pride which is deeply rooted in self-confidence; when a man has at last realised that he cannot do more than acquire a few spluttering and jerky virtues which will never carry him through a crisis, he is approaching the time when

he can turn only to God and place his trust in the only treasury where trust is honoured. Moreover the virtue of hope is concerned with God himself rather than with his gifts so that the newly springing virtue does not tarry over mere temporal trifles. By this virtue the man does not hope for the end of a war or the betterment of his financial position, he does not hope even for the lengthening of days or the removal of a disease, at least he can only hope supernaturally in such things in so far as they might lead him immediately to God. So his prayer of petition is purified of any tendency to selfishness as his trust in the merciful omnipotence of God increases. His prayer and his trust receive no special assurance as to his bank balance but they do receive a firm assurance of the increase of his other virtues; he can trust with unshakable confidence that God will make him patient and charitable because the mercy of God is inevitably moved by the tears of the petitioner to give these absolutely good treasures. It is clear, then, that this theological confidence grows with the prayer of beseeching and between them they cleanse the soul of its evils and bring it nearer to contemplation, nearer to the dark night of the senses, nearer to the stone upon which there are seven eyes.

These remedies for sin are summed up in the one unique Remedy, the Rock which is Christ himself, who takes away the sin of the world. Perhaps one of the greatest dangers of the purgative way is the neglect of our Lord, or to put it more accurately, the neglect of specifically *Christian* virtues. It is easy enough to see what virtues are required and to feel the need for great and continued efforts to rid one's self of sin. And then a man sets to work, as we have said, to acquire these virtues, to exercise himself in ascetic practices, to plunge into silence and perform acts of religion. But all these virtues and practices will be found set out by the best pagan philosophers: their value and necessity were recognised by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle and they were practised in large measure by the Stoics. A man who drinks little and smokes less may not be practising *Christian* temperance at all, but a purely natural virtue which he shares with all the good pagans around him. He may be temperate and patient, generous and sympathetic simply because it is his *nature* to be so—it is of his nature to act well even though his nature has been wounded by sin and does not easily act well. Natural virtues are attractive things, recognised as of great worth by the heathen as well as by the holy. The good pagans of all centuries sought them as the most worthy ornaments a man can wear, far more precious than a gold crown or platinum ring. And as the first period is so very much concerned with just these moral virtues, it

is possible for its spirituality to remain very natural and therefore pagan, ordered to the perfection of the man himself rather than to the love and glory of God. If it is true, as indeed it is, that the end specifies human action, then we must be careful to distinguish and co-ordinate the various ends which play their part in making the moral nature of such an action. The virtuous act of patience, a very meritorious human act, is immediately specified by the overcoming of the movements of displeasure. But this overcoming of displeasure, toleration of painful things is directed to further ends; it may be done either for the love of God in which case it is truly virtuous patience, or by the dictates of the desire for a quiet time where honesty is the best policy. Now the virtues which are directed through Christ to God will be specified by the person of Christ in some way, those that are directed to human policy will be only humanitarian and pagan. In other words in order to exercise *Christian* virtues we must look towards Christ. Without him these virtues will be no better than Stoic virtues lacking the divine power of the infused virtues.

For this reason the principal remedy for sin and the preoccupation of the anchoress's whole life of virtue must be Christ himself. The *Riicle* puts our Lord before us as the means of overcoming the capital vices one by one.

Who is there who thinks himself great and is proud, when he beholds how little the great Lord made himself within the womb of a poor virgin (p. 186).

And later the author gives us the charming description of the 'falling stratagem' by which our Lord overthrew the devil.

He fell from heaven to earth and stretched himself in such a manner on the earth that the fiend thought that he was all earthly (p. 210).

This is not merely humility, this is Christian humility, Christ's own humility.

Where there is humility there is Jesus Christ; that is his Father's wisdom and his Father's strength. Now it is no wonder that there is strength where he is, through indwelling grace (p. 210).

Envy is overcome by following Jesus through his suffering even till he descended to hell to share his good things with them that were there. Wrath disappears before the peace of Christ (pp. 186-7 and 192 etc.). Sloth cannot stand the sight of the life labours and death toil of Christ; and the Cross of Christ above all is the means of inspiring the Christian virtues opposed to these seven deadly vices.

The poverty of our Lord beginning with swaddling clothes and ending when

he was stripped stark naked upon the cross; when he complained of thirst he might not have water . . . and of all the broad earth he was not allowed a little dust on which to die . . . (pp. 193 sq), this is the remedy for covetousness. Indeed the *Rivle* becomes more and more saturated with the virtues of Christ as it continues. At first the Christian should follow these virtues as shown him in the Gospels, for our Lord is the perfect model. It is dangerous to copy the virtues of saints as displayed in their lives, but the one great example for all to follow is our Lord himself, and him we must follow if we are to be virtuous in his way—'Learn of me for I am meek and humble of heart'.

After a period in which the Christian tries to live as Christ would live and to act as he would act, the identification through grace increases so that Christ does not remain an external rule of behaviour but an interior principle of action. The virtues begin by being copies of Christ's virtues but they end by being Christ's virtues themselves. This is the personal implication of the doctrine of the mystical body brought out so clearly by St Paul. The Christian is called upon to fill up what is wanting in the passion of Christ, which means that he must offer and suffer in patience with our Lord's own act of generosity and of patience—there is one perfect oblation and one redemption in which all Christians must share. And then by degrees the Christian comes to say 'And I, no longer I but Christ liveth in me'. In this way all his virtues are supernatural and flow through the humanity of Christ, through his human life and activities, into the soul. *Per ipsum, cum ipso et in ipso*.

There is no space to insist further on this point. It should be obvious to anyone who takes the spiritual life seriously. But there is always the danger of trying to do too much on one's own without really opening the door to the entry of Christ. It is easy to insist on the acquired pagan virtues and to forget that these virtues must come from the one mediator, be directly under his inspiration. He alone is the remedy for vice and the inspirer of the good Christian life.

Name Jesus often, and invoke the aid of his passion, and implore him by his sufferings, and by his precious blood, and by his death on the cross. Fly into his wounds; creep into them with thy thought. They are all open. He loved us much who permitted such cavities to be made in him, that we might hide ourselves in them. And with his precious blood ensanguine thine heart. 'Go into the rock', saith the prophet, 'and hide thee in the pit which is dug in the earth', that is in the wounds of our Lord's flesh (p. 219).

If we have attended his court, tasted his glory in the morning, what an influence on our lives it *must* have. Why, if we are shaped by our companions that we live with, the books we read, shall not his daily presence affect us? So meditation is not an elaborate argument but just holding ourselves steady in front of a truth. God fills this tiny world from horizon to horizon, it is all steeped in God. To see this is our vocation in life and whatever we do is blessed and sacred. There was no one work more sacred than another in his life. His Father was always with him, on the lake, as he went through the cities, in the garden, 'I and the Father are one'.

Not only is the end wonderful but the road is wonderful, the way to God! We cannot be nearer to God than we are now, we shall *see* we are nearer, that is the only difference, not sight—*insight*—a very strong understanding of it by faith. The only real resolution that really alters our lives is a growing realisation of God's presence. It is quite impossible to come day by day into his presence without being affected. When Moses had spoken to God his face shone as the sun. We ought to give out radiance and light after speaking to God, we should if we realised God in that early morning talk. His glory blazed in the tabernacle of the old law. We have no vision of God but his human nature on the altar. Make a conscious act of his divine presence there. 'Though I go down to the valley of the shadow of death I will have no fear, for thou art with me.' We need make no resolution to love for this follows if we see him. To be with God is to have found Goodness—to be inspired. Make a keen act of faith, holding him in front of us, any mystery, parable, saint who attracts us, his blessed Mother, then by faith seeing him vividly, moving our hearts to make acts of love. Some person annoys me very much; well, may I find in his heart *God*—some tiresome letter to write, some work I dislike—why should I be afraid, 'I am the Master of the world'. See him, that is vision and what our eyes have seen survives longest in our memory, just to have seen him vividly acts most practically of all. Perfect wisdom to have found life—just at our door—in our heart. God is the locked strength of our soul.