

THE BEAUTY OF THY HOUSE

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THE Holy Family is our God-given model of domestic perfection, but because the gospel tells us so astonishingly little of the hidden years we have to build up our exemplar with the aid of thought and imagination. There is no dearth of devotional writing on the subject but we may find that, though suitable for pious reading or for abstract meditation, it does not lend itself to practical application. We are in danger of falling between two stools. If we are theologically minded we cannot forget that the Holy Family was unique: it has no counterpart in our own experience. We cannot conceive what life was like in a family in which one Person was divine, one sinless and one, to say the least, a very great saint. Our Lord in later life is still our exemplar, but the evangelists have described events and reported conversations so that we are in constant contact with him and can share his sentiments, joys and sorrows and derive spiritual nourishment from them. At Nazareth we are left to our own resources, or almost so, for scripture supplies none of those touches which bring things home to us, and though we can appreciate the devotional theology of, say, St Bernard's sermons they belong to a different and more rhetorical age than this. In *Neminem fugit* Pope Leo XIII gives a comprehensive survey of the Holy Family and what the life at Nazareth should teach us, but even this seems somewhat academic: it is excellent advice, but it does not warm the heart. It is not that these things leave us cold. We do indeed rejoice in the ineffable dignity of Mary, the Mother of her Creator, and in the incomprehensible love and intimacy between her and her Son; in the unparalleled privilege granted to St Joseph and, above all, in the wonderful condescension of God in assuming our human nature; but reflections of this type, appealing more to the head than to the heart, are apt to lead to theological speculation rather than to personal devotion. On the other hand, if we are temperamentally devotional we picture to ourselves the rapture we would experience in looking after the Child, watching his physical and mental development; we think of the delight of living with the Holy Family, that oasis

of peace in a turbulent world, listening to their conversation and finding ourselves (in imagination) led painlessly and effortlessly to sanctity. We make our resolutions to serve God in their company and under their guidance taking, perhaps, the virtues of charity and patience as our special intentions, and yet, after all, we feel these meditations are wishful thinking. We cannot, we feel, live up to their high standards for we are very ordinary mortals and life at Nazareth with its absence of friction is entirely outside our experience. We would find it easy to be perfect in such ideal surroundings, but it is a very different matter in our own homes. Our children, our wives, our husbands are not to be compared to Jesus, Mary and Joseph: ourselves least of all. There was, we feel, no need for our Lady to practise patience, for her Son was never disobedient; there was no need for St Joseph to practise longanimity towards Mary, for she was never unreasonable; nor had she any grounds for criticizing her spouse. And so we are apt to love and admire the Holy Family with a kind of notional assent but to think their circumstances were too ideal to have much bearing on our own lives. Our children, of course, should be encouraged to imitate the Boy Jesus, but for adults the Holy Family belongs to another world.

Apart from these temperamental deterrents an unrealistic mental picture of the home at Nazareth can equally well stand in the way of devotion. It is easier to read than to think, and easier to accept ready-made pictorial representations than to build them up in our own minds, and though the imagination is a good servant it is a remarkably bad master. We all know that angels are spiritual beings, but they are inseparably connected in our imaginations with wings, drapery and flowing hair. We cannot, without a mental effort, think of them as spirits. In much the same way we see the Holy Family through an imaginative haze of religious pictures; no doubt repository art is the worst offender, but the old masters are by no means guiltless. Only too often we are shown an impossibly palatial workshop, so bestrewn with lilies as to suggest a conservatory, in which St Joseph, with or without a lily in one hand, manipulates a plane or saw; our Lady, with or without another lily, sits watching him with fond admiration and the Boy Jesus stands nearby bearing (if this is not too offensive to pious ears) a strong facial resemblance to a son of the Fairchild family. All are impeccably clothed in soft

raiment, lavishly embellished with gold braid and all, unfortunately, wear expressions of extreme mawkishness. No one supposes that these are true likenesses of the Holy Family, but the whole décor influences our thoughts: it requires a deliberate effort to rid our minds of these imaginative pictures and to substitute others of a truthful and realistic type. Again, the palatial workshop, the lilies, the soft raiment, the mawkish expressions inevitably suggest sentimentality, a softness of character alien to all that scripture tells us of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, and this, in turn, can do much harm by correlating emotionalism with true piety, sanctimoniousness with perfection. Here again we must be on our guard against false notions. We are apt to think that spiritual perfection lies in completion; we have mastered our passions and have no inclination to do wrong, we are at peace with God, the world and ourselves and can bask undisturbed. It is difficult to understand how this misconception arose and why it is so generally accepted. Accepted it undoubtedly is and may well be at the root of much spiritual discouragement. Even as a picture of heavenly bliss it is impossibly static, and heavenly bliss belongs to eternity not to this life. Our Lord bade us be perfect even as our Father in heaven is perfect, a seemingly unachievable counsel of perfection, but we are to be (or to try to be) perfect human beings, not infinitely perfect. Our Lord, true God and true Man, was both and it is he who warns us that when we have done all things that are commanded (and so, surely, we have attained perfection?) we are still to regard ourselves as unprofitable servants. There can be no resting on our laurels. Our maxim must always be 'nunc coepi'—'now I have begun'. But it is necessary to steep ourselves in the whole gospel, not merely in selected passages, to understand what constituted perfection in the perfect Man. The passages we prefer to select are, on the whole, those which show our Lord as kind and gentle. Kind and gentle he undoubtedly was, and always so to people of good will, but in order to obtain a balanced view we have also to include his hatred of hypocrisy and injustice, his scathing denunciation of evil doers. It is true that 'man seeth that which appears but God beholdeth the heart' and that we, unlike our Lord, have to judge by appearances only. Nevertheless, there are sins and injustices which should call up our righteous wrath, sins and injustices which it would be a sin to condone, and anger of

this type is a concomitant of perfection. There was nothing new in our Lord's hatred of sin. God's detestation of evil was the constant teaching of the Old Testament, and St Joseph, being a just man and well versed in scripture, must have had very high standards of moral goodness. From his earliest days Jesus must have been accustomed to hear his foster-father denouncing the evils of the times and consoling himself and his family with the tenderer passages of the Old Testament. Our Lady also was a true daughter of Israel, reared on the commandments and exhortations and promises of scripture, and the fact that she suffered none of the disorder occasioned by original sin made her perceptions of good and evil incomparably keener and deeper than ours. We must not overlook the fact that perfection in her could not have been different from perfection in her Son. It is seldom that we see a picture of our Lady that expresses character and suggests these things to us, but it requires very little reflection to convince us that she too could be stern and outspoken when occasion arose and that to be full of grace connotes an exceptionally strong personality. She had her full complement of human faculties and if we are to see her aright it must be in the light of our Lord's humanity, not through the eyes of imaginative writers and painters. Our Lord was tired and hungry; so was she. Our Lord was keenly sensitive to ingratitude and discourtesy; so was she. Our Lord had his special friends; so had she. We do not commonly think of these matters in connection with our Lady, yet she was a real woman and we do her a dis-service in overlooking the fact. She is the glory of our race, but nevertheless one of us, neither immune to the petty vexations of life (though she rose above them) nor too spiritually minded to enjoy its God-given pleasures—the marriage feast at Cana proves that. We must remember that the Tower of Ivory was also the busy housewife and the Mystical Rose an indefatigable walker. Lovely as these apostrophes may be, we must not allow them to obscure her very real and perfect human nature. The gospel, read meditatively, gives us a clear-cut knowledge of her character and possibly the best lesson we can learn of her in these restless days is that of tranquillity—'her ways are beautiful ways and all her paths are peaceable'. Devotional writers have loved to portray the glories of Mary, but it is in scripture that we find her true greatness and can divine the Mother under whose tuition Jesus grew up.

All that we actually know of his childhood is contained in the gospel narrative and between the presentation in the temple and the visit to Jerusalem twelve years later we are merely told that 'the child grew and waxed strong, full of wisdom; and the grace of God was in him'. And then the remaining eighteen years of the hidden life are summed up in one short passage: 'And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was subject to them. And his mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus advanced in age and wisdom and grace with God and men.' In spite of these meagre details, God has given us the Holy Family as the ideal we must strive to live up to and, shorn of its imaginative, misleading features, it can and should be our inspiration throughout life. There is no need to take the family unit too literally. We are all children of God and all form one family, and though our individual contacts are limited our pattern of conduct is the same whether practised in domestic, monastic or any other circle. But the ideas derived from misleading pictures and notions fog the issue. We are conditioned to think of the Holy Family as leading a life of unadulterated bliss with nothing to ruffle the even tenor of their ways; and their conversation was entirely spiritual. Yet to all outward appearance it was a perfectly normal human family; the breadwinner, the housewife and the child: in all essentials the type of life we live ourselves. St Joseph we may be sure had to deal with finnickily and unreasonable customers and dilatory if not dishonest creditors; our Lady, washing linen or drawing water from the well with the other women, no doubt suffered from malicious tongues and ungenial conversation; we know the Holy Family was poor, and poverty always spells worry and hardship. Injustice abounded in those days as in ours and must have filled the hearts of Jesus, Mary and Joseph with sorrow and righteous anger; nor can they have been blind to the materialism around them. Doubtless they were saddened from time to time by the misfortunes, illnesses and deaths of those dear to them, yet all this appertained to perfection. God has given us as exemplar a family in which joy and sorrow, work and fatigue loom as large as they do with us and it is only by taking these facts into account that we can form any concept of wherein their perfection lay. Our Lord was called the Man of sorrows, our Lady's trials were superhumanly severe, St Joseph too had his heavy burdens to bear, and can we expect to be treated

differently from them? The trouble is, we do not see perfection in its proper context. What God wants of us, what he sees as perfection in us, is consistent, arduous, energetic perseverance in his service. Among themselves Jesus, Mary and Joseph lived in perfect harmony, but we must see the Holy Family as it really was, not set apart from the world but forming part of the population of Nazareth with relatives and neighbours, friends and enemies, social and civic responsibilities, births, marriages and deaths all making their respective demands on the privacy of home life. It can have been no easier for them than for us to forgo a quiet evening by the fire to entertain an unwanted caller and even our Lady (who was by no means devoid of emotions) must have felt that this idle talk was a poor substitute for the conversation of her Son. St Joseph, too, tired after a day's carpentry, must have sighed regretfully when some self-opinionated or garrulous neighbour dropped in for a chat; and Jesus, who (considering the long journeys of his public ministry and his love of climbing mountains) was a strong and active child, must have known a boy's disappointment when rain prevented some planned excursion with his friends. All our ideas of soft living, sentimental kindness and undisturbed leisure are out of place in considering the Holy Family; everything scripture tells us of them points to strong, valiant people steadfastly working out their destinies in everyday affairs, accepting all things as from the hand of God and finding their true peace and happiness in doing his will. It is along these lines that we must work out our own salvation. The Holy Family is a universal exemplar, but we must adopt those features most suited to our personal circumstances, not try slavishly to imitate their life in those aspects which differ from ours. We must be practical. Star differeth from star in glory and in God's eyes there are many degrees and types of human perfection. We are bidden so to let our light shine before men that they may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven. God does not say 'intellect' or 'importance', but 'good works' and they are entirely the fruit of grace. We must be supernaturalized before we can profitably influence others. There is an urge in our nature to show off, to exaggerate our importance; it takes many forms but one of the commonest is that of busy-ness. We feel we are doing nothing for God unless we scurry here and there, have many irons in the fire, sit on committees and join

sodalities and (perhaps) multiply our devotional practices. He has given us the answer to that in the hidden life at Nazareth, in the obscurity of the daily round and common task, and we find him in our own homes as surely as there. As St John of the Cross says, 'More does God desire of thee the least degree of submission and obedience than all those services thou thinkest to render him'. The Holy Family is our model in this and the particular perfection of those hidden years—so similar in essentials to our own lives—lay precisely in that obedience and submission inculcated by St John. The Church, who is well aware of her children's needs and weaknesses, gives point to this by choosing a lesson on submission and obedience as the epistle for the feast of the Holy Family. It is the passage in which St Paul exhorts us to show compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience towards others; we must bear with one another's faults and show a spirit of forgiveness when people give us grounds for complaint (there is no sentimental pretence that we or others are faultless). Our Lord's generosity must be the measure of our own and charity must inform all we do, for that alone unites us with God and therefore with our fellows. We must also cultivate a habit of gratitude and do our best to encourage others in their service of God. This, we feel, should be within the reach of everyone; they are small things to ask and our whole lives are full of opportunities for putting them into practice. We see quite plainly that they must have been the very woof and warp for Jesus, Mary and Joseph, too, little domestic virtues which nevertheless make for perfection in God's eyes and which, if persevered in, will entitle us to become members of God's holy family for all eternity.