

wins great peace. The master of himself, the ruler of circumstances, the friend of Christ, and the possessor of immortality—such is that one who endures suffering patiently.

### BOOK 3—CHAPTER 24

Beware of curiosity, and keep free from trivial extraneous affairs. What are such things to you? The one, the great concern of your life must be to follow me. *You* are not responsible for this man's character, or the words and actions of that one. *You* will not be asked to reply for others, but a strict account of your own life will be demanded. Why then become entangled and hindered by such matters. Every creature and everything in the great universe<sup>1</sup> is comprehended by me. Every man is an open book to me:<sup>2</sup> I know him intimately, his thoughts, his wishes, his ambitions. Then entrust yourself entirely to my care, and let the faithless be as worried as they please. Do what they will, they cannot escape the results of their words and actions—it is impossible to evade me.

Never struggle to mix with the influential or wealthy, or take pride in the wide circle of your friends, no, not even in one chosen friend. For all such things fill the heart and mind and shut out my light and influence. If only you were fitly prepared and ready at any moment to experience my Presence, how willingly would I enlighten you and show you my deep mysteries.

Be on your guard. On no account neglect prayer, and in all your doings remember that great preservative—humility.

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## THE TRUE BASIS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

### DISCUSSION

THE exigencies of the Press prevent the collation of the various reactions to Père Nicholas's article, as we must go to press before readers have seen the second part of the article. But the discussion is already opened on a fundamental level by the following letter. Some will have thought that the original article went too far. Fr James thinks that it has not gone far enough. He may be thought to have stated the case in its extreme form; and those who disagree will be given an opportunity of replying in a subsequent issue of LIFE OF THE SPIRIT—*Editor*.

To the Editor, LIFE OF THE SPIRIT:

Dear Sir,

The article by Fr Nicholas in the LIFE OF THE SPIRIT raises so much that has been for so long of absorbing interest to me, that I cannot refrain from writing to you about it. You must pardon what may seem insolence on the part of a typical secular priest in

<sup>1</sup> 'quæ sub sole fiunt.

<sup>2</sup> 'scio qualiter cum unoquoque sit.'

writing about the Religious Life, but sometimes the outsider sees most of the game. I must begin by limiting my objective. All my studies and experience have been concerned with the monastic life; but, I believe, nevertheless, that what I have to say may apply with perhaps even greater force to Canons, Friars, and Clerks Regular.

It is my firm opinion that the troubles which beset modern religious spring from the new spirit that was born with the counter-reformation, informed by the humanism of the 16th century, and mummified by the disciplinary measures of Trent. This may seem a truism; but I am certain that it is not fully realised how deep is the cleavage between the spirit of pre- and post-tridentine Christianity. There have been many saints since Trent and the Counter-Reformation, and there were not a few at that period, but this I believe to have been in spite of the spirit of that time and not because of it. The study of the lives and writings of all the great saints since then shows an interesting development, quite unconscious I think, back to the pre-tridentine objectivity. Let me define what I mean by saying that I think that with the 16th century the emphasis in the spiritual life was from the object to the subject, from God to perfection. An example may make what I mean more clear. Compare the opening chapter of St Augustine's Confessions with the first chapters of St Teresa's Autobiography and you will see what I mean: St Augustine begins by singing the praises of God and St Teresa by bewailing her sins. Cassian, it is true, advises the novice to begin by fixing his intention on purity of heart like the marksman on his target, but purity of heart was, for Cassian, the pure love of God, not a way of behaving, nor yet a matter of 'acts'. The modern spiritual writer would advise us to keep our eyes fixed on our arrow or bullet or the sights of our gun. Fr Nicholas, in his article, and true to the post-tridentine spirit, speaks of the Religious Life as 'a school of perfection' (p. 13); St Benedict, on the other hand, speaks of it as 'a school of the service of God' . . . *Constituenda est ergo nobis dominici schola servitii*. Fr Nicholas speaks of the desire for perfection that animates novices and then wonders why they go, as if the desire of anything less than God could keep a novice in religion. St Benedict, on the other hand, bids the abbot test the novice to see if he is really seeking God. A different matter. The word 'perfection' in, more or less, the modern sense, is mentioned by St Benedict once when he mentions those *qui ad perfectionem conversationis festinant*. But it is not until the last chapter and does not effect my contention at all unless it be to strengthen it, for I would not suggest that Christians should not be as perfect as their Heavenly Father, but that it is the effect of seeking and finding him and not the other way round. Unfortunately I have not by me the *Consuetudines* of Guigo, but I have studied them carefully and I am sure the emphasis is the same. I should love to

continue with a thousand comparisons between patristic and post-tridentine spiritual writers, but I must bring this letter to an end, if for no other reason than that you would never read it were I to make it as long as I could. Let me then end this part of my letter by saying that *perfection is attained not by aiming at it directly and so, in a measure, seeking self; but by aiming at and seeking God.*

Now what are the results of this false emphasis that arose in the 16th century from, I am convinced, the humanistic spirit born at that time, which made man and not God the measure? The results are deplorable: they are narrowness, pettiness, nervous storms, nervous break-downs, and sad reactions, not to mention the rather horrid self-consciousness of so much modern piety. And so it must often happen that all but the toughest novices, even though they are generous and willing, do break down in the noviciate, and the break-down is nervous, because the quest for perfection has put a wrong, and utterly false emphasis on to their actions and introduced dangerous dichotomy into their lives. Were I a novice master, I would eliminate the word 'perfection' and give my novices the *Moralia* of St Gregory, the *Conferences* of Cassian, and other works of the Fathers to read. Very verbose, very irritating, they often are, but sound meat among the verbiage. Believe me it is *not* the austere institutions of your Fathers and Founders on which the spirit of your novices break, but on the constitutions of well meaning post-tridentine legislators. For every novice who goes because of long fasts and long silences, twenty go because they are made to seek a narrow idea of perfection. Fr Nicholas speaks as if to change this would be to deprive religious life of the Cross—nonsense of course. St Benedict and St Bruno, at any rate, were not occupied in devising crosses for their sons, but a way, necessarily austere because it lead *away* from the world, the flesh, and the devil, and to God.

Perhaps I have overstated my case and, at any rate, I do not claim that it is a complete answer, only an utterly vital one.

Yours ever in Xto,

BRUNO S. JAMES.

July 17. Wells-next-the-Sea.