

must be determined exclusively by what is necessary to do God's will. This is not to be measured by a merely utilitarian standard, but by the absolute demands of God's transcendence, our nothingness, and the nakedness of Christ. Hence the religious life, a life of tending towards perfection, provides the benefits of evangelical poverty in a form in which both the highest perfection of the spirit of poverty is possible, and in which the imperfect are able to learn poverty of spirit gradually, by being compelled, so long as they live the religious life, to make acts of the virtues which compose it, acts which normally suppose and develop the interior virtues themselves.



CARTHUSIAN ASCETICISM¹

BY

A CARTHUSIAN

I am come so that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.—John 10, 10.

IF you were to ask each of us, 'Are you willing to die to yourselves?' we should all reply sincerely, 'Yes; we are willing. . . .' But it is not enough to say or even to think so, for it is possible to deceive ourselves. Dying to ourselves is no theoretical problem composed of abstract thoughts and reasonings; nor does it consist in making resolutions for the morrow which is always later. . . . It means putting them into practice. To die to ourselves *externally* is to detach ourselves from all ties, whatever they may be; but this detachment must be complete, whole, irrevocable, and there must be no looking back. This is going a long way. . . .

Because we are Christians we should be detached from all exterior things. Our vows secure this detachment; they are made to free us from all slavery, to break the ties by which sin has bound us. But we must beware, for we bring with us into the monastery our own nature, with all the tendencies that sin has infused into it. This nature sometimes attempts to take its revenge without our realising it, to recover for itself what

¹ Translated from *La Vie Spirituelle*, October 1950. by Benedicta Burns.

it can; it would like to attach itself to the objects which we use. When nature sees itself deprived of everything, it believes itself lost, and tries to attach itself to trifles and absurdities; this seems foolish, but it is so. And then, instead of practising the vow of poverty, we surrender to a proprietary instinct. This is just the opposite of death to ourselves.

Nature which suffers from having to submit to a rule tries to make up to itself by seeking its own comfort, and by living heedlessly in spiritual sloth. We may end by so adapting ourselves to the austerity of our cell that we live there a kind of bourgeois life, enclosing ourselves in the well-mannered selfishness of bachelorhood. This again would be the exact opposite to death to self. There would be no room for the divine life; self would fill everything and block all approaches to the soul.

In the sphere of the spirit, it is the same. We run the risk of attaching ourselves to our own ideas, our own judgments, our own ways of thought, to this manner of living which is the particular form of our personality and for which we feel an affection. In these subtler things, self is more hidden. It disguises itself more easily behind praiseworthy pretexts. . . . Among people of the world who pretend to use those abstractions which they call truth, common sense, good taste, etc., it is self which is served and which becomes the object of a real cult. We spend our whole day considering how to safeguard our dignity, the effect we shall produce, what people will say and think of us, how we can force others to accept our ideas—in short, how we can make self triumph; and life becomes a play in which everything is calculated and ordered to an effect that must be produced to place self in a good light. As long as all this is not simplified, as long as we do not manage to forget ourselves, and as long as self fills the whole soul and overflows on all sides, how can life enter? There is no room for it. All this is contrary to the religious life; it represents a mentality incompatible with it. But if in religion we seldom go so far in the wrong direction, the danger of giving way to this tendency always exists, and to a certain degree the evil itself remains. We do not see clearly the designs and subtle bonds of self; self-love is to be found in everything and we are only vaguely conscious of it. We are attached to our own ideas, and our own way of seeing things, not for the pure love of truth

as we pretend, but because they are *our* ideas and *our* outlook. Thus self takes its revenge, but secretly and in disguise, so that when we hear death to ourselves spoken of, we turn to our neighbour and do not think of looking at ourselves.

If with all this we succeed in leading a regular life, if we fulfil the letter of the rule and submit to certain mortifications, all this which is indeed excellent and necessary can contribute to the increase of illusion and the nourishment of self-love. We think ourselves good religious. We may be externally, but it is only a veneer of perfection; internally, love of self vies for place with the love of God. Charity is relaxed; intercourse with God is consequently imperfect, and the divine life cannot freely reach the soul. Moreover, what will become of it? All space is so filled with self! Death does not empty it; life can only infiltrate little by little. As long as we are so full of ourselves, our own ideas, tastes and self-esteem, there is no room for an abundant life; we vegetate.

What is the remedy? It is always the same: to forget ourselves instead of looking to ourselves; let us be direct, seeking only God in the things and ideas that we have; giving God as sustenance to our minds and hearts; beginning to put him first in our preoccupations and love, and little by little he will pervade all; he will end by eliminating all the rest.

Now self must be forgotten; but how can we forget ourselves? Our minds and hearts and faculties have need of sustenance. Instead of offering them self, we must give them God.² When our minds and hearts are made his captives, are seized and filled with him, we will not think any more of ourselves. This is the simplification of everything; true Carthusian simplicity. But we cannot arrive at this perfect simplicity without many struggles. For when we think that we are dead to all, there still remain the roots and remnants of self. Dying to ourselves is a most long and difficult business.

To die to ourselves and to live for God would seem two very different things. The ideas are indeed different, but in reality, in practice, they are one and the same thing, for in the

² It is not a question of sustaining ourselves with abstract thoughts. Here, through God, we listen to the Blessed Trinity, above all, to the Son of God, the Word Incarnate, to the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, the proper object of our contemplation here below. (cf. Gardeil: 'Christ-Consciousness', Blackfriars Publications.)

measure that we die to ourselves, in so far as we forget ourselves, God enters into us; it would be equally true to say that in the measure that God enters into us, we die to ourselves and forget ourselves. In the measure that the divine life penetrates and grows in us, the self in us diminishes, is absorbed, transformed or eliminated by it.³

I say transformed, absorbed, eliminated, for everything in us is not bad; that only is bad which comes through sin, and that must be driven out. But our faculties, our nature, even our passions are not completely bad. They have all been warped and unbalanced, but the Divine Life restores them to order little by little and re-establishes all our activities anew, so that they conform to the original plan of God.

So, to die to ourselves is not to annihilate ourselves; it is to drive out sin, certainly, but for the rest it is simply to put things in order. But we must beware and notice that here too we can easily deceive ourselves. We can say, 'To put ourselves in order? But we can restore this order in ourselves by practising virtue.' It is often a grand wile of the devil to reveal an excellent goal to us, so that in attaining it we miss a better. . . . Here, understand me clearly, virtue is necessary, but if we were to say, 'I want to be virtuous in order to empty myself of myself, to reduce everything to nothing in myself', this might well succeed only in making us more pleased with ourselves, filling us again with ourselves, increasing our self-esteem and finally putting self in the place of God, so consolidating the disorder that we wish to turn out.⁴

Certainly we must be virtuous, but as Christians we must be so without thinking of it. We have not come to the monastery to cultivate virtue; we have come to give ourselves to God, that is to say, to surrender ourselves to him in such a way that he may be master in us. The goal is God; why do we want to run after anything but him? Let us then have only God in view, and in order to do that, let us forget ourselves. Let us seek him, and all the rest will be added. Let us put

³ Contemplation which fixes our gaze on God and divine things, the allegiance which makes us comply with the divine will, and the considerate service of our neighbour, are the indirect means, more efficacious than direct methods, of forgetting ourselves. 'To want to forget something is to think of it', wrote La Bruyère.

⁴ Here it can only be a question of the moral virtues, for those of faith, hope and charity which have God himself for their object, must be exercised always.

Christ at the centre of our thoughts, desires and preoccupations. Nothing is better calculated to destroy the self-centredness that chokes us than a generous turning towards Christ.

I insist on this point because I see the selfishness of souls . . . among the best of those who ought to reach a high degree of union with God, too many are held back in the way. Because their attention is focussed only on virtue and mortification, they do not see far enough. Their life becomes in part a kind of pious routine, congealed as it were by these practices, and the life of grace does not grow as it ought.



AN APOLOGY

The Editor of *LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* and the author of *Some Books about the Bible* in the last issue of the journal (January) wish to apologise to Fr Cullan, o.p., the well-known American theologian, for referring to his death. The unfortunate error arose from the fact that Fathers Cullan and McHugh have together written so many valuable works on Scripture and theology that they appear in many readers' minds almost as one man. Fr McHugh, o.p., died two years ago. The editor and author sincerely regret any distress this reference may have caused Father Cullan.



FUTURE NUMBERS

The MARCH issue of *LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* will be devoted to the question of '*Meditation and Contemplation*' with articles by Donald Nicholl, Michael Hollings, Conrad Pepler, C. Kirchberger, Adrian Dowling, etc., etc.

The APRIL issue will be an enlarged special number on *THE PRIESTHOOD*, to which the Rector of Wonersh Seminary, the Vice-Rector of Oscott College and the Professor of Dogma of St Edmund's College are all contributing, together with the Prior of Farnborough Abbey, Father Bede Jarrett, o.p., and many others.