

and the highest climax of life is still wrapped in a veil which we cannot penetrate or grasp whilst we are still engulfed in matter, time and space. But the knowledge of the *fact* of this relationship has already put the key into our hands which will let us one day into the place where life and knowledge become one stream and where we are delivered from darkness with the Father of Light with whom there is no vicissitude.

Finally, as has been said before, the most important means of increasing our living knowledge lies in a willing and active faith coupled with frequent prayer. This should be understood properly. The best prayer is of course such prayer as keeps us directly and personally in touch with Christ. Such prayer comes naturally when we assist intelligently at Mass or meditate upon Christ. But such prayer must be fed, and be fed with the right kind of nourishment. One powerful means is what the old Fathers called '*lectio divina*', divine reading. That does not mean rushing through the Scriptures but picking out small passages and dwelling on them, repeating them, standing still to look at all the implications and meanings. Even if one limited oneself because of lack of leisure to the epistles and gospels of each Sunday, one would find a complete code or handbook of knowledge—if one knows how to read. Here again a certain intelligent perusal of good books on theology or the Scriptures, or the reading of good articles which explain points that might help us—all this will prevent an arbitrary and fanciful use of texts and prayer and so assist us in our progress. Moreover, if advice is asked of those more advanced in knowledge than ourselves, we shall easily and without much difficulty come to 'savour' that living knowledge, and we shall 'savour' it 'soberly', as the Apostle counsels: '*Sapere in sobrietate*'.



LOVE AND SUFFERING IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

A Conference

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WE are told that religious life is a striving after Perfection. That does not mean what many people 'in the world' think, and what perhaps we thought on entering the life. It does not mean that religious are perfect. You've heard

people outside say: 'Sister So-and-so is a saint.' Personally, we cannot see it, and the reaction it provokes in us makes us wish they had not made the remark.

Before we saw the life from the inside it may well be that we had ideas about it; the sort of people we should have to live with, the sort of life we should have to live. Maybe we smile now at how naïve we were. It may even seem sometimes that we made a great mistake in undertaking it at all. We have heard our brothers or sisters say: 'If I'd known then what I know now I wouldn't have taken it on; I couldn't have faced it.' Well, God hid it from us, no doubt, for that very reason; because we have a vocation, because God did not want us to panic and run away from him. Gradually, the full extent of the sacrifice he asks of us is borne in upon us; like our Lord we begin to suffer and to grow sorrowful.

I suppose our first reaction is to think that something has gone wrong somewhere: as if we had made some awful mistake: as if God were punishing us for some sin—perhaps our presumption in undertaking this form of life. 'Sister X is so serene. She doesn't have trouble of this sort, why should I? A religious is a holy person, she never feels like other women, she is altogether different.' These ideas leave us as we go through life. We find that Sister X has much worse troubles to contend with; that our idol, the perfect religious, is not so easily come by. We see others' weaknesses so clearly, in fact, that we are in danger of overlooking their very real virtues.

I submit that it is at this point that we arrive at the possibility of real growth. It has been said that the cynic is very often right about facts but takes the wrong way out. To know that the life we have chosen is not an escape from hardship but a fuller acceptance of it is merely a necessary preliminary to real beginnings. The motto of our Order is Truth, and we need so much to let it enter into every corner of our life.

Let us accept the fact that those around us are not perfect—we shall not be shocked then to find them showing it in their actions. Neither are we perfect—and so we cease to be shocked at our own sins and weaknesses. We came to religious life, not to give a demonstration of our great virtue, nor to be given a demonstration by others: we came to keep the Commandments more perfectly, to help one another to love God as much as we can. We can develop an inverted kind of pride and think of not

giving scandal rather as if we would avoid giving people the wrong impression and make them think we were not holy. We must be honest through and through. Let us confess that we cause each other real suffering at times—that the life is not as easy as we thought it would be, and that we do not seem to have made much headway. We know in our heart of hearts that this is how we all feel at times.

Religious life is a hard life. Religious life is a life of suffering, because it is a sharing in the life of our divine Lord: 'The servant is not greater than his Master.' It is when we begin to see this that the life becomes real for us. We are here to suffer. We are here to suffer because we are here to love, and there is no love without suffering—not in this life. Our Lord suffered because he loved us. He suffered so much because he loved so much. Suffering is the blossom on the tree, the flower—if you like, the Passion flower; but love is the fruit. Where there is no blossom there can be no fruit; where there is no suffering there can be no love. That is why the saints saw the sufferings God sent them as proofs of his love. He was giving them the means of showing their love, of growing in love. He was helping them to love him.

How often in marriage the chance is lost. They love each other, or think they do, but their love is so imperfect, so self-seeking—and then the romance wears off and they are given the opportunity to perfect their love, to love unselfishly, disinterestedly and they let it slip by. Love is dead, they say, when what they mean is the old selfish love is dead. Now I am being made to love *you*, not myself in you, nor the gifts you bring me but *you*, and I cannot make the sacrifice.

Everything we find unpleasant in our life, everything we find irksome, boring, depressing, is matter for love because it is matter for sacrifice. Think of it like the bread and wine at Mass. The Americans have a slang phrase expressing contempt which describes a thing as 'chicken-feed'. Well, bread and wine are peasants' feed, the poor man's meal; yet God chose them as matter for the Sacrifice of the Mass. He set them aside as constituents of his heavenly banquet.

Those worries you would be ashamed to tell anyone about because they seem so trivial and yet cause such pain; those feelings of loneliness and frustration and of the pettiness of our everyday actions and life; all these things are the bread and wine ready to

hand for the sacrifice. These are the '*oblata*'—the things to be offered. It is these which must be sanctified, these which must be sacrificed. That is God's will. That is why he gives them to us. This was the sacrifice God's own Mother offered day by day: this was the sacrifice of St Joseph.

These are the sacraments of God's will for us: these *are* God's will—in the concrete, coming to us through obedience from the hand of God. We can give them a divine efficacy and power. Just before the Consecration in the Mass, the priest and we with him, pray the *Quam Oblationem* in which we ask God: 'Which oblation do thou, O God, vouchsafe in all things to make blessed, approved, ratified, reasonable and acceptable, *that it may become to us the body and blood of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord.*'

What is this oblation we have brought but ourselves, the whole of us, our lives in their smallest details: and we are asking with and through the priest that these things may even become God himself. 'Our offering is unworthy of You', we say, 'it is valueless; give it value, make it supremely acceptable; may it become the body and blood of thy Son.'

Sometimes one meets people broken by sin and suffering and there seems nothing that one can do: 'I'd have to be God to put this right.' But in the Mass we have a source of power, of strength that transfigures even the tiniest suffering borne in union with that sacrifice. We *can* help such souls. We can share in Christ's work of redemption. No suffering is too trivial. All our worries, every pain of body and soul, partakes of the redemptive power of Calvary. We have only to will it, only to make the sacrifice with Christ.

So we see the place our daily Mass assumes in our life, giving it a meaning and God-like purpose. We must not try to rid our life of suffering; we cannot, and even if we could, our love would remain at best a stunted thing. What we must aim at is to gather up the fragments, the crumbs of suffering, lest they be lost, and offer them back with Christ in the Holy Mass.

