

Life of the Spirit

Volume V

MAY 1951

Number 59

THE CROWN OF LIFE

BY

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.

TRADITIONALLY, meditations on death have leagued with those on the judgment and on hell to induce a type of fear that leads to repentance. Death terrifies the pagan and the Christian who by sin has strayed into a pagan way of life. In a world given over to the search for material well being and the more physical perfections of human life these terrors are pushed into the background of the mind. The foreground is wholly filled with the desires and activities connected with good living. Meditation on death is the last thing the living materialist would willingly undertake.

Today, however, this gloomy background threatens more persistently and enters subtly into the texture of life. In a certain sense men are today obsessed with death. National life as well as international is so organised that war becomes inevitable and modern war demands an ever increasing 'death-potential'. The governments of nations are all the time seeking weapons that will kill a greater number of men, women and children; and men stand by, petrified and powerless to prevent the working of the death machine. The obsession, too, creeps more subtly into our modern life in the desire to put the suffering out of pain by putting them to death. It is not better to enter worldly kingdoms maimed or lame than to be kept outside hale and hearty. The maimed and the lame who suffer incurably must die. And what is to be said of the increasing desire that living men should not be generated, and if generated, to be put out of the way before coming to the light of day? Complacency in sterility spells a death which is not only physical but spiritual as well.

Without God this under current of preoccupation with death becomes inevitable. The absence of a true end for human life,

that is to say, where there is no true finality in which man may discover the permanent fulfilment of his being, throws men back on death—the end without finality. Without a spiritual end for life the physical end spells the terror of negative finality. After death there is nothing.

Those whose end is life, life eternal in God, take an entirely different point of view. They carry with them the figure of a man done to death in agony nailed to a tree. They attempt to establish for themselves a constant life of 'mortification'—a life that is a constant 'making self to die'. The Christian, then, seeks the integrity of a whole life not by acquiring the maximum comfort and enjoyment in his daily existence, nor by seeking a fulfilment of all his living human powers. He finds the fulness of life in death. Christ insisted so often that the seed must die and be buried in order to bring forth the new life; that he finds his life who loses it; that the followers of Christ must take up their cross daily. And after listening to this strange paradox his disciples could cry: 'Oh death, where is your sting?' Meditation on death in those days was a gloriously living contemplation, surrounded as the early Church was by scores of men, women and children dying for their faith and thus having a second, supernatural birthday.

A generation ago men were thinking that the age of martyr had passed, that the brutality of inflicting torture and death on a person because of his religious beliefs was no longer a real, live possibility. And so they made gloomy and doleful meditations on the passing of life, while their spiritualist neighbours tried to establish a superficial link between those who are living and those who had 'passed over' in order to assuage the melancholy reality.

But that generation has suddenly passed into another whence the Christian finds himself surrounded by his fellows in many countries falling, tortured and slain because they are followers of Christ. St Thomas suggests that fortitude, which chiefly inspires martyrdom, is exercised principally in warfare and that the martyr died as it were fighting for the highest good, namely for God (II-II, 123, 5 c. and ad. 1). The metaphor is an apt one when we consider the numbers who are now slain because of their adherence to the faith. They are not yet indeed honoured by the Church as such. Many are inevitably immersed in political struggles, a fact that makes it difficult to disentangle true martyrdom for the faith from some more nationalistic motive. This must happen where

the faith has been part and parcel of the normal life of the citizen. And, even if many are never recognised as dying purely out of love of our Lord, they are not to be despised for a heroism devoted perhaps to loyalty to their country.

It was just this confusion between politics and the faith which made the situation in England under Henry VIII and Elizabeth so difficult for the ordinary Catholic to understand and which offers such a very close parallel to many of the persecutions of modern times. And if today England and most English-speaking countries are not subject to the insensate persecution that has caused such a shock to our refined sensibilities which had relegated martyrdom to days gone by, nevertheless death for Christians stands at our doors and we are at least called upon to enter into the spirit of those who are dying and to share their deaths with them. We have to glory in their sacrifice, and to glory in death we must enter into the life which precedes martyrdom. For the martyr is not made in a moment; martyrdom is the crown of a life spent in preparation for it. Death crowns life in the Christian's view; it does not destroy it. And every Christian should now be leading a life which could so be crowned.

Here we may turn to the lives of those men and women in England who lived in such a way that they are now honoured—particularly on the 4th of May—as martyrs, witnesses by their death to the deathlessness of their faith. We can nearly always detect in the life of a martyr the seeds of his final glory. And we detect it principally in the way he prayed and in the way he followed the austere figure of death by *mortifying* his own human nature. It was this that St Thomas More pointed to as the three Carthusian Priors and the Brigittine were drawn in agony past his window on their way to Tyburn:

These blessed fathers be now as cheerfully going to their deaths as bridegrooms to their marriage . . . For God considering their long continued life in most sore and grievous penance, will no longer suffer them to remain here in this vale of misery and iniquity, but speedily hence he taketh them to the fruition of his everlasting Deity.

More compared them to his own 'miserable life' spent 'most sinfully'; but beneath the humility of the saint we may discover the secret of his own death. He had himself devoted time and energy to a similar pursuit of 'mortification'. Not only had he

persistently worn his shirt of hair almost all his adult life; he had studied under the shadow of these Carthusians' own austere lives in the London Charterhouse; he had risen in Cistercian fashion at 2 a.m. and prayed and studied till 7 o'clock, when he assisted at Mass. Friday had always been a day of special penance for this brilliant light among the Christian humanists of the day.

The prayer of these Carthusians, assisting at the Mass of the Holy Spirit before making their decision to die rather than give way to the King's wishes, had been answered—'a soft whisper of air which some perceived with their bodily senses, while all experienced its sweet influence upon their hearts'. The gift of fortitude which is of the stuff of martyrs comes immediately from the Holy Spirit, but it can only come when prayer and mortification have rendered the soul responsive and receptive of his gift. We may turn our eyes for a moment towards that courtier Newdigate, gay friend of the King; he had seen the evil in the King's ways and had died to the world ten years before entering the Charterhouse. There he had prepared himself by prayer and penance for the time when he would be chained for seventeen days by neck and legs unable to move, the preliminary to his execution with his two brethren, hanged and cut to pieces in the pure white of his monastic habit. Within two months he had followed his prior who, cut down from the gallows, was heard to say gently as his entrails were torn out, 'Oh most merciful Jesus, have pity upon me in this hour'.

Such is the spirit of men who live the Christian life to its full in the midst of death, in the midst of mortification. And that life is one in its essential characteristics both in the unwordly seclusion of the cloister and in the political turmoil of the Chancellor's office. The married man and father of a family, the man who held the highest political post, was moved equally by the spirit of fortitude as was the ecclesiastic who became Bishop of Rochester and as were these cloistered monks long since snatched from the political or ecclesiastical world. And what is the secret of this triumph in death if not that the life and death of Christ is realised once again in them as it had been in the first martyr, St Stephen, who is shown by St Luke in *Acts* to have died the same death as our Lord?

The place of death in the redemption of the world may be seen from this point of view. For originally the penalty of ending

human life in this fashion had been the effect of a sin that unleashed man's physical powers in such a way that they dominated his immortal spirit. Physical death then became inevitable, but always this thing of terror. It was a necessary penalty for sin, but one which was imposed on the cringing spirit of man. He refused to accept it; at least he would never agree to taking it upon himself willingly as a punishment for sin. His spirit even while suffering the penalty cried out against the judgment of God, until the day came when the untarnished and rapier-like will of the Son-made-man was to overcome this resistance to just punishment and thrust through to the very heart of original sin by being willing to die for the whole of man's iniquity. At that moment death itself became the instrument for man of glory to God. The redemption was achieved by the free, active acceptance of the penalties of sin; and this is the principal act of the martyr—that he should willingly and actively *sustain* suffering and death by the virtue and gift of fortitude. 'The virtue of fortitude, the nature of which is to show a certain fixed determination, principally deals with the "passion" of flight from physical ills, i.e. with fear.' (II-II, 141, 3; cf: 123, 6; 124, 2 ad 3.) The triumph over death is gained only in the acceptance of death; therein lies the paradox of the redemption. To put up with death seems to be the height of 'passivity'; but in effect it must be the deepest and the most powerful act of a man's life for which all the preceding activity must be simply a preparation.

It is here that we can see the full import of a life of prayer and penance and the reason why these two activities in particular form an essential preparation for the death of men like St Thomas More and the Carthusians in the sixteenth century and of the tortured victims of persecution today. Prayer in its simplest expression does not attempt to change God's will or to bring him down to the level of human whims and fancies; prayer moulds the human will upon the divine. A life of constant prayer is not simply a passive attitude of a soul looking towards God, but of frequent acts of petition the underlying theme of which is always 'Thy will be done'. The more the Christian asks from God in this spirit, the more conformed does he become to the unchanging and eternal will of the Father. The contemplation to which the Carthusians and St Thomas More were devoted was at heart simply this devoted resting of their wills upon God's eternal will,

a resting reached by constant acts of resignation. 'That this chalice might pass . . . nevertheless, not my will but thine be done'. The fruit of persistent prayer is therefore the perfection of obedience which is the 'obedience unto death'. In exceptional cases the grace of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, can overcome the perversity of the human will and transform it suddenly into a true vehicle of the divine will of love. But in ordinary circumstances the habit of prayer, softening the will by degrees as the acts of surrender become more protracted and deeper, makes straight the way towards the final acceptance of death. Prayer precedes the full flowering of the gifts of the Holy Ghost as the moisture that gives life to the plant and beauty to its petals.

But it was the life of penance or 'mortification' that struck most forcibly as the outstanding characteristic of the martyr. Prayer cannot achieve this softening of the resistance of self-will unless it be supported at the same time by the activity of mortification; for mortification beats down the enemies to the freedom of the spirit. Not only does it demand the same virtue of fortitude which inspires the martyr, but it also deals effectively with the power of physical attraction which clogs the spirit and renders it subject to the moribund declension of the body. Penance tames the passions, gradually subjecting them to the will so that a man may be angry and sin not, love with passion yet chastely, eat charity, eat with delight yet temperately. By dealing fiercely with his untamed instincts man makes it possible for the will to be free and therefore freely to dispose itself to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Under grace the will controls the movements not only of the inner spiritual activity of such things as prayer, but also of the outward actions of the body and soul. During this process of ascetical training the terror of suffering and even death is made remote. It can never be banished altogether, for nature clings to physical life as God has made it so; but the control thus established by mortification makes it possible for the Holy Spirit to exercise the special power of fortitude when death actually stands before the Christian's eyes and puts the firmness of his intention to its greatest test.

Prayer and penance together, then, produce in man the obedience which is required before the Christian can follow Christ *usque ad mortem*. Both active, and strenuously so, they gradually fuse the activity of the human spirit with that of the

Holy Spirit, so that there is one activity. In this way the Christian is said to have become completely passive in the hands of God, ready to be taken by him wherever he wishes. He is able in this state of powerful passivity to support even death for the love of God.

It is therefore the life of the English martyrs that means so much to us today. We admire them in their dying. We are carried away with enthusiasm for the simple faith of St John Fisher, who could say in one short phrase before his execution that he died willingly for the truth of the Catholic faith. But not many of us are called upon to undergo that final test when only the power of the Holy Ghost could carry us through to victory. But that faith of which they are the 'witnesses' is not merely an assent to certain truths; it is a life spurred on to intense activity and overwhelming experience by prayer and penance, which themselves always deepen that union of wills in God which is called charity or love. And this life of faith and charity made fruitful by mortification and continual prayer is demanded of us all if we are to be worthy of those who today are suffering in the same way. There are contemplatives, ecclesiastics and men of the world languishing in prison, tortured to the very depths of their human characters, dying or being killed, and these things they suffer because they have devoted themselves to Christ. If these men are to be supported in their final testing and are to gain the crown, we fellow members of Christ must live in the same spirit of obedience unto death by prayer and penance. And if it so be that the turn might come to one of us, we might then presume to rely upon the Christian life that we had led in company with the host of Christ's members and to die as we had lived—in faith triumphant.



THE SPIRITUALITY OF ST THOMAS MORE

By

BERNARD FISHER

The King's good servant—but God's first.

—St Thomas More on the scaffold.

ST THOMAS MORE, 'the one genius of England', to quote Erasmus, is one of the best-loved of Englishmen. His wit and learning led Swift to number him among the seven