A MAN APPROVED

by LEO TRESE

"Use all care to present thyself to Cod as a man approved, a worker that cannot be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy II, 15)

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1. Vocation

Why did I become a priest? It is a question that is open to a glib reply. If I were speaking for the edification of the faithful, I might be tempted to give an answer only half honest. I might say that, in the idealism of my youth, I responded to the high challenge of Christ's, "Come, follow Me"; that I chose to seek my happiness in a life self-dedicated to the service of God and the salvation of souls. Actually, of course, I myself had very little to do with becoming a priest. I am a priest because God wanted me to be one and saw to it that I became one.

My own motives in the matter, if I am mercilessly sincere with myself, may have been anything but noble. My attraction to the priesthood probably had its roots in the deep faith of my parents. Their reverence and admiration for the "good Father" was so obvious as to make the priest, in my eyes, the most important person in the community. It was a position in life worth achiev-

ing. Maybe I could be a priest too, and have men doff their hats to me and speak to me always with deference, and give me the best pieces of chicken and the biggest portions of dessert.

Then perhaps one of the priests of the parish took an interest in me. His attention flattered me and enkindled in me the hero-worship that is latent in every boy. I saw him only from the outside, but what I saw, I liked. He had a nice car, always new-looking. His hands and clothes were always clean—none of the sweat and grease and dirt that seemed characteristic of the jobs other people had. And the priest always had time for ball-games and swimming and the other things that seemed to me an important part of life.

So I began to think that maybe I'd like to be a priest too. And of course the first time I mentioned it at home, my parents were manifestly proud and happy. They were afraid to say anything that might influence me too much, but they couldn't hide their hopes. And the Sisters at school got wind of it and took more notice of me, and began to show me special consideration in a hundred little ways. And my uncles and aunts and cousins, my pals and—yes, my girl friends—all helped with the inflationary process. Until I began to feel an important person indeed, a chosen one, a marked man. And I liked it.

Off to the seminary I went, and all through the years of my studies many loving hands carried me carefully on a cushion. Most of my chums went to work in auto plants, or gas stations, or driving trucks. For myself, a few Summer weeks spent working in the railroad car shops or the corner grocery sent me hustling back to

the seminary in the Autumn, only too glad to return. Life moved on pleasantly, through philosophy and theology. I loafed a good bit, improvising recitations and boning up for examinations. I griped about the food (which was costing me nothing), managed an occasional show on a free afternoon, and added my pontifical bit to the bull sessions at which we settled all problems of souls and the Church.

With weekly confession and daily Communion, temptations were not too obdurate in my sheltered life. And so, almost before I knew it, I was up for subdiaconate, and the fateful vow by which I would put the world behind me. There was a moment of compunction and worry right at the end; but my spiritual director quickly pooh-poohed my scruples, and when the Bishop said, "*Huc accedite,*" I took the step.

Then the final year spun past, as I practiced the Mass and baptized the doll. Priesthood approached, and I felt very holy in chapel and very inspired. But outside chapel I was thinking far more about First Mass invitations and souvenir cards and breakfast arrangements than I was about the miracle that was going to happen to me. The miracle happened, and my quiet father cried when I blessed him, and gray-haired priests knelt to me, and I was feted and all but adored. I was a priest, and I loved it.

And that is the history of one vocation. I do not claim that it is typical. It leaves out, I know, many intangibles. But I do not think it would be extreme to say that few of us can claim, in honesty, that we are priests today because, and *only* because, under a selfless and inner compulsion, we have followed from our youth the vision of God's glory.

No. We are priests solely and only because God wanted us to be. What kind of net God may have used to draw us within the sanctuary gates does not matter now. What motives, however human and worldly, He may have used as levers upon our selfishness is no longer important. It is enough to know that God, in a tremendous mystery of unmerited love, finally got me where He wanted me.

I once heard an unfortunate priest excuse his dereliction on the ground that he only became a priest to please his parents. As though that mattered. As though he shouldn't have been eternally grateful to God for having used the likeliest tool that came to hand. As though Nathaniel didn't follow Christ, in the first instance, out of curiosity; and Peter and James and John because they hoped, in the Kingdom, to occupy the seats of the mighty. It is axiomatic that God works through natural causes. It isn't the "how" of my priesthood that matters, but the ultimate "why."

That means God's "why." For reasons that only He knows, God looked upon me and loved me. He hoped, by successive graces, to arouse in me a corresponding love—the *amor amicitiae* and the *amor benevolentiae* that in time would make me truly one with Him. He has succeeded, let us hope, to a degree. But the degree will vary in each of us, according to the extent of our correspondence, according to the generosity of our response. "To him that hath shall be given." As grace has builded progressively upon grace, our priesthood has become steadily more selfless, steadily more happy, steadily more fruitful.

All that is required of us is that we hold ourselves

receptive to God's love. Our main duty is to remove the obstacles—to peel off the asbestos, so to speak, so that His love may have a chance to penetrate and warm us through and through, melting the frost and germinating the seed of spiritual life within us. No feverish activity is asked of us, just that we give God a chance. Either He will do the work, or it will not be done.

So we pray. Every day, and often through the day, we listen for God's Voice. No matter what problems or worries we may have brought with us to altar or *prie-dieu,* we park them on the floor behind us. Whether it's building or finance or housekeeper or janitor troubles, or a scandalmonger or a stubborn committeeman—they'll wait for us; and when we pick them up again, we are not surprised to find they've lost a lot of weight. With minds and hearts emptied of every possible distraction, we shall be attuned to the Voice of His Love, Who can speak so clearly, yet ever so softly; never forcing Himself into competition with any other voice.

And it will be in a spirit of generosity that I shall come to my prayer. With a willingness to let God have His way with me. I shall not be afraid to listen to His Voice; afraid of what I might have to give up; afraid that He might ask more than I am prepared to give. As though God ever would ask that which is beyond my present strength. Or rather, as though He ever would ask *anything* of me without at the same time giving me the needed strength. His love will be the *Spiritus fortitudinis* as well as the *Spiritus Sapientiae.*

Praying thus, with a recollected and a generous heart, I think that I may, in time, grow up to my vocation.

2. *My Mass*

Sometimes we priests feel that we are very busy men—and, within our own limited environment, quite important persons. We may be in parish work, instructing converts, visiting the sick, catechizing youngsters, administering temporalities. Or we may be in school work, developing minds, fashioning Christian leaders, directing athletics, dramatics, the choir.

Whatever our particular field may be, we probably are satisfied that we are doing constructive work, essential work, priestly work. There may be some who chafe at the feeling that they are stymied in their present job; that they do not have the opportunity to do the really great work of which they are capable. But for most of us, such thoughts come, if at all, only in our darker moments.

However, regardless of which group may claim me, it is profitable for me to remind myself again and again that there is only one thing I do which pertains essen-

tially to my priesthood. There is only one thing that is of transcendent importance, and that is my offering of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. By eternal standards, nothing else that I do matters much.

My assigned duties, insofar as they are the fulfilling of God's Will, may not be contemned. But a great deal of what I do, I must confess, could be done by an intelligent and a trained layman. This is true even of many of my parochial duties. And what a layman couldn't do, God very readily could accomplish by other means; for example, by a direct infusion of grace.

But not my Mass. Not my Mass. For that tremendous act, God *needs* me. In His economy of salvation, nothing else could take its place, and no one else could do it. What would it matter even if I did feel myself frustrated and bottled up in a dead-end job? I could be condemned to doing nothing else but chopping wood all day long, and my priesthood still would be a thousand times justified by the Morning Sacrifice with which each day begins. We have heard it said that if we had lived, after ordination, only long enough to offer once the Eucharist, our long years of study and preparation would have been well repaid. We have heard it said, and we know that it is true. Not because of what that Mass would do for us, but because of what that Mass would do for the Church, for souls.

I need to nail that down fast to my consciousness. That there is only one thing that *really* matters in my day; only one thing by which I, as a priest, stand or fall, and that is my Mass. By nature I may be an indifferent speaker, preaching the *"vera doctrina"* in a stumbling sort of way. Temperamentally I may be a rather inept

teacher, fatiguing rather than firing my students. I may be an untalcnted and inefficient administrator, hopeless in the face of problems of maintenance and expansion. But none of this matters, really.

Because the thing I'm ordained for, the thing I was» called for, is something in which no one can top me! Once each day I can stand upon the very pinnacle of human existence, and there is no one above me, but only God.

Isn't it a pity, then, that so often I hurry through my Mass, the one action of the day that really counts, as though it were just an incidental to the day's beginning? As though it were only one detail among others, one duty of many? A sacred detail, a holy duty, of course. But one to be executed with dispatch, so that I can get on to other and maybe "more important" affairs?

If I *have* dulled the luster of my Mass by a routine attitude, the fault will lie, most probably, in my lack of preparation. In human affairs, nothing of any importance ever is undertaken without careful readying. Whether it is a thief casing a layout, an insurance salesman approaching a prospect, or a lover planning to propose to his girl—always there is spade-work.

Surely then in a matter of such supreme importance as my mediatorship between God and man; surely as I contemplate vesting myself with the Personality of Christ—almost as though I were going to crawl inside His skin and speak with His Voice—surely this, if ever, is a time for preparation.

I shall not be condemned as an extremist, I know, if I set a half-hour as the very minimum of time that I must spend in anticipation of my Mass—not counting the time

of my vesting nor the time I spend puttering around the sacristy. Ten of those thirty minutes will not be too much time for the careful formation of my intention, for a recollection of the many persons and causes for which I wish to offer my Mass. Nor for my effort, above all, to identify my will with Christ's in the Mass, so that He and I may be *one* Victim. "Make Your Will mine, O Lord. Even if I cannot see Your Will, even if I fear It and try to blind myself to It, *make* me do Your Will—in spite of myself, if needs be."

No, ten minutes will not be too much for all this. And then but twenty minutes are left for that very least period of mental prayer with which my Mass should be prefaced. For this, nothing else will substitute, if I am to ascend to the altar in the full consciousness of my priesthood. It is mental prayer alone that will make me, *Deo adjuvante,* a little less unworthy of my partnership with Christ.

I have never yet failed, through negligence, to make my morning meditation, without feeling that I had robbed myself irreparably of many Mass-bestowed graces that might have been mine. Mass without meditation, it seems to me, is somewhat like my Bishop making an unheralded visit, and finding me sprawled in soiled shirt-sleeves in an untidy room with a detective story in my hands. All feelings of pleasure and satisfaction that such a visit might afford would be dulled by stirrings of uneasy regret.

Habits of neglect are so easily formed. The extra sleep of one morning makes it so much easier to stay in bed the next. The psychologist William James may seem a strange sort of witness to call against myself. But who

could put it better than he (in his *Principles of Psychology):* "The hell to be endured hereafter, of which theology tells, is no worse than the hell we make for ourselves in this world by habitually fashioning our characters in the wrong way. ... We are spinning our own fates, good or evil, and never to be undone. Every smallest stroke of virtue or of vice leaves its ever so little scar. The drunken Rip Van Winkle, in Jefferson's play, excuses himself for every fresh dereliction by saying, I won't count this time! Well! he may not count it, and a kind Heaven may not count it; but it is being counted, none the less. Down among his nerve cells and fibres the molecules are counting it, registering and storing it up to be used against him when the next temptation comes. Nothing we ever do is, in strict scientific literalness, wiped out."

Not a bad sermon for a scientist to preach. I must try to remember it tomorrow morning as I shut off the alarm and start to roll over for another five-minute snooze. It's time I began to give those little molecules something else to work on. And God's grace something more to work on, too.

So I have spent a fruitful half-hour in preparation for my Mass, and I come now to the foot of the altar. *Introibo ad altare Dei.* What will my Mass mean to me today, and every day? Am I conscious of the fact that it is no mere act of private devotion that I am about to perform? Do I realize that the Church has placed in my hands the collected and corporate love of every one of her children, to be borne by me to the altar, to be there

united with Christ's own Love, and offered by Him to God our Father?

My hands are to be Christ's hands; my lips, His. By my agency Christ is about to open a door upon Eternity, so that today's members of His Mystical Body may hang with Him upon the Cross, united with Him in His role of Victim. With God, I know, there is no time—no past, no future; there is only the tremendous NOW. So that there is a sense in which it is perfectly true to say that Christ on the Cross hangs before God the Father forever. And in the Mass Christ will accrete to Himself upon the Cross, the whole Mystical Body by which He lives in the world today.

Of these things I *must* be aware. Aware too that through me, because of the intentions of the Church which I make my own, God's graces are going to flow through me to Christ's Church, and through His Church to every least cell of His Mystical Body. It is a two-way traffic, albeit a holy traffic, upon which I am about to embark.

Surely then the essential disposition at which I must aim in my celebration of Mass is one of identification with Christ—as complete an identification as it is humanly possible to achieve. It is not as an automaton that I wish to stand at the altar. The love will flow up through my hands, willy-nilly, and the graces will flow back. But it will be tragic if there is nothing of me in the going, and nothing for me in the coming. "Lord," my heart will be crying, as I stoop for the Consecration, "Lord, make me one with Thee! Take my heart and make it Thine! Transform me by Thy love! Don't let me stand

here untouched and unmoved. Take me, all of me, and do with me what Thou wilt!"

I'll not worry about distractions. In my fallen human nature, they are inevitable. Except for the saints (about whom I would not know) there's none of us that can hope to achieve the perfect mass, with a mind that wanders not even once. I shall be on my guard against distractions, of course. But the distractions that will come in spite of myself are not going to make me lose the rich satisfaction of my Mass. At the worst, I shall rally my errant attention at certain focal points of reference: the beautiful doxology of the *Gloria,* the majestic salutation of the *Sanctus,* the recollection of my heavenly colleagues at the *Communicantes,* the renewal of my self-offering at the *Fiat voluntas tua.*

And my inner recollection will reflect itself in my external bearing. I shall remind myself that I am not offering Mass in isolation, merely for my own pious satisfaction. I am the minister of the Church, representing the Mystical Body of Christ. The members of that Body are there behind me, if only in the person of the server. They are trying to offer the Mass, too. It is their Mass as well as mine. Maybe I *can* say Mass rapidly and still offer it with great piety and awareness. But it is robbing others if I race through the Mass at a pace that these others cannot follow. I am robbing them in an even more foul way if my haste seems to belie the majesty and the wondrousness of what I am doing; if my slipshod, jerky, or hasty movements lessen the esteem of the Mass in the hearts of those who see me.

If one has fallen into the habit of saying Mass rapidly, it is difficult, admittedly, to form the contrary habit of

reading our Mass with deliberation. It is difficult to re-train oneself to walk with dignity from corner to middle and back to corner again; to turn towards the people in a way that will exemplify recollection, and to make all gestures—signs of the Cross, extension of hands —in a manner that will be a silent sermon on Faith. But these are not "little" things. And if it means half an hour for a low /Mass with *Gloria* and *Credo* and a few Communions, or forty-five minutes for a sung Mass—well, it will not be the congregation who will complain of my leisurely pace.

Certainly I have no desire to be more Catholic than the Church. But if I may digress a bit, I must admit that I belong to the Mass-of-the-day school. It is not for me to say that daily requiems are to be contemned. I can only say that for my part, I find it much easier to be recollected, and I derive much more personal profit from my Mass, when I follow the calendar of the Church. My requiems are limited to Anniversaries and Month's Minds. And I can honestly say that I shall be more than content if the Masses offered for me after death are Masses *de festo* or *de tempore.* The laity, who more and more are coming to know and use the Missal, are not mere faddists or crack-pots when they express a weariness at the daily appearance of black vestments.

That, however, is strictly by way of parenthesis and personal opinion. I should not want it to distract from emphasis upon the more essential truth: that no priest need fear for his salvation if he genuinely loves his Mass. That means prefacing his Mass with an adequate preparation. It means approaching the altar with the conviction that, "Here is the only tiling in life that matters. I don't

care what else happens to me today, so long as I offer this Mass well." It means that he tries, through the progress of his Mass, to unite himself as closely as possible with Christ ("Take my heart; unite it with Thine; with Thine offer it to God our Father!").

It means that he tries to act out, in his external bearing, the Faith that he wishes he had; being psychologist enough to know that outward demeanor *can* fortify inner sentiment, hypocrites to the contrary notwithstanding.

It means, too, that he can kneel afterwards and honestly feel that he has tried, during the half-hour that is past, really to give God the best that is in him. It means that he has celebrated with a consciousness that it is not just *his* Mass, but the Church's Mass, the people's Mass, and that they have a right to see the Mass preached in its very offering. I wish that I could be sure that I have described myself. I wish that I could be sure, each morning, that I had done, and done so well, the one thing for which God has called me and anointed me.

3. *The Divine Office*

For a body of men trained in the science of logic, we priests can be, at times, surprisingly illogical. We are quick to spot, and to expose, the rationalizations of the laity; when, for example, they excuse themselves from frequent Communion on the plea that they cannot fast late and cannot get up early. But how blind we can be to the fallacies in our own reasoning, especially as it applies to our spiritual life.

On no subject are we apt to be more glaringly illogical than on the subject of prayer. We know that a priest is bound, by the very nature of his vocation, to a life of more-than-ordinary sanctity. We know too that there is no solid sanctity without depth of prayer. A priest who does not pray is a monstrosity—a blind man offering himself as a guide, an ignorant man professing to be a teacher, one whose tepidity and mediocrity are a stumbling block to his people.

We acknowledge all this as axiomatic, of course. We

do not even need Canon 125 to impress upon us the absolute necessity of prayer—of far more prayer than that established as a minimum for the laity. Yet see what happens. When work piles up and days grow crowded with more duties than one man seems able to handle, do we meet the pressure by saying, "My first and primary duty is prayer; no matter what other activity has to be neglected or abandoned, I *must* pray"? Is it not, rather, by some freak of logic, the other way around?

As my days grow more crowded, spiritual reading ceases, since I barely have time to scan the sport page and the funnies. My work carries me into the late evening, and the Divine Office, postponed all day, is now recited with nodding head and heavy eyes. I roll into bed clutching my rosary, and manage a decade or two before unconsciousness grips me. A sick priest is no good to anyone (I reason), and a man has to have an irreducible minimum of rest. So I sleep until the last possible moment in the morning, and make my preparation for Mass as I walk from the rectory to the church.

The picture doesn't fit every priest, thanks be to God. But it isn't purely a fanciful picture, either. It does happen. I know, because it has happened to me. And I'm not talking now about exceptional days, when a sick-call, perhaps, has kept me out half the night, or a domestic emergency has consumed half the day. I'm talking rather about the ease with which we can make *every* day an exceptional day, so that our obligation to prayer receives nothing more than the lip-service of "mafiana"—a tomorrow that never comes.

Getting down to brass tacks, there is our most inescapable prayer-duty, the Divine Office. We all recite our

Breviary daily, of course. The gravity of that obligation was so well drilled into us in the seminary that we'll manage to get it done, even if we have to read our Book by the light of the dash-lamp. Fidelity to one's Office has become almost as much the hallmark of one's priesthood as Friday abstinence has become the final test of a man's Catholicity. A Catholic who has begun to eat meat on Friday, we count as pretty definitely lost to the Church; and a priest who has begun to omit his Office would be counted as being in the last stages of disintegration. So we say our Office every day. But how?

Let me say, by way of parenthesis, that this is not a Latin scholar who speaks. A sin of my youth, from which I still suffer, was an obstinate dislike for study, especially for dull drilling on tenses, cases, and vocabulary. So I don't pick up my Breviary today in happy anticipation of the eloquence of St. Ambrose or the grandeur of St. Augustine. And I am not one of those who rejoices over the new translation of the Psalms; so far as meaning goes, I can't tell the difference from the old. I mention this only to indicate that I am not speaking from an ivory tower—a classical savant scolding those of lesser breed.

What then can a priest like myself, a Latinical incompetent, hope to get out of the recitation of his Office, aside from the merit of obedience? Well, if the obedience is wholehearted, that alone will pay well on the time invested. And my obedience *is* wholehearted if I do all that I can to make the Office a real prayer, and not a mumbo-jumbo performance that may have in it more of irreverence than of merit.

There are three things which will determine how well I say my Office and how much I get out of it: first, the

time I assign to it; secondly, the circumstances under which I recite it; and thirdly, the state of mind in which I undertake it.

As for my state of mind, it is essential that I realize the role I am fulfilling in the reading of my Breviary. I am a mouthpiece of the Church, of the *ecclesia orans.* I have been officially commissioned by the Church to speak for her in offering praise to God. I am the agent, the deputy, of the entire Mystical Body of Christ. It is not essential that I understand what I say; the Church understands what I am saying—she has put the words in my mouth. And God understands what the Church, through me, is saying. Largely unintelligible though the words I speak may be, that detracts nothing from the glory that the Church, through me, is giving to God; nor does it detract from the merit that I myself gain.

If I do understand, it is well, of course. The inspiration that I gain will be greater, the instruction that I absorb from the Fathers and the Doctors will be richer. (How I should love the opportunity to read the Divine Office daily in the vernacular!)

But, with or without understanding, the good that accrues to the Church which prays *through* me, will be a constant factor. And the merit that accrues to myself will be equal, too, so long as I come to the Office in a spirit of prayer, and make it a free and consciously directed act of divine w'orship. If I don't understand a word I say, yet read my Office reverently, with sentiments in my heart of love for God, adoration of His Divine Majesty, sorrow for my sins and in reparation for them—then even God will not ask more than this.

It hardly needs pointing out that this state of mind, this

spirit of prayer, is not easily established at eleven o'clock at night, after a busy day that leaves one mentally and physically fagged. It is not easily established, either, sprawled out in an easy chair, with one ear cocked to the radio, or one eye on the TV set. We haven't the right to complain, surely, of the burden of the Office—to say that we get nothing out of it—if we haven't given our Breviary a square deal; if we haven't come to it in a spirit of prayer, thoughtfully, reverently, and *quietly*. How insistent we are on quiet and decorum as we offer our Mass. Yet our Office, our liturgical prayer, is really an extension of our Mass, and should be only a little below it in the care with which we surround it.

The best *place* for the recitation of our Breviary is the same place where any other prayer is best said, when possible: in the presence of Christ upon the altar—in Whose Name and as one of Whose members we are praying. There are times when that will not be feasible, of course. And right here a thought occurs to me: we priests spend so much time and money in ministering to our physical comfort and enjoyment; yet how few of us take the trouble to contrive a little private oratory for ourselves which would be really conducive to prayer. A corner of our bedroom or study, with a sturdy *prie-dieu* that will have a shelf for our spiritual books; and a chair that will be comfortable without being sybaritic; a crucifix on the wall, and perhaps a little shelf above the *prie-dieu* with a statue of our Blessed Mother, and maybe a vigil light and a sprig of flowers in season. And a good light at our shoulder, of course.

The best tune? It doesn't matter too much, so long as it is a time set definitely aside for this purpose, and not

too late in the day. The half-hour immediately after breakfast, for example, or immediately before lunch, for Prime to Compline; and immediately before or after dinner for anticipating Matins and Lauds. Or if we're not the anticipating kind, then it can be Matins and Lauds in the morning, and Prime to Compline in the afternoon or early evening. (Zeal does not flag so easily, and attention does not tire so readily, if our Office is divided between two periods of the day.) But whatever time we fix, let it be held inviolable from all except the most critical emergencies. We do not let parish or personal business delay our Mass; our Breviary-time should be almost as sacred.

If we already have adopted some such plan for ourselves, then there is no hollow mockery in our words as we ask the Lord to help us pray *digne, attente, ac devote*.

4. *Mental Prayer*

The three chief duties of our priestly day are our Mass, our Divine Office, and our Meditation, in that order of importance. But while there *is* a gradation of importance, yet the three are tied together so intimately that any one cannot be neglected without the others suffering as a consequence.

The Church seems to have taken cognizance of this fact by tightening the screw a little bit as we go down each step. It is taken for granted that we shall offer our Mass, so there is no law that says we must. But there is a canon which says we *mist* recite our Divine Office daily—with the enforcement left to ourselves. At the next level the Church isn't quite so trusting—she says that the Ordinary must *see to it* that we spend some time daily in mental prayer.

My own Ordinary has never inquired into my habits of meditation—for which I am grateful, even though I

have, often enough, betrayed his trust. Not his trust alone, but the trust of all the people who depend upon me to be their "city built upon a mountain."

I know, well enough, that there is nothing whatever in my day that has right of precedence over my mental prayer—with the possible exception of administering the last Sacraments to the dying. It isn't in a spirit of deliberate indifference that we skip our meditation, not unless we're a long way down the hill.

But a fellow can sit on the side of his bed late at night, and look at the alarm clock as he pulls off his shoes, and say to himself, "This was a tough day, and every minute of it was spent doing God's work. Certainly the good Lord won't object to me taking a little extra sleep in the morning." We wouldn't dream of omitting our Mass for the sake of the extra sleep, but meditation—well, we'll make it up another time. The Lord will understand.

He does understand, of course. He understands our spiritual sloth, which hides itself under the disguise of physical activity. He understands only too well our infection with the heresy of good works, in which muscular fatigue is canonized and perspiration is confused with merit. The devil understands too, since he probably played no small part in jockeying us into such a state of mind.

It is not my intention to marshal here all the arguments in favor of meditation. There is no need to review all the authorities, from the Lloly Spirit Himself, Who says that "with desolation is all the world made desolate, because there is no one who thinketh in his heart," down through all the masters of the spiritual life who tell us,

quite simply, that there can be no real sanctity without systematic mental prayer.

We have all read the same earnest admonitions. We have all heard the same urgent warnings. It isn't that we aren't intellectually convinced of the need for meditation. It's just that. . . well . . . it's just that. . . . All right, it's just too dam hard to get up in the morning. And if we don't get our meditation in before our Mass, the odds are fantastic against getting it done during any other part of the day.

Even right after Mass doesn't work. I've tried that myself, and have found that hunger for the morning coffee and cigarette are far stronger than hunger for the consolations of the Spirit. There may be heroic souls who can make it work; but anyone as heroic as that probably will find it easy to roll out of bed half an hour earlier in the morning.

As for later in the day: well, you've probably tried it, as well as I. You've persevered for a day or two, maybe for a week or two. And then some hectic day you had to skip it, and the next day was just as bad, and the next. . . .

No, there's no use kidding myself. Either I make my meditation in the morning before Mass, or I don't make it at all. And if I *have* got into the habit of skipping meditation, it becomes progressively harder to get back on the track. Because look, I say to myself: I'm really not such a bad priest. I'm chaste and sober and decent and hard-working. I preach a good sermon and take good care of my people. I admit that daily meditation would be good, and I'll get back to it eventually. But

I'm not such a bad guy, after all, so meditation can't be *too* important.

And all the while, of course, the reason I think I'm so good is *because* I don't meditate. I don't get a good look at myself. I keep judging myself by how much worse I *could* be; even judging myself perhaps (God save Charity!) by someone else whom I consider worse than myself.

But once I get down to persistent mental prayer, I'll begin comparing myself with my true pattern, Christ—instead of with some self-fashioned blueprint of my own. I'll be almost appalled at my former complacency, as the shadows and the dark spots and the crooked lines begin to show up.

At the same time as my evaluation of self grows more realistic, so also will my peace of mind increase, by some rule of divine ratio and proportion. I shall find more satisfaction in my work, more happiness in my day. Progressively I shall find more of God in my activities, and less of self. Decisions will come easier, and my touch in all things will be surer. Because, starting each day with a good solid look at the Image I must copy, I shall come to be able to say more and more truthfully with St. Paul, "I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me"!

All that it takes, ultimately, is a brutal hand in setting the alarm clock, and an even more brutal shedding of the blankets. I don't, honestly, think that I shall sicken and die because of a half-hour less sleep each morning. (I only wish that I *could* hope to die in such a good cause!) Modern medicine has discovered that mental health contributes more to longevity than does physical perfection. It seems reasonable that daily meditation will contribute

more to my length of years than all the capsules and tablets which clutter my medicine cabinet shelf.

So I shall add a new antiphon to my night prayers: "Look, God, it's eleven-thirty now; *-please* help me get my feet over the side of that bed at five-thirty tomorrow morning!"

5. *Hearing Confessions*

One of the major problems of our priesthood is to protect ourselves against that numbing, deadening effect upon our sense of the sacred which daily intimacy with the mysteries of the Faith tends to inflict. We are dealing continually with miracles of grace, and familiarity moves in like a thick and penetrating fog. It obscures and makes dull the awe and wonder that was ours when we first spoke the words *"Hoc est enim corpus meum,"* or *"Ego te baptizo"* or *"Per istam sanctam unctionem."*

This tendency to casualness, almost to nonchalance, is perhaps nowhere more evident than in our administration of the Sacrament of Penance. From the age of seven this mystery of mercy has been a commonplace to us as recipients; and the brief thrill we felt when we first raised our hand in absolution disappeared all too soon, as penitent followed penitent and the words *"Ego te absolvo"* became mechanical upon our tongue.

We well could afford to spend several mornings of

private meditation upon the incident related in the fifth chapter of St. Luke's Gospel, when men for the first time heard human Ups give assurance of God's forgiveness of sin: "Thy sins are forgiven thee!" It is no wonder that the onlookers went away exclaiming, "We have seen wonderful things today!" It was not alone of the physical miracle that they spoke. They had seen Jesus do more amazing things than the healing of the palsied cripple. No, they had witnessed what mankind had been hungering for, unconsciously, for centuries: an assurance of release from the awful burden of sin.

It is so hard for us to realize what it must have been like to live under the ancient law of fear. Even today, the best of us face the prospect of death with a certain trepidation and feeling of misgiving. Even with all the healing and saving grace that is at our disposal, we cannot escape the uneasiness that the thought of judgment arouses. And if we have been so unfortunate as to think that we may have fallen from grace, how dark and tasteless is our day, until we have presented ourselves to the shriving hands of a fellow-priest!

So perhaps we can achieve a faint understanding of the joy that must have welled up in the hearts, not of the scribes and Pharisees, of course, but in the hearts of the simple people of good faith, who heard Christ's words to the cripple, "Thy sins are forgiven thee!" Those who heard must have felt a tremendous surge of relief to know, even vicariously, that a power had come to earth which had dominion over sin.

Outside of a rare and positive revelation, the best of souls went through life in dread uncertainty as to their relationship with God. He was so distant and silent—

and they were so fearful. The patriarchs and prophets would find it hard to understand how you and I could ever take for granted the so-facile opening of Heaven, and the so-audible descent of God's mercy, as we know it in the Sacrament of Penance.

Indeed, it was an event to shake the universe, when Christ appeared to His apostles on Easter Sunday night with the quiet greeting, "Peace be with you." The connotations of what happened then were in some ways more momentous than what had happened on the evening of the previous Thursday. That God should deign to be our food was stupendous. But that He should further deign to make us in some degree *fit* to receive him! That mankind, tossing and turning under the burden of virulent poison in its veins, should suddenly find the toxin drained away, and know blessed peace and rest at last! This is the miracle that we must never forget. It is a thought that should be in our mind every time we take our seat in the confessional.

There are other things to be remembered, too; other things that Christ tried to impress unforgettably upon us, when He entered the Upper Room on Easter Sunday night.

Fie entered a room filled with men who were sunk deep in dejection. Well they might be. In spite of the Master's repeated and explicit prophecies of His death; in spite of His emphatic avowals that His kingdom was not of this world;—to the very end the apostles basked in the expectation of an earthly reign and a temporal glory. There was great virtue among them, but there was pride and ambition too. Judas was not the only sinner.

But their dreams had come crashing down about their cars with such suddenness as to leave them helplessly dazed. From Palm Sunday to Holy Thursday everything seemed so beautifully promising. Then in a period of less than twenty-four hours they saw their Invincible One seemingly collapse in the hands of His enemies. (I never have known either sensation, but I suppose that a priest who was momentarily expecting to be appointed a bishop, if he suddenly were cited to appear before an ecclesiastical tribunal to face charges he could not answer, would experience some of the nightmare horror which the apostles had endured.)

It was with shame that they avoided each other's eyes, and had so little to say to one another. "We shall go up to Jerusalem and die with You!", they had boasted; not really believing that it might come to pass. Yet, where had been their braggadocio on Thursday night, and Friday? A mongrel dog would have been more loyal to his master, than they.

Then, with no sound of door or window opening, Christ stands in the midst of them. *There* is a scene that would repay a lot of meditation. What would *I* have felt, if I had been one of them! For an awful moment I can feel my heart jump and stop its beating. I try to swallow, and there is no saliva, even if my throat were not paralyzed. The palms of my hands grow wet, and cold sweat trickles into my eyes. My knees, my legs, begin to buckle, and I back towards the wall lest I sprawl on the floor.

But a word stops me: "Peace." And suddenly I know what peace is and begin to breathe again. And confusion and fear evaporate. And all the formless shame that

has been tormenting me wells up in one great lump of grief that bursts and disappears like a bubble of soap—as the Voice of Mercy speaks in calmness and in love: "Receive ye the Holy Spirit." As God breathed a spirit into Adam, so now a new spirit is breathed into me; a spirit that is at once forgiving, and the *power* to forgive; a spirit that at once creates, and makes me a re-creator too.

"Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them," says this Master for whose rewards I have so ignobly bargained, in Whose prophecies I have disbelieved, and from Whom I fled in His hour of need. "Whose sins you shall forgive," He says, with no word of my own derelictions. This is mercy indeed, thrice compounded. This is gentleness, this is tact and understanding that are divine.

From my meditation on that scene, I cannot turn, without a renewed realization of all that my role of confessor entails. I cannot again—at least not soon again—enter the confessional reluctantly, to assume the role of a robot-like absolution machine. Much less shall I grumpily settle myself in the box to become a harsh inquisitor, making difficult for souls that which Christ tried to make so easy.

Whether for one confession or a hundred, I shall never put the stole around my shoulders without first kneeling to ask God for the grace to be an effective channel for His mercy. As I first open the slide I shall try to be conscious of the wonder that has been entrusted to me; conscious too of the nearness of Jesus, of His presence there beside me, inspiring the advice that I must give, ratifying my every judgment.

And as the penitents come, one by one, I shall be unhurried in my handling of each soul; *of this one, here, now,* whose eternity may depend upon his moment with me. I shall rigorously shut out of my mind all thought of the long line that may be waiting. If some grow restless and leave, God has His own ways of bringing them back. And if my night's rest must be shortened, what better penance to offer for those who are weak and whose perseverance is doubtful?

Deliberate and unhurried I must be—and attentive, too. It will not be easy to keep alert, as the hours pass and there comes a steady procession of pious souls, whose pecadillos fall almost unheard upon my tiring ears. Yet they must *not* fall unheard. Because not all the stultifying sins are the big ones that bring me to attention.

If I preach on the Gospel of the Magdalen or the woman at Jacob's Well, that the lot of the harlot may be easier, in Judgment, than the lot of the prideful or the spiteful—then I owe it to those many souls who are smug in their self-righteousness, to save them from the Hell into which their own blindness may be leading them. A plain but kindly word of advice on his predominant fault can do much to awaken such a penitent from his lethargy. And I cannot speak that word unless I am listening to what he is saying; listening as though this were the only confession I had to hear this day.

Taking each confession as though it were the only one to be heard will make easier the practice of another virtue so essential to the confessor: patience. Whether it is an infrequent penitent who comes ill-prepared, and whose examination of conscience we have to make for him; or whether it is an habitual sinner who manifestly

has not followed the advice we gave him last time; whether it is a child who does not talk loud enough, and who insists on telling us things that are not sins at all; whether it is one of these or any other type of trying penitent—*I shall be patient,* as Christ would be patient. One sharp word from me may undo all the good that God's persistent grace has been trying to build up in that soul for weeks or months past.

Indeed, it is not even enough that we keep a firm hold on our human irascibility. Patience, after all, is a negative virtue. We must go further than that. We must pray for, and we must develop within ourselves, the virtue of compassion. As we bend our ear to the penitent, it must ever be with the yearning love for souls with which Christ bent over the palsied man; it must ever be with the mildness and the gentleness with which He said to His apostles, "Peace be with you."

The penitent may have entered the box stubborn, argumentative, uncontrite. It will be our tenderness, and not our harshness, that will melt his recalcitrance. God help me if I snap at a penitent, "What did you do that for?", "Don't you know any better than that?", "You don't even know what sorrow is!"—and all the other things I might say, in which the tone of my voice, even more than my words, would cut and flay instead of heal. Christ was not a browbeater, and I must avoid this devil's trap. "The bent reed thou shalt not break, and the smoking flax thou shalt not extinguish," will be my eleventh commandment.

Another quality that we recognize as basic to a fruitful administration of the Sacrament of Penance is the virtue of prudence. It seems wise to check up on ourselves

occasionally, to make sure that we *are* using the delicacy of a surgeon as we probe into tender consciences. We are content, certainly, with confessions that are integral; we are more apt to be wearied than otherwise by unpertinent additions. But there are times when we must be content with the barest minimum of integrity, lest our attempts to make the penitent be more specific in his avowal also make the sacrament odious to the sinner.

It is here, especially, that prudence will be quick to detect a shame that is too deep for open avowal. It is here that prudence will meet the penitent on his own terms of half-revelation, rather than implant in him a fear of the sacrament, which may be a barrier to further progress.

It is prudence, too, that will move us to weigh well our answers to penitents' questions, and our solutions of their problems. Snap judgments, particularly in doubtful matters, have no place in the guidance of souls. A lawyer, faced with a fine point of law, is not ashamed to tell a client that he must wait for an answer until competent authorities have been consulted. We confessors can be no less cautious. We dare not let vanity prod us into stating as a fact, a principle or a solution that is uncertain or half-forgotten in our own minds.

An indirect result of our zeal for the Sacrament of Penance will be to move us to preach this sacrament frequently. Considering its importance, twice a year would not be too often, surely, for a sermon on Confession. Two things, I think, need special emphasis. The first is an explanation of the Sacrament of Penance as a means of perfection. So many people have the idea that Confession is a curative medicine only, to be used for

healing purposes when the soul is infected with serious sin. They need to be reminded constantly that it is a preventive medicine also; that the special grace of this sacrament is to build up a resistance to sin, the way inoculation or vitamins build up resistance to disease; that virtues can be much more easily acquired when we invigorate ourselves regularly and frequently with the strength of spirit that absolution can give.

The second point which needs emphasis in our preaching is the foolishness of being afraid, anyone, ever, to go to Confession. A reminder to our people of the meaning of the Seal of Confession will help here; reminding them of how next-to-impossible it is for the priest to know the penitent's identity; but reminding them further that even if the priest did know the penitent, he could not ever, in any way, refer afterwards to what has been told him in Confession—not even to the penitent himself. A few graphic examples will help, here.

But above all we should drive home the point that the priest never listens with contempt to the avowal of sins, however grave or seemingly shameful the sins may be. We must make plain that the priest has a great love and compassion for the sinner, even as Christ has; so that, the bigger the sin, the happier the priest is to welcome the sinner to repentance, and the greater is the admiration of the priest at the humility of him who confesses. A reminder, too, that the priest himself goes to Confession, and knows the penitent's viewpoint, may be a new thought to some.

And let us give assurance that a priest never scolds, in Confession. The confessor may try to help by showing the penitent where he has gone astray; the confessor may

instruct on the steps the penitent must follow to avoid a relapse into sin; but the confessor will *never* scold. (And of course we must stick together, all of us, to see that this promise is kept!)

As another by-product of his zeal for the Sacrament of Penance, the good pastor will see to it that his people have the opportunity, at least a few times in the year, to receive absolution from a visiting confessor. We may think we know our parish well; we may be convinced that we have a parish of saints. But just as surely as we announce that a strange confessor is coming to our church (in the smaller towns, particularly), just so surely will there be souls in the congregation who will breathe a sigh of relief, and be waiting for the visitor when he comes.

Finally, and above all, we shall pray for our penitents. Each time we leave the confessional we shall kneel before the altar to pray for those whose souls have just passed through our hands. Every Mass that we offer will contain a special memento for our penitents. We shall pray for their perseverance, and that grace may remedy our own defects of administration. We shall pray that our penitents may not be our accusers, when mercy shall have given way to justice and we stand before our Master's tribunal. Then indeed shall he be blessed, as he gives an account of his talents: the confessor who has practiced the patience, and the compassion, and the mercy of Christ.

6. *Preaching*

The mission of the Church is to teach, govern, and sanctify souls. The mission of the Church is our mission, too. The reason for the existence of the Church is the reason for our existence as priests. Unless we are called to the administration of a diocese, we have little to do with the governance of souls. But we have everything to do with the teaching and the sanctification of souls.

We fulfill our duty of sanctification through the administration of the sacraments; particularly and most fruitfully through the offering of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. But he will profit little by the Mass who does not know the Mass. He will gain a minimum of grace from the sacraments, who receives them in ignorance or misunderstanding. He will serve God in stingy fashion who does not love God with an all-consuming love. And his love for God will be weak indeed who does not know God as He really is.

Old stuff, of course, this emphasis on our duty of preaching. But I think that those who have weathered a few years in the ministry will agree that it is a duty in which we have to keep continually prodding ourselves. I know that I, for one, have all but forgotten the thrill that was mine the first time I laid the Gospel book down on the pulpit and began, "My dear friends in Christ. . .

It was a justifiable thrill, too. Because, in a sense, I was just as much a direct agent of Christ in that moment as I was a few minutes later when I leaned over the altar and murmured, *"Hoc est enim corpus meum."* The Holy Ghost was just as actively working through me in that moment as He had been the night before when I had whispered, *"Ego te absolvo."* The thrill of that first sermon is one that I ought to feel every time I ascend the pulpit. I ought to, but of course I don't. Human nature is too fickle, and repetition dulls the edge of even the most sacred emotion.

But it still remains true that the cause of Christ is never so completely in my hands as when I fold those hands across my stomach and fix the congregation with what I hope is an arresting eye. If we might ignore the fine points of theology, we almost could call preaching the eighth sacrament. It is not for nothing that we must be ordained before we can preach. It is not for nothing that we wear a stole for this sacred function. It was not for nothing that the apostles ordained deacons to feed the poor and to care for material administration, so that they themselves might be freer to attend to the ministry of the Word.

The Word! Spelled with a capital W. That is the key to it all. Because when we preach, we are handling the

Word of God, the Wisdom of the Father. And the Word is Christ. We are handling Christ, admittedly, in a different mode than in the Eucharist, but it is the same Christ Who is dependent upon us. Before we were ordained, while we still were laymen, we might talk as often or as long as anyone would listen. But it was only after ordination that our talk became preaching. It was only then that our words acquired sacramental value. So that, concomitantly with our words, God's grace flowed out over our hearers, to penetrate dull minds and touch laggard hearts, and so effect entry for our words.

And so the health of the Church rises and falls with the frequency and the quality of our preaching. There are countries today, nominally Catholic, where unbelief, anti-clericalism, and radicalism are rife; largely, we are told, because preaching was neglected. Where everyone was Catholic, there seemed little need for explanation of truths which were accepted from the cradle. But the faith languished, vocations starved and died, and the Church suffered. None of us, I am sure, would care to succeed to a parish where, say for a period even of ten years, no sermons had been preached except on the great feasts and during Lent.

We are very conscientious, God be thanked, about offering Mass and administering the sacraments. We are very attentive to the duties of visiting the sick and instructing converts. But in our hierarchy of values, we dare not let anything come between these and our preaching. Not temporal administration, not money-raising, not athletics, and above all, not our personal pleasure. It is easy for us to see ourselves clothed with Christ as we stand at the altar or kneel by a sickbed. But

we have to keep continually goading ourselves lest we forget our Christlikcness when we stand in the pulpit.

For myself, whenever I meditate upon Judgment, a good bit of my uneasiness arises from remembered derelictions in this very matter. I look back to weeks when I have been very busy with pastoral duties, but not too busy to read the trivialities of the daily news, to enjoy the sedative reading of a secular magazine, or to listen to a few favorite radio programs. I look back to weeks such as that, when I have come into the rectory after Saturday night confessions and, just before going to bed, have decided to see what the Gospel is about for tomorrow. What kind of a sermon did I prepare, I wonder, with a mind so tired and a spirit so lethargic? And should I not fear that in Judgment souls may rise up to level an accusing finger at me, because I was to have spoken the Word that might have saved them, and did not? Pointed, soul-jarring, interest-fixing thoughts were needed, and I mouthed platitudes.

In this, as in so many of our clerical shortcomings, we sometimes try to pass the blame back to our seminary training. There was a time, perhaps, when the professor of sacred eloquence seemed to be chosen for his piety and knowledge of English grammar. Necessary qualities, both of them. But I am sure that for today's professor of pulpit oratory, quickness of imagination and skill in the art of persuasion have been added to the list of qualifications. There are few seminaries—if any—in which the Homiletics courses is any longer relegated to a minor spot in the seminary curriculum; as though the "how" of saying a thing mattered very little.

But even we of the older generation would be childish

indeed, were we to take refuge in any real or fancied failure of our seminary training. Because the real failure, if there is one, is far more likely to be in our own lack of conscientious application and industry. The best seminary training in the world would not enable me to prepare a soul-searing and soul-saving sermon on Sunday morning as I walk from the rectory to the church. There is a lot of jolting about the "*dabitur vobis.*" Actually there *is* a *dabitur vobis for* the preacher; the Holy Ghost *will* inspire and direct him. But it will be in his serious and conscientious effort at preparation that the inspiration will come; not in an eleventh-hour-and-fifty-ninth-minute frenzied search for something to say.

Always, in preaching, the first job is to decide what to talk about. The easy way is to glance through the Gospel of the Sunday, and then repeat the same hoary admonitions that we preached a year ago—or two years ago; the same pious cliches that our people have been listening to from us and from our predecessors for time without end. Not that repetition isn't good. But we all know how stifling that kind of repetition can be.

It is so unnecessary, too. There isn't a Sunday Gospel that will not yield a rich variety of thoughts and lessons, if we are willing to expend more than a modicum of effort, and if we prod our thinking with a good commentary. There is such need today for good punchy sermons which will make vivid to our people the implications of their membership in Christ's Mystical Body; sermons that will give them a vision of their dignity as children of God; sermons that will shatter their lethargy and arouse them to the lay apostleship for which the Holy Father pleads.

A simple solution, of course, for the ever-recurring problem of "What to say?" is to preach a course of sermons. We all are familiar with the fact that the great majority of our Catholics are ill-instructed. Even those who attended Catholic schools have to a great extent forgotten in adulthood what they learned as children. Moreover, as their minds mature, they find that their earlier religious concepts often are inadequate to cope with the exigencies of today's living.

A course on the Commandments, for example, will give us opportunity to talk about racial justice and to attack the sin and scandal of segregation. It will enable us to talk about Christian ethics in business—about jerry-built houses, maybe, that are sold at twice their worth. It will afford us a chance, too, to preach (with the Popes beside us) of social justice in industry, of the inequities of a system which denies the worker a fair share of the wealth he has helped to create. (And may God give us the courage to preach such needed sermons, even though our wealthy best-giver is sitting in the front pew!)

Then—how long to talk? The old saw that after twenty minutes the preacher is talking to no one but himself is not wholly valid. Visiting lecturers will come to town, and people will pay good money to listen to them for forty-five minutes or an hour. But those lectures have been planned and re-planned, written and re-written. There is only partial truth in the old joke about the man who could talk for two hours on a moment's notice, but needed a whole day to prepare a five-minute discourse. A long talk that is a *good* talk needs a lot of preparation.

However, in most city churches, long talks are out of

the question. The church must be emptied and another congregation admitted. But even with Masses every hour, there should be time for something more than a three-minute fervorino. It takes more than three minutes to present a thought adequately to one's listeners, turning the thought about, the way one might turn a jewel in one's hand, so that every facet may be seen and appreciated.

It takes time to present illustrations and similes and examples and stories—the tools of speech which make all the difference between a good sermon and a dull one—the tools which Christ Himself used so freely. It is not for me to lay down any hard-and-fast rule. But it seems hardly possible that a good sermon could be preached in less than ten minutes, with fifteen a more desired optimum.

Then there arises the eternal question: to write, or not to write? Should our weekly sermons be committed to paper, or is it enough simply to think out our sermon, and with its outline firmly fixed in our mind, to preach with some degree of spontaneity? Well, we all know the answer to that, whether or not we act upon it. There is no better sermon than one that has been well thought out, then written out, then corrected and revised. No glib-tongued extempore speaker can beat that kind of preparation. Even though we do not memorize what we have written, the very fact of writing will so fix the thoughts in mind as to make delivery a pleasure, rather than a nervous strain.

Writing the sermon out in full also will give us opportunity to polish our style. We can tighten up our sen-

tences, for example, sometimes making an adjective take the place of an entire clause. Notice the difference between sentence (a), "Our Blessed Lord has great compassion for sinners, and no one needs to fear approaching Him, however great his sins may be," and sentence (b), "No sinner, however depraved, need fear to approach the compassionate Christ." There are twenty-two words in the first sentence, and only eleven words in the second; yet they say the same thing.

One of the greatest benefits of a written sermon is that it enables us to eliminate those pet phrases which we all acquire in the course of time, phrases which grow meaningless to our hearers because we use them so often. Like the priest who never speaks of the sacrament of Penance without calling it, "The sacred tribunal of Penance"; or the priest who never speaks of eternity without referring to, "The blessed vision of God in Heaven." Nice phrases, both of them, but monotonous when they creep into every sermon.

Yes, the written sermon unquestionably is the ideal, and all praise to the man who has the character to make it his weekly practice. But I should be a hypocrite if I said, "This is the way it must be done," when I'm not doing it myself.

If we follow the alternative, and preach from an outline, there is one essential, it seems to me, to making our sermon effective: we must write out, or at least fully *think* out, our introduction and conclusion. So much depends upon getting the interest of our listeners right at the start; still more depends upon leaving them with what a radio performer would call a strong punch-line—

the whole gist of our sermon balled up tightly into one final sentence or short paragraph that the hearer will carry away and not easily forget.

And when all is said and done about the mechanics of this tremendous responsibility of preaching: the preparation for it by meditation and reading, the perspiration for it by thinking and writing; when all is said and done, there remains the one over-all *sine qua non* of fruitful pulpit oratory: the living of what we preach. It was a wise ancient who said, "I cannot hear what you say, for the noise of what you do!"

No matter how polished the rhetoric, I cannot preach upon temperance or mortification if I am known as a tippler and a "good liver." I cannot preach upon poverty if I am known to love the good things of life. I cannot preach the Mass if my own speed and slovenliness at the altar give the lie to all that I say. An oratorical genius without virtue is no match for a tongue-tied saint. Skill and mechanics will constitute about one-tenth of a good sermon. The other nine-tenths consists in the utter sincerity of my words, the interior assent to and practice of what I propound.

And may my first assent be to the truth of this: that preaching is one of my proudest privileges as a priest—the heralding of the Good Tidings, the handling of God's Word. To this truth also: that there are few duties of my priesthood to which it can take second place; and that there are few priestly obligations upon which, after my Mass, I shall be more searchingly scrutinized at Judgment.

It was not idly that Paul so solemnly warned Timothy: "Attend unto reading, to exhortation and to doctrine.

Neglect not the grace that is in thee, which was given thee . . . with imposition of the hands of the priesthood. Take heed to thyself and to doctrine: be earnest in them. For in doing this thou shalt both save thyself and them that hear thee."

7. *Poverty*

Something which we are apt to forget, with regard to the threefold counsels of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience, is the fact that Christ proffered His counsels to everyone, not just to an elite few. In fact, it is possible even to forget that when we call them "counsels," we are not intended to infer that they are a matter of indifference. As though a man might choose to be poor, or chaste, or obedient, only if and when the spirit moved him.

This misconception is particularly widespread with regard to the counsel of Poverty. In spite of our corny jokes about the religious priest taking the vow of poverty and the secular priest keeping it, it is generally true that we regard the obligation of poverty as something pretty much limited to monastic enclosures. We forget that when Christ lived there were no monks or nuns. It wasn't to a Jesuit or a Franciscan that He spoke when He said, "Go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor,

and come follow Me." It was to a very ordinary sort of person that Christ spoke; to someone who wanted to do a little more than the minimum, to someone who felt some stirrings of desire to encompass a little more than the bare essentials of sanctity.

It was only as the monastic and religious Orders were founded, with the counsels as a *sine qua non of* membership, that people began to take the comfortable view that poverty, chastity, and obedience could properly exist only within the framework of canonical vows. They ceased to be universal ideals, desirable for all and accessible to all.

Especially poverty. Because, of course, chastity—according to one's state in life—is so inescapably imposed by natural and divine positive law, that a vow merely becomes a secondary bulwark. The obligation to obedience also is sufficiently explicit as to leave in bad conscience anyone who would defy his lawful superiors. But poverty? Hmmm. Anyone who undertakes that, outside religion, is likely to be classed either as a fanatic or as an impractical idealist.

All this in spite of the fact that Christ hammered away at the importance of poverty far more than He emphasized the necessity of chastity or obedience. Because He well knew, of course, where emphasis was needed. Even good pagans might abhor the gross sins of the flesh, and unaided reason could demonstrate the right order involved in obedience. But as for detachment from the material goods of this world: well, the Son of God Himself has trouble pounding that into the heads of His followers.

Did it ever occur to us, I wonder, that when Christ

said, "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God," He didn't exempt priests from the grim warning? Riches, we have to remind ourselves, is a relative thing. It takes much less to make a rich priest than to make a rich industrialist. Not only in a literal sense, because of fewer material needs—lack of dependents and greater economic security. But in a larger sense also, because as priests our obligation to detachment is so much greater, and the harm we may do ourselves by any degree of covetousness is so much more imminent. A little materialism in a priest is like a little pepper in one's coffee; it has no place there at all.

There is no need to stress the great harm that has come to the Church, the great scandal that has been given, by clerical acquisitiveness. I am not referring to the tonsured magnificence of the Renaissance, to the beneficed lords of times past. I am thinking of more contemporary incidents, such as the death of a priest whose will, admitted to probate, reveals assets perhaps of a hundred thousand dollars or more. Bequests to charity can never take the sting out of such a will, any more than holy water can make fish out of meat. The question always in the public mind is, "Where did he *get* so much money? Why did he hang onto it?" If a priest finds himself receiving money out of proportion to his needs, surely the time to give it to charity is now, while it still *is* an act of charity; not after death, when the grave has tom it forcibly from his grasp.

It is only in passing that I refer to such incidents, because few of us are in danger of leaving a fortune behind us. But instead of congratulating ourselves that we are

not as the rest of men, we shall do better to subject ourselves to a searching survey, as to our own particular fulfillment of the obligation to poverty. I say "obligation," because the apostles are our pattern of priestly sanctity; we are not wholly formed as priests until we can say with Peter, "Behold, we have left all tilings to follow Thee!" It is for us to accept joyfully the invitation which the rich young man declined sorrowfully. It is for us to come after Christ in genuine poverty of spirit, and to see in the Church's legislation for holders of benefices a rule of conduct for ourselves: the distribution to the poor of all income beyond our actual needs.

How may we offend against the virtue of poverty? It is with a considerable degree of trepidation that I propose that question. It is, to begin with, a touchy subject. Then there is the added presumption of me, a secular priest, undertaking to examine the consciences of my colleagues on a matter in which I myself am far from perfect. My only defense is that it is Christ, not myself, Whom I would propose as a pattern. My only excuse is the hope that, in speaking to others, I may be shamed into doing more myself.

How then may we safeguard the spirit of poverty in our priestly lives? First of all by scrutinizing our lives for evidences of superfluities in things material. There is, for example, the everyday matter of transportation. A priest today needs a car, and he needs a car that is sound of wind and limb, a car that will get him there dependably, and get him back. But there are many cars on the market today that will fill the bill, below the Cadillac or Chrysler level; yes, even below the Buick or Packard level. I am fingering here a tender point, I know. Many

good priests, exemplary priests, drive big cars. "Some of my best friends drive Cadillacs and Chryslers," I could truthfully say.

And yet, let us make this a moment of complete honesty. Let us admit that there *is* a spirit of materialism involved, when we spend several hundred dollars extra for a car, when a Ford or Chevrolet or Plymouth would get us, just as quickly and just as surely, where we want to go. Can we quite deny the incongruity of a priest behind the wheel of a top-drawer job? Not to mention the scandal (maybe not a big one, but a widespread one) of a pastor who drives through his parish in the latest model super-duper, while most of his parishioners have to be content with older and more modest jalopies? I shall not belabor the point. I do not wish to identify myself as a Jansenist or a Manichean. I can only say, Thank God for the love and loyalty of our people, who so seldom give voice to what must sometimes be a source of troubled thoughts to them.

What is true of automobiles is true also of many other things in a priest's life. There are the summer "cottages" that often are better homes than many of our flock have for year-around living. There are expensive vacations at expensive hotels, beautiful leather golf-bags loaded with enough irons to break a caddy's back, costly cameras, the best in television sets. In fact, the *best* in *everything*—which so often seems characteristic of our care of ourselves; all the baubles which so often we seem to use as opiates against that inner, restless urge to a greater sanctity. None of these things is necessarily sinful, nor even an occasion of sin. But they are attachments which are outside the love of God. As someone has pointed out

(I think it was St. John of the Cross), a silk thread will serve as well as a rope, to keep a bird from flying.

Then, there is another way in which we may fail in poverty, which is less easily detected because it hides itself under a mask of selflessness. This is the self-attachment of the priest who has made his parish a projection of himself. I can keep my people bent and groaning under a constant financial burden, supposedly all for the glory of God, when in reality it is for the glory of me, Father Biggus. "I'm not doing this for myself," I piously tell my people: "It's your parish, you're the ones who will benefit, not I." And so I pass over the plans for a modest and solid structure that would be adequate, and proceed with a magnificent edifice that will open the eyes of other pastors and be a lasting monument to myself—God rest my people when I'm gone.

It is all very well for me to say that nothing is too good for the House of God. But do I mean just here in my own prosperous parish, or do I mean everywhere? If I am to apply the thumb-rule of poverty that seems basic to this virtue: that I have no right to two coats, so long as my neighbor has none; then the thought of shabby clapboard churches in our own South and West, of thatch and bamboo chapels in mission lands, may move me to blue-pencil some of my own specifications.

There are varying degrees of this vicarious acquisitiveness. We can—unconsciously—identify ourselves with our parish to the point where we look upon any falling off in revenue as a personal affront. It is this state of mind that is responsible for most of the "money talk," the Sunday-after-Sunday carrying of the dollar sign into the pulpit, which is a scandal to the weak and a source of

uneasy shame to the strong. The pathetic part of it is, that after I have put on my weekly act of scolding and cajoling, I end up probably with less of a return than the pastor who gives his "money talk" once a year, and is content the rest of the year with an occasional commendation of the parishioners' generosity.

We have to watch ourselves, too, in the matter of stole-fees. Even the best of us, whose personal wants are few and who give their surplus to charity, can become demanding in the matter of stole-fees. I have often wished, myself, that the whole system of stole-fees could be abolished, but it has been with us for a long time and doubtless will remain the established practice of the Church. Yet, it would be such a pleasure to be able to smile and shake my head and say, "I can't take any offering for the administration of a sacrament; that's what I'm here for; it's all provided for in my salary." As things stand, I hardly may do that; I may not sabotage an approved custom of the Church. But when someone asks, "How much will that be, Father?" I still can smile, and I can answer, "Whatever you want to give; whatever you feel you can afford." I can watch a baby carried away from the font without calling the godparents back to tell them, "You forgot something; that will be two dollars, please." I can even watch a hundred dollars' worth of flowers being carted out of church after a flashy wedding and finger the five-dollar offering in my pocket without bursting a blood vessel-even though I had expected at least twenty-five.

Let's put it this way: any time that anxiety, annoyance, or resentment on my part is concerned with money, then I am failing in the virtue of poverty, I am lacking

in detachment. And it is no adequate defense to say, "It's the parish that I'm thinking of, not myself." I am sure that Christ must feel far more at home in the somewhat shabby church of a priest who is a poor money-getter but a gentle shepherd of his flock, than in the glistening and gold-leafed showcase of the hard-driving executive who finds godliness in blueprints.

There is so much more that could be said about this virtue of poverty. The need of a priest to be an open-handed man of charity, finding more pleasure in giving ten dollars to a family of seven than spending the same ten dollars on a roll of color film for his movie camera. Sharing the contents of his wallet (however thin he may have to spread it) with every worthy appeal that the postman brings. Leading a life, not necessarily of penury, but of simplicity, content with the ordinary comforts and decencies that the ordinary workingman has to be content with. Giving no part of our heart to the world, nor craving the luxuries that the world would have us think necessities. Strong in the faith, which never shall be betrayed, that God will not be outdone in generosity. Scorning to hoard against a future that God already has guaranteed.

"Then Peter answering, said to Him: Behold we have left all things, and have followed Thee: What therefore shall we have? And Jesus said to them: Amen I say to you, that you who have followed Me, and everyone that hath left house or brethren or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands for My Name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall possess life everlasting" (Matt, xix, 27-28).

8. *Chastity*

Why did we take the vow of chastity, anyway? The obvious and the easy answer is that we *had* to take the vow of chastity if we wanted to become priests; and we did want to become priests. But to give the real answer, the essential answer, we have to recall what is involved in our vow of chastity.

God, we know, could have provided for the propagation of the human race in many alternative ways. He could have provided for some process of self-germination. He could have had us grow up out of the ground, like stalks of corn. He could have directly created each human body, as He already does create each human soul.

Instead, He chose to share with human beings His own creative power. In His infinite goodness, He chose to make us male and female, so that men and women might cooperate with Him in bringing into existence human beings, destined to live for all eternity. Husband,

wife, and God: a Trinity spanning Heaven and earth. Precisely because it *is* a sharing of God's own creative power, the sexual faculty is a holy and a sacred gift, not by its nature something nasty and degrading; a truth we priests cannot stress too strongly in our talks on marriage and holy purity.

The procreative faculty is, then, outside the realm of grace, our most precious possession. We have not taken the vow of chastity because the power to propagate is a shameful thing, unworthy of a priest. We have taken our vow of chastity because in our love for God, we have been moved to offer to Him our most treasured natural gift, the one with which man is most loath to part—and therefore the one most worthy of the God Whom we profess to love with all the power of our being.

I do not say that it is an adequate gift. There is only one adequate gift that we can offer to God, and that is His Christ in the Mass. But at least we may call it a proportionate gift, this surrendering back to God of the awesome power of life which He has implanted within us. It is the part of love to give, and *give,* and GIVE. How often we read of human lovers who in their sensual infatuation have not only stripped themselves of material possessions, but even have sacrificed honor and betrayed trust, in order to give and give to the object of their affections.

We do not admire or condone such madness. But this tawdry caricature of love should make us realize that there must be a sort of holy madness in our love for God. If indeed we may call "madness" an impulse which is so supremely logical: the abandoning to God

of our physical fecundity, in loving gratitude for the spiritual fertility which God has bestowed upon us: the sharing with us of His highest creative power, the power to beget saints rather than progeny.

It is important, I think, that we steep ourselves in this conviction—this view of our vow of chastity as a gift of love and gratitude freely offered to God; the surrender of something treasured, a token offered for something far more precious. If we regard our vow merely in a negative light, as a denial of self for the purpose of discipline, or as a penance imposed by the Church to ensure a more efficient clergy—then indeed will our vow be a heavy burden, and our temptations a constant crucifixion.

Because of course there will be temptations. With many of us, the full force of what our renunciation means doesn't strike us until some time after ordination. The sheltered life we led in the seminary, the careful reverence of friends and acquaintances, the eager anticipation with which we looked forward to receiving the tremendous power to consecrate and to forgive—all these things brought us to subdiaconate and priesthood by a fairly easy path. Celibacy, we felt, would be a cinch; a small price to pay for our admission to the sanctuary.

The very jokes we told in the seminary, it seems to me, were a gauge of our innocence, and a sign of the lightness in which we held the grand gesture of "the Step." Did you ever notice how, as the years pass, those jokes lose their humor, and are so seldom heard in a gathering of older priests? Which brings to mind the distinction we must make between innocence and virtue. We call a child innocent, but we do not call a child virtuous. Innocence has not become virtue until it has

faced temptation, and conquered; using the word "virtue," of course, in its popular sense.

We are familiar with the idea of temptation being a gift of God, at least permissively; yet when *we* are the recipients of such gifts, we view them reluctantly. We know that there can be no crown without a cross, but we do wish that our own particular cross might take some less violent form. We must, however, evaluate our temptations aright, and in their very severity see the measure of the degree of glory God has in mind for us. The great saints have not been men and women who tripped lightly through life without temptation. The great spiritual heroes have been men and women who have wrestled with great temptations and have, for love of God, been victors.

Well, where does our danger lie? I must confess right here that I often have listened with something close to impatience to retreat-masters discoursing on "the dangers from the opposite sex." My impatience has been due, no doubt, to my memory of my own mother and sister, and all the countless good and holy women I have known. I don't think that any woman will pose a real threat to any man's virtue, unless the man himself is already "on the prowl." We priests need to exercise discretion, certainly. But it is a discretion that is learned at the *prie-dieu,* rather than from a volume of pastoral theology. If a priest were to betray his vow, his fall wouldn't begin with a lack of discretion. It would begin with a neglect of the spirit and practice of prayer.

The man of prayer, the priest close to God, moves through his priestly work unworried and unafraid. His spiritual vision is acute. He is quick to recognize danger

and quick to heed its signals. I honestly feel that for the priest of good will, the danger to chastity from without is not the arresting problem that it sometimes is represented to be.

But there still is the problem of our temptations from within. There are the thrusts of rebellious nature, reluctant to obey a wounded will. It is here that the greater danger lies, even for the man of good will, the man of prayer. There is danger from the sheer spiritual fatigue of constantly parrying the probings and prickings of our adversary, week after week, year after year. Always hoping that time will bring surcease, yet always finding the same old enemy waiting for us when a moment's idleness befalls us, when tensions build up, when nerves are ragged from pressure and strain. It is the weary monotony of it all that constitutes the greatest threat to our love for God. And we need not be ashamed if we are moved to cry out with St. Paul, "O Lord, please deliver me from this sting of the flesh."

The answer of course is the same that St. Paul got, "My grace is sufficient for thee!" That is the thing we have to keep hammering home to ourselves: that God's grace *is* sufficient. There is no temptation powerful enough to defeat the omnipotence of His love. There is never a time when the devil can catch God napping. There is never a time when anyone can say in honesty, "I sinned because I couldn't help it."

But it is not enough to be conscious of God's ever-present grace surrounding us like a bulwark, bearing us up, impenetrating the cracks and crevices of our human weakness. We must be conscious of the *weakness,* too. We must totally abandon all confidence in ourselves,

because it is confidence in self that bars entry to grace. We have to tell ourselves over and over again that there's no sin in the book that we couldn't commit and wouldn't commit, if it were not for God's grace.

It is this totally unfounded confidence in self that can account for many habitual sins. The sinner turns from his surrender to temptation, and in a combination of angry disgust and wounded pride (a far cry from contrition!), he vows, "I'll *not* do that again; I'll *not* be such a fool; I'll *not* be such a weakling!" And all the while the truth of it is that he *is* exactly that kind of a fool, that kind of a weakling. All of us are, priests included. We have to impress upon ourselves our innate weakness, so that we can say, and mean every word of it, "Dear Master, I'm a pushover for the least of Satan's wiles; please keep me tied up tight in the protective bonds of Your grace."

This honesty with ourselves must extend to other points, too. We must be as objective in our judgment of ourselves as we would be with a penitent in the confessional. It is the part of human deviousness to want to give ourselves all the breaks, theologically speaking. We know that so far as matter is concerned, there is no "little" sin against chastity. But we could, were we not vigilant, manage to juggle "sufficient reflection" and "full consent of the will" to the point where an overt sin would become a semi-deliberate act or merely a strong temptation. We would be quick to disillusion a penitent of such self-blindness; we must be equally objective with ourselves. Unless we are mercilessly honest with ourselves, God's eager grace will have to stand by in frustration, powerless to help us.

We must be honest with our confessor, too. We know what power the Sacrament of Penance affords for the resisting of temptation. A^accination is not one-tenth so effective in opposing the germ of smallpox as the grace of Confession is in opposing sin. But of what benefit could Confession be, if it were filled with evasions, half-truths, and specious avowals. Into what complete atrophy a person might fall, if once he began to tamper with the integrity of Confession. He could be so smugly sure that all was right with God, even while his soul might be petrifying in unacknowledged sin.

Honesty, honesty, honesty. That is our part in safeguarding chastity. Honesty with ourselves, honesty with our confessor, honesty with God. Only by such honesty shall wle keep from snatching back from God by stealth the gift we so proudly presented to Him in public on the day of our subdiaconate. And surely such honesty is little enough to exact of ourselves, when God's grace, God's love, is doing all the rest. It is because of the universal human tendency to self-deceit, that it seems wisest to lean over backwards in our attempts to be objective with ourselves. I should not presume to re-edit the moral theology books. But in this particular case, we cannot do better than to give the benefit of the doubt to the Sacrament of Penance. At the same time I would emphasize what we all know, and did know long before we were priests: that we simply cannot sin without intending to. That a temptation can be persistent, and obstinate, and diabolically recurrent, without being sinful at all. That such temptations in fact can be a tremendous source of merit and a grand promise of glory.

Certainly there is no priest who is trying his best to

be a true man of God—putting his prayer-life above and ahead of his external activity—who need fear mortal sin, whether it be against chastity or any other virtue. I do not think that any priest who faithfully and consistently makes a half-hour meditation every morning need fear for his chastity. If he meditates every day, then everything else will fall in line. His Mass will be devoutly offered, his Divine Office will be prayed with recollection (if not with understanding), he will manage time for a daily visit to the Blessed Sacrament and for a few minutes of spiritual reading before he goes to bed. He will end his day with a frank and sincere examination of conscience, and he probably will go to bed with a rosary in his hand.

A man just can't live a day like that, and then ignore God's outstretched Hand when a storm of temptation tries to blast him off his feet. A man can't love God twenty-three hours and fifty-nine minutes of the day, and then betray that love for a single moment's pleasure and gratification.

A quarter-century ago and more, I made mv first retreat as a priest. I recall that I was mildly scandalized at two talks the retreat-master gave—one on mortal sin and one on chastity. Such talks seemed so out of place, directed to the disciples of the Lord. At best, it seemed time wasted that could so much better have been given to more inspiring and challenging subjects.

That was a long time ago, and I was fresh from the seminary—not good, but innocent. With the passing years, I've seen a brother priest, now and then, drop out of sight. I've come to know myself better, too. And I look back to the young fellow I was with a certain

nostalgic sorrow, or maybe pity. I would that I and all my fellow priests, young and old, might have preserved that starry-eyed idealism through the years.

But whatever toll time may have taken, in innocence if not in virtue, we have not, I hope, grown cynical. I myself have come to see the fabric of our common priesthood, not as a diaphanous thing of light and brightness, but as a tough warp and woof of quiet struggle and dogged perseverance. A coarser weave than I thought, but more enduring. It is a priesthood I am proud to be a part of. It is a priesthood whose fidelities witness daily to the invincibility of God's grace. So in courage and perseverance we shall weather our storms, whose raging gusts can never drown out the Voice that is our hope, "Aly grace is sufficient for thee!"

9. *Obedience*

Benedictine monks take only one vow: the vow of obedience. Since poverty and chastity already are prescribed by their Holy Rule, no specific vow beyond that of obedience is necessary.

Secular priests likewise take but one vow: that of chastity. Poverty and obedience are so inherent in the ideal of the priesthood, that explicit vows would be a matter of supererogation. The types of poverty and obedience peculiar to the secular priesthood differ in application and sanction from that of the regulars—but their urgency is none the less real. A worldly priest, we ail recognize, is a living contradiction. So is a self-willed priest, although I am not so sure that we are as quick to recognize, here, the inconsistency.

Poverty, chastity, obedience—all these are merely parts of the total love which we expressed when we exclaimed, with Peter, "Behold, we have left all things to follow Thee." Through many years of careful appraisal, we

reached the conclusion that there was nothing of value in all creation, except the Christ Who called us.

And so we willingly surrendered the right to physical paternity. We cheerfully renounced—at least as an ideal—superfluous possessions. We even gave up (surely we must have realized what we were doing?) the one thing which fallen nature is most loath to part with: attachment to our own will.

In our catechetical instructions, we point out, time and again, that the Christian moral code is simply a manifestation of love. "If you love Me, keep My commandments." We point out that love for God is not a matter of feeling or emotion; much less of speech. It is a matter of *doing,* of *willing*. "We can say that we love God until we are blue in the face," we may tell a prospective convert, "but if we do not do what God asks us, then our words, and even our palpitating hearts, are lies and delusions."

It's funny, isn't it (in a sad sort of way), how we can finish an instruction like that, and then maybe five minutes later hit the ceiling as we open a letter from our Ordinary and find our diocesan taxes upped, or some privilege curtailed? We wouldn't dream of deliberately breaking one of the Commandments; God's Voice still thunders too unmistakably from Sinai. But it is so easy to forget that God speaks also through the voices of our superiors. And since the folly of men is the wisdom of God, it follows surely that His Will is found just as definitely in a seemingly stupid or ill-advised directive as it is in an admittedly smart chancery decision.

If called upon to give direction to a nun, we do not hesitate to point out to her that, even if her superior's

command appears unwise, the superior still must be given the benefit of the doubt. "Whether your superior's request is wise or not, dear Sister, just do the best you can, and the merit of your obedience before God will be the greater." At some time or other, most of us have given advice along those lines; but have we given it to ourselves?

We grow understandably disturbed if we hear that some parishioner has criticized our omniscience in matters of parochial administration. But on higher levels it is different; it is always open season on bishops and their delegates. It is so hard to see God's handwriting in a pastoral letter. Synodal decrees, rubrics of the ritual or missal, even Papal encyclicals, often are accepted with the proviso (in our own mind) that they will be interpreted in the light of our own better understanding, and applied with adjustments to our own special circumstances and needs.

Perhaps it is unfair of me to corral others within the maverick fold, when honestly and objectively I can speak only for myself. I do know that it is seldom I approach an examen on Obedience without uncomfortable misgivings. This time it may be neglect of my spiritual exercises as prescribed by Canon Law, or neglect in the matter of clerical attire, or cutting comers with the rubrics, or slothfulness in carrying out some expressed wish of my Ordinary. Another time, it will be something else. But I know that in any case, I shall be striking my breast before I get through my examen.

And yet, several times a day, I tell God that I love Him. Which means that I ought to be firmly attached to His Will. What He wants, I must want. Not only in

matters of virtue versus sin, but even in matters of virtue versus the indifferent, even in the choice of the greater good over the lesser. I love God, and so I must try to view everything through His eyes and act accordingly, even in the simplest and least important of my decisions, even in what I might call my non-religious activities. As we leave the plainly marked path of laws, decrees and directives behind us, the going gets more and more rugged.

Because the obedient priest, the truly God-loving priest, does go far beyond legislation and mandates. He sees the evidence of God's Will in all the circumstances surrounding himself. He knows that God does not send angels from Heaven, normally, to manifest His Will; if He did that, everything would be so easy. No, His messengers are the people we encounter every day, and obedience robes itself with patience. So I am patient with the wearisome bore who sits in my office and rambles on, while the plans I've made for that particular hour (maybe good and priestly plans, too, like visiting the sick), have to be revised or dropped overboard; because this man, believe it or not, is a messenger from God.

And I am patient with the altar-boy when he drops the cruet, with the janitor when he forgets to stoke the furnace, with the Altar Society president when she messes up a project I had clearly explained to her, with the housekeeper when she puts too much salt in the soup. In all of these persons, and in the hundreds of others who cross my path in the course of the day and week, I see messengers of God, manifestations of His Will—or at least, I *should*. Over and over again I say to

myself, "God must have wanted it this way, or He wouldn't have allowed it to happen; if this is what He wants, this is what I want." Someone has said that it is easy to accept crosses that come directly from the Hand of God—illness, for instance—but that it is difficult for us to accept crosses that come to us through third parties. We feel that the cross has been in some way degraded, that it has lost some of its dignity; we find difficulty in seeing the Hand of God at all, so well does He conceal it. Actually His Hand is there, and the eyes of love will find it; at least at the second or third glance.

We are patient too under the blows of what the world calls "blind chance," but which we know are bits of God's plan and design. When the rain comes pouring down on the day we had planned a little outing for ourselves, when our tire blows out as we are hurrying on a Communion call, when the power-line breaks and the lights go off and maybe the heat—and so on and so on through all the annoying incidents of fife—we still are patient. God knows what is happening and is letting it happen, so it must be what He wants. Which means that it must be what is best for me, hard as it is to see at the moment.

Besides patience, obedience has another robe, which we might call courage. Patience and courage go together, but they are not exactly the same. A person could conceivably be patient and still be downhearted, discouraged. But one who sees God's Will everywhere is not discouraged; not often, and not for long.

I am not referring here to those passing fits of formless depression into which any of us may be plunged now and then, those occasional "blue" days that are apt to

afflict all but the most phlegmatic or the most incurably optimistic. Such transient spells of melancholy are more physical than spiritual; we know that things will look different tomorrow, so we just keep busy and wait for it to wear off. Much less am I thinking, when I speak of discouragement, of St. John of the Cross' "Black night of the soul," the spiritual aridity experienced by souls far advanced in perfection. I can't talk about that, because I haven't got that far.

When I speak of discouragement, I am thinking of a self-sufficient soit of man who feels that the success of his priesthood depends upon the success of his undertakings. The sort of man who is plunged into moody darkness if some plan upon which he has lavished much thought and labor goes completely awry. The sort of man who wonders whether it is all worthwhile, when his Sodality prefect runs off and gets married by a judge, or his building-fund drive flops, or (if he's an assistant) the pastor turns thumbs down on plans for a Catholic Action group. The sort of a man who thinks, in spite of his theology books, that goodness ought to mean freedom from temptation, and who is moved almost to abandon the struggle when he finds that rebellious flesh can be so stubborn, and wayward mind can turn to such ugly thoughts.

The obedient priest, he who loves God and seeks His Will only, suffers discouragement from none of these things. Because he knows that to God, success and failure by human measurement are meaningless terms. With God it is only intention and effort that count. Frustration may follow upon discouragement, his every cherished plan may be a washout; but he jogs along, this man of cour-

age, serene in the knowledge that in the final accounting, his failures will add up just as high as another man's successes. And as for temptations: "Well," says the courageous man to himself, "some people have cancer, some have arthritis, and I've got temptations. Maybe I'd like to swap crosses, but God has worked out what is best for me, and I'll not let it get me down!"

Obedience has still a third cloak—the robe of contentment. One who seeks God's Will only, is completely contented with his present lot. Secure in the recollection that sanctity is achieved by the doing of ordinary things extraordinarily well, the priest who has made God's Will his only measure of performance has no overweening desire for a chance to demonstrate his talents in a wider field. He is free from ambition; he is not looking for bigger worlds to conquer.

And ambition can be such an insidious enemy to our priestliness. It doesn't have to be a *big* ambition. Maybe just a city parish instead of a rural flock. Maybe not a pectoral cross, but just purple piping on our cassock. Maybe not a diocese, but a deanery. Yet, keeping one eye out for the "main chance" leaves only one eye for our present duties. The ambitious man is a man of divided allegiance. Since he regards his present job as only a temporary stopping-off place in the course of his advancement, he seldom gives the present job the best that is in him. He forgets that if God has a big job in store for him, God will see that he gets it. And when he gets it, he'll be a lot better *in* the job if it has come to him without any scheming or conniving. The priest to whom God's Will is everything will look upon his present job as the final and ultimate task of his life. At

an ecclesiastical function, he will sit in a pew and see his classmate (who got much poorer marks than himself in the seminary) at a *prie-dieu* in the sanctuary, without feeling galled or neglected.

Patience and courage and contentment; these are qualities that characterize the obedient priest, the priest who loves God, the priest who lives with but one idea and one ideal: the identification of his own will with that of God. Can we imagine the impact that such a priest must have upon his people, as he moves among them day by day—patient, cheerful, and content? Such a man doesn't have to be a great scholar or an eloquent preacher. His life is his best sermon, his very smile, and most casual words are gentle weapons which soften obstinacy and win the lukewarm. Himself rooted fast in God's Will, his strength will draw, irresistibly, those who are weaker. He'll be a *popular* priest in the best sense of the word: a people's priest.

His will not be the synthetic popularity of the man who sets out consciously and determinedly to make himself liked; who tries to be "one of the boys" with the men, a wit with the women, and hail-fellow-well-met with everyone. This man's hollowness and insincerity are sensed, if not recognized, by everyone he tries to charm. His is not the crowded confessional, if there is anyone else hearing; it is not to him that people turn in their deepest anguish, if there is anyone else to whom they can go. Sooner or later his façade will crack; an access of temper or an outburst of bitterness or an act of selfishness will ruin the reputation he so sedulously fostered. All because there is no real substance, the substance of God's Will, within the shell.

Sometimes the collapse is complete, and another name disappears from the Directory. Whenever I hear of a brother who has dropped out of the ranks, I think how tragic it is that he lost his way in his search for happiness; how tragic that he got trapped in a dead-end street, when the way was so plainly marked. Because he *teas* searching for happiness, like all the rest of us—priest and layman alike, saint and sinner too. Happiness is the one thing we all are seeking, the one thing we ask of life, the one thing we have the right to, the one thing God made us for. The pity of it is that so many lose their way, and get sidetracked into some by-lane such as personal recognition, or possessions, or conviviality, or specious love.

Actually, the path to happiness for anyone lies in the generous, wholehearted, complete acceptance of God's Will as our norm of life. When by long-repeated acts we have formed the habit of meeting each situation as it arises on the basis of, "What, under these circumstances, would God probably want me to do?", we are well on our way.

The issue of obedience, then—of obedience in all its connotations—is an exceptionally happy life for the priest. It may be a calm and unexciting sort of life, but it will be a deeply rich and satisfying one. Ninety percent of our unhappiness in the priesthood comes from the feeling that we have, in some way, failed. But we *can't* fail, if the thing we do, or say, or try is God's Will expressing itself through our instrumentality. No matter what the external evidence may be, if it is God and not self we have been seeking, then we are one hundred percent right. Conversely, just as surely as we find our-

selves unhappy, it means that our will is at odds with God's.

To love God, and to manifest that love with a complete dedication to doing His Will as perfectly as we, in our human weakness and blindness, can: this is the whole sum and substance of obedience. It is the epitome of a truly priestly life, of a truly happy life.

10. The Priest and the Mystical Body

Anyone entertaining the mistaken notion that theology is a dead and sterile science would have only to contemplate the great development that has occurred in recent years in the doctrine of the Mystical Body to realize his error. Especially since Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici Corporis* has there been a prolific literature on the subject. When we of the older generation were in the seminary, our acquaintance with the doctrine of the Mystical Body was pretty much limited to a casual bit of exegesis on the twelfth chapter of First Corinthians, or the fifteenth chapter of St. John's Gospel. But now there is a rich abundance of reference material, from learned tomes to popular treatises in book and pamphlet form, to enlarge one's understanding of the implications of Christ's analogy of "The Vine and the Branches."

"I am the vine; you are the branches," Christ said; "he that abideth in Me and I in him, the same beareth much fruit: for without Me you can do nothing." St. Paul

illuminated Christ's words for us in that famous passage in First Corinthians which begins: "For as the body is one, and has many members; and all the members of the body, whereas they are many, yet are one body, so also is Christ." The doctrine was further elucidated by the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, notably St. Augustine and St. Thomas. But never was it so fully understood in its practical applications, until today.

We know that the term "Mystical Body" describes a very special and a very real bond which unites all who have been baptized in Christ with Him and with each other. It is not a physical union, and yet in its own way it is a *closer* union than physical. The individual cells of our own body are not so compacted together and so interdependent, one upon the other, as are the members of Christ's Mystical Body. Because it is a union so supernatural, so unique, it has its own special term: a *mystical* union. Just as the union of the Divine and Human Natures in Christ is so transcendent as to need a special term: the Hypostatic Union. To those who look upon us from the viewpoint of eternity and see us as we are, you and I and each member of Christ's Church are bound to each other and to Christ in an intimate, unified, and interacting whole. It is the Floly Spirit Who is the bond of this unity; a unity that is closer and tremendously more vital than that of the cells which make up this mass which I call my body.

We know all this so well. Yet it is not easy to bring the meaning of it, for myself, home to *me*. I accept the doctrine in theory, but it is so hard to remember and to apply it in practice. I suppose that if the individual

cells of my own body were suddenly accorded the gift of self-consciousness, they would have a similar difficulty in realizing their incompleteness except as part of the whole. They probably would feel supremely independent. And I as their head might have a better understanding of what Christ is up against in *His* dealings with His Mystical Body.

What *are* some of the implications of this doctrine, which should influence our life and work? Well, since accretion to the Mystical Body comes through Baptism, we might start there, at the beginning. Baptism is a tremendous event in which a soul passes from potential to actual membership in Christ. Yet in many parishes it is a hurried ten or fifteen minutes of mumbled Latin that must seem to the uninitiated almost like the magical incantations of a medicine-man. Crosses are traced, water is splashed, and there scarcely is an advertence on the part either of priest, sponsors, or parents to what we might call the *sensation* that is created in Heaven, as the Holy Ghost comes to enfold, impregnate, and possess another soul. Another cell is added to the stature of Christie ever-growing Body; a soul which by its goodness will add to the health of that Body, or by its badness will weaken or wound.

What can we do? We could, if we have not already done so, give our people a course of instructions on this sacrament of supernatural birth that would breathe new life and meaning into the catechism definition which we all mouth so glibly and so unthinkingly. Then parents, godparents, and friends alike, would be aware of the stupendous thing that is happening at the Font. They

would all but feel the breeze of the Holy Spirit's advent, all but feel the heat of His love. Such a series of instructions could well end with an actual baptism performed before the eyes of the congregation, in the sanctuary on Sunday morning; while another priest, or a well-coached layman, would give a carefully prepared explanation and translation as the ceremony proceeded.

Our people might even be urged to revive the beautiful and significant custom of preparing and using an individual baptismal robe for the child (or adult). The robe would be made on simple lines much like a dalmatic, to be slipped easily over the head. It would be so much more significant than the doll's dress or linen towel usually touched to the shoulder—which never was intended to clothe anyone, anyway. We might, too, return to the custom of an individual baptismal candle, decorated and adorned, to be kept and lighted on the anniversary of one's baptism—which incidentally should become a day *at least* as joyful and important as the anniversary of one's physical birth.

What can we do? We can, if we have not already done so, expound to our people the fact that, by membership in Christ's Body, they share in Christ's eternal Priesthood. Our instructions, again, would revitalize the mechanical rote of catechism definitions. Our people would see themselves as they should and must be, active participants in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, with something to contribute and something to carry away; not mere passive spectators, as a visiting pagan would be. We can make them see themselves as providing, in a certain sense, the raw material of the Sacrifice, the love and self-immolation which Christ gathers from each of their

hearts—uniting it with His own infinite Love, and carrying it thus transformed to God, our common Father.

We can make the words of the Mass, the ceremonies of the Mass, the *meaning* of the Mass come alive for them; so that the Offertory collection, for example, will no longer be a grudging surrender to moral pressure, but a cheerful and conscious expression of the inner offering of self, which accompanies the gift. Holy Communions may increase, too, as our people learn that while they do profit from any Mass at which they assist, yet they do not fully *participate* in the Mass unless they partake of the Victim Who is offered. And as our people come to realize the meaning of their membership in Christ's Mystical Body, there may be born in them the desire to make the Mass more fully their own by praying it with the priest, through the dialogue Mass and the congregational singing of High Mass.

I do not think that I am a "liturgical fanatic." I do not worry particularly about the cut of my vestments, and I do not know a dossal from a dorsal—except that one is found on a shark, and the other somewhere about the altar. The revival of the Offertory and Communion processions is a beautiful ideal, but rather impractical, I fear, in our big city parishes. Indeed, when properly understood, there is no reason why four or six ushers proceeding reverently up the aisle to lay their baskets inside the sanctuary gate need be any less significant than the same men making the same journey with bread and wine in their hands. The altar *"versus populi"* is something that appeals very strongly to me; if I were building a church, I think I should try to have such an altar. But it doesn't really matter in what direction the

altar faces, unless the people understand what is going on there. Once they do understand, it probably matters even less.

None of this said in criticism of the Liturgical Movement. The things that I have mentioned are not essential to the Liturgical Movement, as the great luminaries of that modern crusade will be the first to admit. The heart and core of the Liturgical Movement is to make the Mass and the Sacraments once more a living reality to our people: acts of true popular worship, co-acting and co-living with Christ. But the Liturgical Movemcn* will never completely get out of the ivory-tower stage until we shepherds and guides of the flock open to our people the full beauty and wealth of the liturgy. We shall never do that unless we have come to know and love the liturgy ourselves, to know it as something more than a set of rules in red print. No doubt there have been some changes in seminaries in the course of a generation, but I know that twenty-five years ago, liturgy to me meant rubrics. Like many another older priest, whatever appreciation for the liturgy I may have developed, I have had to dig out for myself.

Since there is no true understanding of the liturgy without an understanding of the doctrine of the Mystical Body, it is fitting that the Holy Father's *Mystici Corporis* should have preceded by four years his other great encyclical, *Mediator Dei,* in which the soul of the liturgy is exposed with such clarity and conciseness, and the Liturgical ^Movement given definitive bounds and direction. These are two encyclicals that should be "must" reading for every priest; more important, in my opinion, than the great labor encyclicals of Leo XIII and

Pius XI. They touch the very essence of Christian life and worship. We parish priests may never have occasion to lead our people in a fight for social justice, for industrial councils or guilds. But we have daily occasion, nay, necessity, to lead them to sainthood. And while we are on the subject of reading, I should like to recommend the finest liturgical reference library available in English: the yearly publication of the Liturgical Conference published at Conception, Missouri. These paperbound volumes contain the proceedings of the annual Liturgical Week, and are available all the way back to the first one, in 1941.[1] From these alone, a priest can acquire a deep fund of liturgical knowledge and practice, to be digested and passed on to his people.

For us as priests, the doctrine of the /Mystical Body has, or ought to have, immense personal significance. In our attitude towards our Mass, for example. If we are conscious of the dependence of the Church, Christ's Mystical Body, upon us, her official organs of prayer; if we realize that the level of grace available to Christ's members rises and falls with every Mass that we offer or omit, with every liturgical Hour that we recite carelessly or well: then how loath we shall be to miss even a single Mass, unless circumstances make our celebration physically impossible. To a priest imbued with a sense of his importance to the *ecclesia orans,* the planning of a vacation will be made always with a view to the possibility of daily offering the Holy Sacrifice while on holiday. "Some sinner that I have never seen may need

[1] A selection of representative papers for the first six years has also been compiled in one volume by Mary Perkins: *The Sacramental Way* (Sheed & Ward).

this Mass," such a priest will say to himself, as he goes up to the altar at the cost of his own comfort and convenience. The same will be true of our Breviary. We shall settle to our Office wondering what soul or souls will be helped by it. We shall undertake it with the determination that no soul shall fail to grasp salvation because *we* have failed, through careless recitation, to make the needed grace available.

And in our work with our people—how much easier it all becomes, if this thing of "seeing Christ in our neighbor" has become something more than a pretty bit of rhetoric! Our burden becomes so much lighter if we can really see and feel that we are dealing with Christ when He chooses to come to us, as He so often does, in the person of some parochial pest. It may be a busybody woman or a truculent man, a gabby time-waster or a scatterbrained youngster. Yet it is so easy to be kind and gentle with the weak and the ignorant (and the weak and ignorant outnumber the malicious by ten thousand to one)—it is so much easier to be patient and light-handed with them, when we see the Heart of Christ in the rise and fall of their breasts. Sometimes at swankv parties, professional jokers are brought in disguised as waiters or servants, to spill the soup and insult the distinguished visitors. Christ sometimes comes to us in strange disguises, too.

And when we reverse the glass and see Christ in ourselves—as He pre-eminently is in His priests—the transformation in our work is even more notable. If we can go through our day with the firm conviction, "It is Christ Who walks where I walk, Christ Who speaks when I speak, Christ Who does what I do," what a solu-

tion we have to our problems! So often, as we are dealing with some recalcitrant or temper-trying person, and our own temper is about to slip the leash, we shall remember, "Are the words on my lips the words that Christ would speak? Is this the way that *He* would deal with this soul for whom He died?" My whole approach will change in an instant, as I strive to make Christ not unworthy of Himself. And what is true of particular situations is true of my ordinary and habitual contacts. Only let me start to treat my assistants (or my pastor) and the nuns and the parochial staff as Christ would treat them—and then let me see what loyal helpers I shall have. Just let me move among my people, the young and the old, the sick and the sorrowful and the weak and the careless, as Christ would move, and I shall see a new reverence for me enkindled in every heart and home in my parish.

A pastor beloved and his voice heard; a flock joyful in living and ardent in prayer; the Sacraments cherished and the Mass understood and actively shared; a community of saints begun! That is the parish in which Christ in His Mystical Body has become a living reality.

11. Charity

I don't suppose that I could start an argument with anyone by saying that Charity is essential to true priestliness. All of the Christian virtues are important for us, of course. Which virtue is most necessary of all generally depends on which virtue one happens to be talking about. A retreat-master who is talking about Prudence will say, "This is the one virtue a priest *must* have." If his topic is prayer, he will say, "This is the one virtue we can't get along without." Well, with St. Paul in the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians to back me up, I'll be content to say this: we'll not make much progress, either in our personal lives or our sacerdotal work, without a determined effort to acquire and to enlarge the virtue of Charity within us.

Charity. Love. Love for Christ. Love for Christ in His Divinity. Love for Christ in His Sacred Humanity. Love for Christ as our Redeemer, love for Christ as our Master. Love for Christ—and perhaps this contains them all—in

His Sacrament of Love, in the Eucharist, by virtue of Which we as priests exist.

It is the virtue that ought to be the burden of all our prayers: that we may love Christ more. In our prayers to our Blessed Mother, in our prayers to our Guardian Angel, in our prayers to our favorite saints—always there should be that dominant and ever-recurrent theme: "Help me to love Christ more!" In our morning prayers and our night prayers, in our Mass and in our Office—always this should be the primary intention: "Beloved Jesus, teach me to love Thee as I ought!"

At the moment, however, it is of one facet of Charity that I would speak: love for Christ as manifested towards Him in His members; loving Christ in my neighbor. Or perhaps better I should say, letting Christ love Himself in my neighbor. Because we have seen, in treating of the Mystical Body, that it is just as important (perhaps more so) to see Christ in myself as to see Him in others. If I am to be successful in the practice of fraternal charity, it is not enough for me to say to myself, "I must love this person because, in spite of his repulsiveness, Christ is in him." I also need to realize that I must love this person because Christ is in *me*. Through me as an instrument He wills to express His love, His tenderness, His compassion, towards others.

Our ministry can be so enriched, if the Charity of Christ pervades all our waking hours. If I am conscious of the fact, and never let myself forget the fatt, that Christ has no other way of making Himself audible and visible to those around me, except through me. My efforts at the practice of fraternal charity become so much easier, if they are based upon this determination to make

Christ worthy of Himself. If I am land and considerate, because I would not want to belittle Christ by having Him act selfishly. If I am patient and forbearing, because anything else would, in a sense, force Christ to bear witness against Himself.

To be very practical, if I am conscious of my oneness with Christ, I shall keep my mouth shut in clerical gatherings when the stilettoes are unsheathed and the game of conversational darts is introduced. Unfortunately, it's a tragic sort of game we play, and play too often; this toying with the reputations of others. So when someone throws the first piercing point and says, "Did you hear about the latest scrape they say that O'Halligan got into; got pinched for speeding the other night and tried to fight it out with the cops?"—even as my mouth opens to make the next toss by saying, "Yeah, he never should have been ordained," I suddenly realize that Christ wouldn't say that, and I swallow hard, and my mouth slowly closes. And when the conversation gets around to Guggenheimer who is, according to popular opinion, always sucking up to the bishop, I strain another vocal tendon to prevent Christ from saying something He never would have wanted to say.

The first time we try this, it makes for a very drab and discouraging evening. Especially if we have established something of a reputation as a wit by our past assaults upon the foibles and weaknesses of others. As we sit silent and confused, our friends are apt to ask us what the trouble is—whether we're off our feed, and what's on our mind, anyway? But that stage passes, and gradually our friends begin to take us at our true worth

—which is so much higher because now ours is the very personality of Christ.

Make no mistake about it; the most popular priest in any crowd, the one most loved and respected, is the man who is never a threat to anyone's reputation. If he gets stuck with a tough assistant (or pastor), you'll never know it from him. If he gets moved, and his successor tries to belittle him and criticizes his administration, this man offers no angry defense nor recrimination. Even when the conversation turns to the most recent act of official unreasonableness, this priest is maddeningly silent. At least it is maddening to those of us who consider diocesan officials to be always fair game. He may have a wonderful sense of humor, but it will never touch the reputation of another. His wit will be the quiet kind. When he slips across a fast one, the resulting laughter will be explosive, but no one's character will go up in the explosion. Strangely enough, he's the one most missed, most regretfully missed, if he's absent from the crowd—the best possible proof that a priest doesn't need a sharp and cutting tongue in order to be popular. There *are* such priests as the one I've been describing. Myself, I must pray that I may increase the number by one.

If we don't stick together, we priests, together in Christ, then God help us indeed. Of course there will be priests who annoy us, priests whose very obvious faults irritate us, priests who don't see eye to eye with us, and always seem to rub us the wrong way. There'll always be (to our discerning eye) clerical politicians and roman-collared toadies and demanding bishops and unreasonable chancellors. But there'll always be me, too.

And would that I could hear myself analyzed and dissected by those who are out of sympathy with my own complacent view of myself. But even supposing that I am as good as I think I am: still let my treatment of these others be the treatment of the Christ Who is in me—a yearning love, a compassion, a prayerful will that Christ may find the fullness of His stature in them also. Or at the very least, let me be silent.

And if Christ-in-me is frustrated by sharp-tongued criticism of others, what can I say of my interior jealousy, resentment, suspicion, towards a brother priest? Above all, how can I ever hope to identify myself as one of Christ's own at Judgment, if T harbor a grudge against another, no matter how real may be the wrong that he has done me? Have you never winced inwardly, to see two priests who by accident have been thrown together in the same crowd, studiously steering clear of each other so that they can avoid having to shake hands or say hello? Christ said, "If you are my disciples, love your enemies, do good to them that hate you!" He said that to everyone, of course. But primarily to us, His priests.

I remember a pastor (long since dead, God rest him) who felt that he had been betrayed by another priest, once his best friend. Ever afterwards he would not speak to the man, he did not want to hear the man's name mentioned, he would not go where he thought he might encounter the man. Yet every morning he would go up to the altar, and in robust tones he would sing his Pater Noster, seemingly with no advertence to the horrible inconsistency of what he was doing. I am not passing judgment upon him. In every other way he was

an exemplary priest. He would have had a horror, I am sure, of ascending the altar steps with a sin against purity or temperance upon his soul. But there is something peculiarly blinding about sins against charity, something diabolically distorting, that seems to completely anesthetize one's conscience. We joke sometimes about the *"Ecce quam bonum et quam jucundum" of* the Psalm. But there just isn't any possible way for a priest to reconcile a spirit of rancor or resentment with Christ's charge: "If therefore thou offer thy gift at the altar, and there thou remember that thy brother hath anything against thee; leave there thy offering, and go first to be record ciled to thy brother, and then coming thou shalt offer thy gift." '

Essential too is our charity, our Christ-consciousness, in all our dealings with the laity. People can be most awfully exasperating at times, in and out of the parish. But Christ is not one to give way to exasperation. Follow His patience, His kindness, through the Gospels. His patience and kindness towards His ambitious apostles, His slow-to-believe disciples, towards the Samaritans and the sinners and the importunate favor-seekers and the merely curious who dogged His path looking for wonders, and gave Him no rest.

There was only one class of persons towards whom Christ showed what we might call sharpness, and that was the hypocrites—the rulers and leaders of the people, who burdened their laity and excused themselves. But there are no hypocrites like that, among those with whom *we* have to deal. There are no hypocrites, in the classical sense, in our parishes. There is ignorance in plenty. There is thoughtlessness in even greater abun-

dance. There is lack of security which expresses itself in over-aggressiveness. There are feelings of inferiority which manifest themselves in forwardness. There are all of these, and many other human shortcomings besides; which, to the discerning eye, the Christ-illumined eye, arouse pity and compassion, but never impatience and wrath.

As I have made my pastoral rounds, year after year, seeking to reclaim a stray sheep here and there, it has been heartbreaking to encounter fallen-away after fallen-away who have abandoned Christ because they had found Him wanting—in one of His priests. They don't put it that way, of course. But Father So-and-so had been unkind to them when they buried their mother, or Father Nameless had hauled them over the coals because they wouldn't make a pledge for the new church, or Father Someone had publicly condemned as defective the work they did on the rectory roof. I remember one whose excuse was that a priest had hit him over the head with a book when he was in the tenth grade.

You know all the stories as well as I, so there's no need to continue the litany. The point is that these people—all our people—have only one chance to see Christ clearly, and that is to see Him in us. They see Him there, or they don't see Him at all. I remember one priest who was unimpeachable in every way, except that he was that curse of any parish: a scolder. He was chronically impatient with all the human imperfections of his flock, individually and collectively. Hardly a sermon did he preach that didn't have its undercurrent of sarcasm and petty nagging. Was it any surprise that his box was not busy on Saturday nights, and that hardly anyone

ever rang the rectory doorbell unless they were desperate indeed? /Marriages out of the church increased, babies of lax parents went unbaptized, but he could see no fault of his own. "These people are no good anyway," was his explanation; "there's no faith in this parish." Yet they *were* good people, and the seeds of faith *were* there. But they had sought Christ in their parish and had not found Him where they had a right to look.

In our priestly work we do so need to be patient, and patient, and patient again. What St. Alphonsus said about confessions: that he would rather go to hell for having been too lenient than for having been too severe —is doubly true of our other duties and contacts. Even when our righteous anger seems patently justified by the malice and the pertinacity of the one with whom we deal, we still shall be on the side of the angels if we swallow our wrath, however righteous, and let the malice and the pertinacity find in us no more resistance than Christ offered to the servant of the High Priest. We dare not talk about our charity being tried to the limit. Our charity can have no limits, because it must be the Charity of Christ.

St. Peter probably never dreamed that his phrase, "Charity covereth a multitude of sins," would be so often abused and misquoted, and I shall not try to twist it now. But the instinct of our people is sound when they choose to condone almost any other fault in a pastor, so long as he is kind, compassionate, gentle, and long-suffering. Because, no matter to what other human frailty he may surrender—so long as he exemplifies fraternal and pastoral charity, the image of Christ in him can never be wholly obscured.

12. Humility

A group of us were discussing a mutual acquaintance whom all of us liked—a person of some eminence in his own field. We were trying to analyze *why* we liked him, what it was that made him an attractive personality. Several qualities were tossed around: sincerity, simplicity, affability, thoughtfulness, and a few others. All of them fitted, but none of them quite told the whole story; until someone said, "He's a *humble* man." That was the precipitant which ended the discussion. Everyone agreed that humility was the one word which explained everything. Our absent friend was a humble man.

I must confess that I myself hadn't realized, before, just how much territory the virtue of humility could cover. I had learned about it, of course, in moral and ascetic theology; I had made periodic meditations on humility, as we all do. I knew that humility is the root of all virtue, that without it there can be no real virtue

of any kind, that other virtues without humility are like a Christmas tree stuck in a pail of wet sand—pretty now, but doomed to wither and die. I knew all this, but it wasn't until we took a good man apart that the full potentialities of humility really struck home.

And it's such a simple virtue, too. It is nothing more than a correct estimate of one's worth in the sight of God. That means, logically, a recognition of one's essential worthlessness, since there is nothing we are or have that is not due to God. Even for our moment-to-moment existence, we depend upon the continuance of His preserving power. We shudder to think what would happen to us, if God were to take His eyes off us for a single instant! We'd vanish with a "fffft" like a punctured balloon, and even God couldn't find us when He looked back again. We know all this, but the mere intellectual admission of the truth is not enough; it is only a beginning. We are not truly humble, we are not practicing the virtue of humility, until we have made the sense of our own insufficiency, of our complete dependence upon God, an active and a constant principle of operation in our lives.

God knows we priests ought to be humble. No one is better acquainted than we with the innate perversity of fallen human nature. In the course of our pastoral labors we have seen often enough exemplified the axiom, *corruptio optimae pessima.* We have seen giants topple, we have seen talents prostituted, we have seen souls calmly embark upon paths that lead to disaster and ruin. All because they had confidence in the inerrancy of their own judgments and the invincibility of their own strength. We could have told them, had they but listened, that their

self-confidence was as safe a guide as the instinct of the moth. Yes, we have reason to know what the lack of humility can do to a man. We have returned home to our rectories often enough, sad at heart because of our failure to win back to Christ a proud mind which had set itself up in judgment over Christ and His Church.

It is so easy to detect the lack of humility in other people—and so damnably hard to recognize the same defect in ourselves. We might almost say, "Blessed is the priest who has no talents; blessed is the man who is so obviously inept that he cannot but recognize his own deficiencies." We might say that, except that the chances are, if we were so situated, we'd be unlikely to see and accept our lot happily. More probably, we would refuse to admit our lack and would take refuge in a self-pitying certainty that "the breaks are against me."

Here is a little exercise that it is helpful to practice occasionally: to take a quiet moment some time, and mentally strip ourselves of everything that is due to God, and see tvhat we have left when we're done. Have I a talent for speaking, for writing, for administration? Am I good at winning converts, or adept at working with young people? Am I a clever money-raiser, do I sing well, have I an accurate eye for a golf ball? Let me think back, if I can, to the time when I did not possess that talent; not to the time when I first began to exercise it, but to the time when I first consciously acquired the talent for myself. Obviously, there never was such a time. It may be that by study or practice I acquired facility in the use of my talents. But the very opportunity given me for such study and practice: did I devise the circumstances which made the opportunity possible? Was it I

who chose the parents I had, the good parents, sound in the Faith which came so easily to me? Was it I who chose, in the first place, to come out of the nothingness which preceded me? Did I have a vision of the glory of God that one day could be mine, and in my nothingness did I say, "I guess I'd better begin to exist, so that I can achieve that happiness for myself"?

Or, to use the negative approach: let us ask ourselves what we'd be like today, if we had had the start in life that millions of others have had. I am thinking especially of the case-histories of problem children I've dealt with. Both parents divorced and remarried, sometimes two and three times over; the children living now with one parent, now with another; parent and step-parent both working, no supervision for the children; truanting from school, failing their grades, running the streets at night. No knowledge of God except as a word of emphasis, no knowledge of Jesus Christ except as an expletive. Finding their recreation in the gutter, learning early their lessons in evil; no schooling in decency and responsibility, not to mention religion. Honestly now, what would we have been, with a start like that in life? And dare we claim that it was our own sagacity that saved us from it?

No, we do want to be humble, and we do try to be. But the vice of pride, humility's lack, is such an insidious enemy, and can creep into our lives like the parasites from which many tropical peoples suffer; parasites which sap their energy, without any localized pain to tell of the evil's presence. So too pride can penetrate to our own spiritual vitals, providing its own anesthetic as it enters. We have heard of people—perhaps even we have encountered them—whose very outward virtue is built on pride.

Men who are chaste or sober because it would be offensive to their pride to surrender to gross desire; men who are truthful because they pride themselves that "their word is as good as their bond"; men who are openhanded in generosity because it ministers to their self-esteem.

There is no need to prolong the list. And anyway, we are not interested in others; it is of ourselves we want to think. And we know well that *we* aren't proof against the tricks of pride. Has it ever happened to you, as it has happened to me: that in a moment of piety, perhaps during meditation or at the memento of the Mass, we have for a moment become acutely conscious of our own nothingness, have felt an access of genuine abasement before God? And then, with that sense of unworthiness scarcely formed in our heart, a little voice has whispered: "See how humble you are—how very holy you are becoming!" God forgive us, it seems we can't even be humble without being proud of our humility.

Well, we shall probably make more progress in humility if we don't keep digging into ourselves all the time to see if we are humble. In fact, when we have become truly humble, we'll be the last persons in the world to recognize the fact. Self-analysis isn't nearly as helpful here as is the more positive approach. First of all there will be persevering prayer, asking God to help us see ourselves as He secs us; because humility is His gift, along with everything else; it's not something we fashion for ourselves.

Then, with a basis of prayer, there will be the effort to keep ourselves reminded of our own utter poverty, of our essential weakness, of our gullibility to the flattery of the world, of the tortuousness of self-love in its efforts

to take credit for what it has but little part in. A factory worker who presses a button which causes a giant press to descend and to fashion a beautifully wrought piece of steel does not step back and say, "See what *I* did with my own hands!" So we keep reminding ourselves, "I am God's, all God's; all that my free will does is to press a little button, and the power of God does the rest; and God even helps me to press the button!"

While too much self-analysis is wasteful, if not actually harmful, in the acquisition of humility; yet it is well to run a quick check on ourselves from time to time, for evidences of pride—if only to humble ourselves by seeing how much pride we have.

Since humility is co-terminous with truth, we recognize that it is not the part of humility to pretend we haven't a certain talent, if we do possess it. If God has been gracious enough to give us some skill, physical or mental, it would be a discourtesy to God to pretend we do not have it. We can quickly recognize as the fake it is, the pretended humility of the man who says, when complimented on some accomplishment, "Oh, it was just an accident," or "You're just kidding when you say that," or any of the other responses with which some people meet compliments. This is what is called humility-with-a-hook—a fainthearted disclaimer in the hope of further praise. It is much more honest, much more *humble,* to say a simple thank-you and to make mental reference of the praise to Him to Whom it is really due.

In making our self-census, we note that one sure sign of a lack of humility is an unwillingness to give honest praise where praise is deserved. Now and then one encounters pastors, for example, who can never bring

themselves to say a word of praise to the young priest who has done a good job of work—whether it's a sermon he preached or a parish party he planned or a convert class he organized. Willing and generous commendation is not only good psychology, it is good Christianity. Such a grudging pastor might offer in his defense the fear of turning the young man's head and making him conceited. But if the young man is worth his salt he'll pass the praise on to God; if he doesn't, that is no concern of the one who offers it. In the meantime he'll have had a solid lift to spirits that may be flagging. We all enjoy a word of praise, and there surely is no sin in the simple pleasure we get from a compliment—so long as we don't hoard it for ourselves. I believe that there is a degree of humility, achieved by the saints, where praise becomes distasteful. I haven't achieved that eminence yet myself—and I am sure that God isn't too displeased with the boost to morale that comes from a sincere commendation.

But to get back to our spot-check for pride: Worse than the man who never praises is the man who always criticizes. He picks out the flaws in every successful achievement of another. He is chronically suspicious, and invariably imputes the worst possible motives to anyone who does a generous or self-sacrificing deed. He's the man who never says, "It was a swell piece of work," but always, "It would have been a lot better if he had done thus and so." He is a proud fellow, this man; secretly afraid that when someone else is being praised, he himself is being condemned by implication. And of course, no idea has any merit in his eyes, unless he first thought of it himself.

Another form of pride is found in obstinate addiction to one's own opinions—and it is surprising how many good people suffer from it, to a greater or lesser degree. The extreme example, of course, is the person who simply can't be argued with. If he says a thing is so, that's the end of it. The way he does things is the best way, and any fool who says otherwise is still wet behind the ears. You can quote Canon Law at him, and he brushes it off: "What do those Romans know of our problems?" You can quote the theologians, and he waves them airily aside: "There's a lot of stuff that isn't written down in books!" When the brash assistant says, "You can't say a black Mass today, he answers, "Young man, watch me, and you'll see me do the impossible." If he is cornered, he still will save his face. Like the man who swears that any kind of grape wine will do for Mass; and when he is proven wrong, wiggles out by saying, "Oh, you're talking about licit matter; I was talking about valid matter." Yes indeed, we are far, far along the path to humility if we can honestly say that we accept defeat gracefully, that we never cling to an opinion through stubbornness, that we admit error quickly and cheerfully when our mistake is shown to us, without any effort to clutch shreds of dignity about us.

In treating of Charity, I have spoken of the pride that manifests itself in uncharitable talk about others, particularly about our fellow priests. This indeed is a phase of pride that the best of us have to be on our guard against. It is such a boost to our ego to point out by indirection our own virtues, through the simple device of calling attention to the lack of those virtues in others. But any

time we try to elevate ourselves by knocking down others to serve as stepping-stones, our humility is suffering a crushing defeat.

I don't pretend to have touched upon all the phases of pride, all the danger signals that point to a lack of humility. Pride is a villain of countless faces, an octopus of a thousand tentacles. We slap him down here, and he comes sneaking around from the other side. It sounds like a tough assignment, this obligation to be humble. It is a problem that was too big for some of the angels. It is a problem that licked Adam, for all of his unclouded intellect and unwounded will. But it is not too big a problem for us, with the grace that God will give us, with the example Christ has shown us. We can't meditate each morning, fashioning ourselves day by day according to the pattern Christ has set, without coming to realize what poor, weak, untempered, bending, breaking tools we are in the Hands of God; without marvelling anew that God still deigns to make use of us, when He could have accomplished so much more by junking the whole lot of us, and exerting His infinite power direct. We can't look at Christ daily, we can't listen to Him attentively, without absorbing some of the infinite humility of His Sacred Humanity. "I cannot of iMyself do anything. As I hear, so I judge; and My judgment is just; because I seek not my own will, but the will of Him that sent Me." Think of it! That is *Christ* talking: "I cannot of Myself do anything." Dare we say more?

13. The Apostolic Priest

The term, "Apostolic priest" is, I know, tautological. We might well say that a priest is apostolic by his very nature as a priest. But that doesn't necessarily tell the whole story—any more than the infused virtue of Faith, received in Baptism, guarantees explicit belief.

"Apostolic priest" is one of those terms that is much easier to speak than to define. I suppose a simple descriptive definition would be to say that an apostolic priest is one who is never satisfied that he is doing enough; one who, even as he looks out over his crowded pews, is still keenly conscious of the other hundreds and thousands who are not there.

In the eternal (and perhaps healthy) friction which exists between pastors and assistants, I have heard pastors say, "He's a good lad and is conscientious about anything I give him to do; but he doesn't *look* for work, he has no initiative." And I have heard assistants say. . . . Well,

we can skip that, but what each means is that the other man is lacking in apostolic spirit.

Many priests, I am sure, have lost their missionary spirit and have surrendered to dull routine, simply because they have been appalled at the sight of the task of "restoring all things in Christ" and have deemed it hopeless. Digging a little deeper, we might find that their quick surrender was due to the possession of a "clerical" mind. A clerical mind is a far cry from a truly priestly mind. A clerical mind takes the view that the layman must be "kept in his place." If a thing needs doing, but Father can't find time to do it, then it must go undone.

Our task *would* be hopeless indeed, were we to deny to the layman the exercise of the common priesthood which, through Baptism, he shares with Christ; if we were to forbid him to fulfill the role that is his through Confirmation: the duty to share in Christ's teaching office. It is a duty (and a power) which has more or less lain dormant for nineteen hundred years. It is a duty whose fulfillment is described commonly as "the lay apostolate."

There are many reasons why it is only in our own generation that the layman is, so to speak, coming into his own. None of us would be so foolish as to think that we have yet seen the full flowering of the Mystical Body of Christ—the full unfolding of God's plan for redemption. From our human point of view, nineteen centuries seems like a long time. But, as St. Peter well reminds us, "One day with the Lord is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day."

No, we have not yet seen all the resources which God has waiting in His arsenal of grace. It is the particular

need of a particular age that moves God to activate an agency or a power that has been latent in His Church from the beginning. When the Deposit of Faith needed a vault in which to survive the barbarian invasion of the Roman Empire, the monastic orders were born. It was in the monasteries that religion and civilization together weathered the storm.

When, in the Middle Ages, the spirit of luxury and worldly magnificence posed a threat to the health of the Church, God fertilized another seed, and the mendicant orders sprang up to revive the ideal of Christian poverty. Then in the sixteenth century, when the ignorance of God's children sent them scurrying after false leaders, there came the teaching orders to restore intellectual discipline to a chaotic world.

There is no need to labor the point. It is sufficient to recognize the fact that the apostolate of the layman, the Church's answer to today's emergency, is a providential part of God's plan. It is not something thought up by some hot-eyed zealot. It is not even something originated by the Holy Father—for all that the last three Popes have been urging the laity to undertake the full exercise of their vocation. The lay apostolate is not something new at all. It has been potential in the Church ever since the sacrament of Baptism was instituted. But, up to our own century, it scarcely progressed beyond the seedling stage.

And now suddenly, in our own generation, it has come to full bloom—although not yet to full fruit. It is almost as though God, like the timekeeper at the start of a race-course, had cried, "NOW is the time!", and had set another part of His plan in motion.

First of all, it is an age which calls, as never before,

for lay leadership. The threat to the world is not from idolatrous barbarians, nor from ignorant heretics, nor from lax and sensual Christians. The catastrophe which faces us is far greater than any of these. It is the threat of a culture which has looked at God, and has smiled amusedly, and has looked away again. It is the threat of a humanism which has known God and has chosen to forget Him. It is the threat of an endemic pattern of thought which calmly assumes that religion has no place in everyday life. The workaday world, we are told, is a *practical* place—religion is an aesthetic experience for those who enjoy it, but it should be kept in its own tightly sealed compartment. The threat has a name, and its name is Secularism.

So the time is ripe for the layman to realize fully his vocation as an apostle, as a sharer in Christ's Priesthood. Because, if Christ is to be restored to the fields of education and government and industry and business and labor and the family, it is the Catholic laymen and laywomen who are in these fields, who must do the job. These fields are, to a great extent, beyond the reach of priests and religious. Bishops and priests can enunciate principles and provide guidance; but the on-the-spot leadership must come from the laity.

Not only is the time ripe, but the layman himself is, probably for the first time in history, ready for the task. It is almost within our own lifetime that a higher education has ceased to be the privilege of a chosen few. And it is almost within our own lifetime that the common man has been admitted to the full sharing of political and economic responsibility, which equip him for the task of leadership.

The time is ripe, the layman is ready; and, to complete His design, God has seen to it that the science of theology is equal to the need. The doctrine of the Mystical Body was enunciated by Our Lord in the parable of the Vine and Branches, and was further developed by St. Paul. Then for nineteen hundred years the doctrine went all but unnoticed. Until, within our own day, theologians have seemed suddenly to realize the full implications of this teaching, and have developed and expanded it to its full stature. The grand unfolding of a slumbering dogma reached its climax in Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici Corporis.*

Another encyclical of the same Pontiff points up a parallel development in the field of worship. *Mediator Dei* calls upon the layman to assume his proper role as an active participant in the public worship of the Church. The liturgy is nothing less than Christ-at-prayer, Christ in His Mystical Body. It is high time that the layman, who by Baptism is a member of that Body and consequently a sharer in Christ's Priesthood, should make full use of the powers that are his. This is the burden of the Holy Father's encyclical—and he is implementing the encyclical in very practical fashion, as witness the revision of the Holy Saturday ceremonies, keyed to active participation on the part of the congregation. The net result is that the layman is going to find himself more fortified, spiritually, for the grave task ahead.

The time is ripe, the layman is ready, theology and liturgy are abreast of the need. The planets indeed are in constellation. But still there is a certain degree of lag, due to the difficulty which we find, priest and layman alike, in readjusting our attitude of mind. For centuries

we priests have looked upon the layman as the *terminus* of our labors. If we bring him into the fold, keep him in the fold, and bury him from the church, then our work has been done.

But now we must see the layman as just one stage of our work; indeed, the first stage of our work. He must be no longer the terminal point of our labors. He must come into his own as an apostle, a Christian leader. He is our auxiliary, and through him the effectiveness of each priest can be multiplied a hundred- and a thousand-fold.

We must see that the layman was not baptized just so that he might be the passive recipient of grace; he was not confirmed just so that his own faith might remain strong. He was baptized so that he might increase and multiply himself, as any healthy cell should, and contribute to the growth of the Body. He was confirmed so that he might share his faith, and use the powers which the Character of Confirmation has given him: the power to teach in Christ's Name—to teach especially by *action* upon the institutions of which he is a part.

Of course, the layman himself must also alter his point of view. He may no longer look upon himself as the self-sufficient beneficiary of the priest's ministrations. He may no longer be content to drink in grace for himself alone, like a reservoir without an outlet. He must see himself as a *channel of* grace. His will not be the kind of power that Holy Orders gives, but still his priestly powers through Baptism and Confirmation are tremendous. He must see that he is one with the priest in responsibility for the Christianization of society.

Indeed, the special responsibility to apostolic action which comes with Holy Orders is simply an intensification, a greater personalization, of the responsibility which, by virtue of Baptism, priest and layman share alike. Holy Orders is a passing from Something to Something higher. But Baptism is the *big* step—passing from Nothing to Something. Unless we overcome the divisive mentality that would set priest and people completely apart, the Popes will talk in vain of Catholic Action.

If we admit that the day has come for the layman to exercise fully his vocation, what follows then? Aren't we already teaching him all he needs to know? Surely in our Catholic schools, in our sermons, in our convert instructions, we are giving the layman all he needs in order to get on with his leadership if he really wants to.

And yet we know by sad experience that it isn't enough to define Secularism, and say, "Now get busy and put religion into your daily life!" Just *telling* a person isn't enough. *Self-activity* is a fundamental principle of the educative process. In penmanship class, the teacher doesn't just write the letters on the board and say, "Now write like that"; she goes around and guides the clumsy hands, and makes them form the characters over and over again. In English class, themes must be written and re-written; in arithmetic, problems must be worked and worked again.

We shall best teach our laymen to be leaders by giving them practice in leadership; providing guidance, but encouraging, insisting upon, initiative. Our job is to help them to recognize problems, and themselves to find the solution to those problems; to help them to bridge the

gap between religion and life; to help them begin malting Christ a living reality in their own particular environment: family, neighborhood, school, shop or office.

It is not my intention to write a treatise on the techniques of Catholic Action. Others have done that far better than I could do. But it seems pretty generally agreed that a compact group provides the best field for leadership training. It doesn't matter much what the group is called; it may be a Sodality, or a Legion of Mary, or a St. Vincent de Paul Conference. Or it may be one of the specialized Catholic Action groups, such as the Young Christian Students, the Young Christian Workers, or the Christian Family Movement. Or it need have no name nor formal organization at all.

What *is* important is that there be a selfless priest who will provide strong spiritual direction, helping the group especially to come to a thorough understanding of, and love for the Mass (which is the heart of all Catholic Action), and helping them to absorb the spirit of the Gospel, so that it becomes alive for them and applicable to their own particular problems. Other tilings are important, too; such as a definite program of action and the exercise of initiative.

But there arc obstacles to overcome before even a beginning can be made. One objection that is frequently heard is this: "It all sounds very fine, but there just aren't any laymen in my parish whom I could get to go along with me on such a deal. They don't want to be bothered. They won't spare the time." (It has always seemed a pity to me that the pastors who are looking for leaders, and the laymen who are looking for a chance to do something, never seem to be in the same parish.)

But seriously, the obstacle at times is a very real one; and yet rarely so great that prayer and dogged perseverance can't overcome it.

Another difficulty more frequently proposed is that there just isn't time. The priests of the parish already are operating on a crowded schedule, and there's no possible way to squeeze anything else in. It's an honest objection and a very real difficulty, I know by experience. But it is the very reason why lay leadership is so urgently needed—in order that our load may be lightened, and that things may be done that we just haven't time to do ourselves. In the beginning, we may have to jettison some duties that seem pretty important; but once the spirit of the lay apostolate is abroad in our parish, we can go to bed earlier nights and sleep with a lightened load. We dare not seek escape by saying, "I have no time." To restore all things in Christ, there must be time—and the apostolic priest will find it.

14. The Priest and World Vision

When I was in the seminary, I remember that we had a chapter in pastoral theology entitled, "The Priest and His Leisure." The burden of the chapter was that a priest, especially one stationed in a country parish, could expect to have a good bit of idle time on his hands, for which he should plan a sound program of reading and study. Well, I suppose that book was written before the era of automobiles and good roads—or maybe by a priest who had never been in parish work.

It has been my own pastoral experience that a man has to scheme, almost cunningly, to salvage any leisure time for himself. *Particularly* in the country, where a priest is not merely a pastor, but a neighbor and friend as well, to be dropped in on and visited with, if one happens to be going by. I am sure that all of us would get a few smiles now, if wre were to read some of those old pastoral theology books, with their grim warnings

against the dangers lurking in the long, lonesome hours a priest could expect to face.

Indeed, our danger today comes from another direction; we almost might say from the opposite direction. In the past three or four decades, a priest has had to take on, bit by bit, a whole new set of duties that were known, at best, in skeletal form to our predecessors. Nowadays a priest is expected to be, in truth, all things to all men: domestic-relations adviser, youth counsellor, recreational director, parochial school administrator, civic leader, luncheon-club speaker, and what have you. Some of it we have foolishly assumed at the expense of more important work, but much of it wc just can't escape. So we trot through our day with no more mental nourishment than a quick glance at the newspaper headlines, and maybe a magazine or a radio program to settle our nerves before we go to bed.

It is a dangerous condition, because our minds easily grow stagnant and sterile unless they be fed. And we can he totally unmindful of our own mental atrophy. Our people will notice it before we do. They will notice —in our conversation, as commonplace and trivial as supermarket chitchat. They will notice it in the narrowness of our judgments, and the ultra-conservatism of our administration.

The Church suffers, too, as our vision becomes more and more exclusively parochial. The Church is a living organism, in which there must be organic growth and a continual adjustment (notice I do not say, "change") to the culture and the circumstances of the times. We priests are, in a sense, the nerve-system of the Church.

It is through us, and only through us, that she reaches out to contact individual souls throughout her vast domain. If the Church lags on cultural, social, and economic questions, it is because we priests lag. To my mind it is one of the tragedies of the twentieth century that the clergy have so largely lost status as the intellectual leaders of contemporary culture. The fault is not wholly ours, admittedly; but some of it is.

I do not mean to imply that every priest should become an expert economist and sociologist and intellectual luminary. Our first duty still is to become saints. But our sanctity will be more fruitful, more effective for others, if we are cognizant of what is happening in the world around us—at least of what is happening in the Church. I do not mean the *events* that are happening—the things we read about in the daily papers and hear about on the radio. I mean rather the new problems that arise, the new movements that are developing to meet new needs, the new directions that are evidenced in a Church which the Holy Spirit still informs.

All this may sound rather vague and formless. What I am trying to say is that it behooves us to keep ourselves intellectually vigorous, for the sake of the Church, for the sake of the world which Christ wants for Himself, and for the sake of ourselves. Which means that we must do some serious reading, regularly and consistently, however crowded our day already may be. We do find time for our meals and allow nothing else to interfere. We do find time for our Mass and (I hope) for our meditation and our Divine Office. In other words, w'e find time for whatever we consider of indispensable importance. Which means that once we have convinced ourselves of the

unique necessity for serious reading, we shall manage to fit an hour for it into our day. What could we not do with an hour a day, thirty hours each month, given to the acquisition of new ideas and the re-evaluation of old ideas! We all know that grace builds on nature, so it needs no pointing out that as our minds are enriched, our souls will be enriched too, and our entire lives. Our meditations, for example, will be so much more fruitful, when they are fed constantly with new facets of thought.

To a priest of practical mind, this immediately raises the question of what to read. It would be brash of me to make reading recommendations to fellow-priests. I should be likely to make myself ridiculous by suggesting books and periodicals that are an old story to my readers. But I do want to be practical, so I shall risk humiliation by intimating a few possibilities. The suggestions item from the twin dangers to which all of us are exposed: the dangers of narrow parochialism and of mental rigidity. To counteract those dangers, we need constantly to aim at developing our world vision and at maintaining intellectual flexibility.

First of all, with reference to periodicals, I think all will agree that it is shamefully easy to waste time on secular magazines. I know that I used to think that I couldn't live without the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Life* and the *Reader's Digest.* It took me a long time to discover that I could get along quite nicely without them, without suffering (I think) either morally or intellectually. As a result, I have more time for such magazines as *Worship, America, Commonweal,* and *Today. Worship* (formerly *Orate Fraires')* deepens one's knowledge and love of the liturgy, which is so intimately connected with

the contemporary "Catholic revival"; *America* gives a sound and seasoned analysis of current problems and trends; *Commonweal* and *Today* give the Catholic layman's viewpoint on the religious, cultural, social and economic questions of the day. Such periodicals as these are intellectually stimulating, even when (or perhaps because) we do not always agree with the ideas proposed.

There are other magazines of equal value, but it is pointless to weary the reader with a long list of names with which he already is familiar. I do not even mention the conventional clerical reviews, for the simple reason that most of us, I am sure, already subscribe to one or the other of them. And I think we shall agree that the strictly priests' magazines are largely limited to matters of immediate and short-range interest. They have their value, but more is needed.

Then, as to books, it is with diffidence that I mention some favorites of my own—some recent and some perennials. For the development of a broad, a universal outlook, there are Cardinal Suhard's great pastorals: *Growth and Decline* and *Priests Among Men.* There is, too, Daniélou's *The Salvation of the Nations* and Montcheuil's *For Men of Action.* (How these Frenchmen can write!) Then there are the great encyclicals, well-thumbed copies of which should surely be in every priest's library. *Rerum Novarim* and *Quadragesimo Anno,* of course; but also Pius Xi's *Casti Connubii* and *Divini Illius Magistri;* and above all, considering contempory needs, Pius XII's *Mystici Corporis* and *Mediator Dei.*

Good follow-ups to the latter would be Pius Parsch's *The Liturgy of the Mass,* and Alary Perkins' *The Sacramental Way.* Régamey's *Poverty* is a powerful book, too.

And then there are Dom Mannion's *Christ in His Mysteries* and *Christ the Life of the Soul* (I still am talking of personal favorites), and Von Hildebrand's *Transformation in Christ* and Edward Leen's *In the Likeness of Christ* and *The True Vine and the Branches.*

The titles I have mentioned are only surface-scratchers, of course. The entire list could be read in the course of one year, well and thoughtfully read, with only an hour a day given to the reading. And there is so much to read that is of lasting value, even while there are so many of us who have not nearly tapped the full resources of our intellectual powers, or realized our vast potential for constructive thought.

I am not preaching, believe me. Scarcely a week passes that I do not have to strike my own breast at the remembrance of golden moments wasted. But I hope that I am not just trying to share my own guilt feelings when I plead for one hour each day jealously protected from encroachments and given to developing in ourselves a priestly mind in the fullest sense: a mind fed on the strong meat that befits strong men.

15. The Passion

Our love for Jesus Christ will not be very-deep, nor strong, nor enduring, if it is not fed by frequent meditation on the Passion of Christ. It is here, at the foot of the Cross, that our most lasting lessons of love are learned. It was on Calvary that God's love for man reached its visible climax. It is with his gaze fixed upon the crucifix that a priest learns what it means to be a victim soul, to empty oneself of self, to lose one's life that he may find it.

There is no step in the Passion narrative that is not rich in material for a priest's meditation. Can we ever exhaust, for example, the grim warning that Judas gives us all, as he strides through the Garden with the rabble at his heels—Judas the priest, who has fallen so far in three short years? Look upon him now, as he comes hurrying, the silver jangling in the bag at his waist. Look at him now, and compare him with the man he was three

years ago, when Jesus first looked upon him and loved what He saw: a soul innocent and generous, quick to answer the Master's quiet invitation, "Come, follow Me!"

Judas was just as heroic in Iris renunciation as the other eleven; he too left all things to follow Christ. We can look back, and see in ourselves on the day of our ordination an image of Judas on the day of his calling, when he turned his back upon his boat and his nets, and set out after the Lord. With our hands enclosed in the linen bands, there was in our heart the same nameless joy, the same burning zeal and high resolve, that Judas knew as he began to walk with Christ.

But Judas had a weakness. Not yet a vice, but a weak ness, as every man has his weakness of one kind or another. Judas, born and raised in poverty, found a thrill in the feel and the look of money. From the thrill of the feel, it was an easy step to the love of possession. Judas had given his all for Christ, but little by little he began to take back what he had given (even as a priest may, little by little, begin to dabble in pleasures of the world which had no place in his first vision of the priesthood).

It was so easy for Judas to indulge his weakness, too. Jesus never rapped his fingers as the Iscariot dipped them slyly into the common purse. Jesus never seemed to be looking. Jesus never gave any sign, by word or manner, that Judas wasn't just as good as the other apostles. (And we think here of the softening priest, who is complacent in his progressive laxness, because God gives no sign of displeasure. Life goes on just the same as ever. So he be-

eat it too. God becomes for him a slightly senile grandpa,

who never will notice a little misbehavior. And the poor priest, in his blindness, cannot see the hangman's noose dangling at the end of the road.)

So Judas puts his hands on the arms of Christ and leans forward to kiss Him. Judas isn't worried about the result of his action. The Master has escaped His enemies many times before, and will do it again. So completely has Judas throttled his conscience that no act is evil now unless its effects are evil. Nothing really harmful can come of this little deal of his; it isn't anything really very bad that he does.

He kisses Jesus, then. And we think of the priest who might go up to the altar to give a more intimate kiss than Judas ever gave, with hands and lips toughened by sins that have been rationalized into petty human faults—simply because God's wrath has not thundered from the heavens. Not necessarily sins of impurity; lips perhaps that have been blistered with the bitterness of angry words, or fouled with jealous gossip about a fellow priest; or a heart that is hardened by hatred for a brother, or atrophied in obstinate contempt for his Ordinary.

So many changes can be rung on the story of Judas, but the plot is always the same. Let me then take a good, long look at myself. At myself on the day of my ordination, and at myself today. At myself on the day of my First Mass, and at myself in today's Mass. Let me not take courage in my surrenders, simply because Christ is not rapping my fingers, and God seems not to be looking my way.

Well, we move on; on, with Christ, to Caiphas. To Caiphas, who was even yet, at the moment Christ stood before him, the lawful (let us say the ordained) leader

of God's people. And where was he leading them? To the feet of the Alcssias Whom the prophets had foretold? Indeed, he was not leading them at all. He was driving such as would be driven, and letting the strays wander into whatever arid lands their weakness and their ignorance might steer them to. Caiphas was the all-time prototype of the greedy and dictatorial pastor, who forgets that the priest exists for the sake of the people, and not the people for the sake of the priest. The exemplar—was Caiphas—of the chronic money-talker, the scolder, the man jealous of his stole-fees, the hard taskmaster of those whose faith manages to survive his harshness. "They're no good!", says the modern Caiphas, of the weak and the errant. "It's useless trying to do anything for scum like that." He barks at penitents and frowns every time his blessed ease and privacy is invaded by door-bell or telephone. He, with Caiphas, would draw himself up grandly and say, "Do you know whom you're talking to?" The love of God dies out in his parish, and if Christ were to appear in the midst of the parishioners, they would not recognize Him, because they never have seen Christ in their pastor.

Herod is another nutrient source of meditation. He was of royal blood, even as was Christ Who faced him. Like Caiphas, Herod was destined by God to be a leader of His people. But it was a grudging and absentee sort of care that he had for the subjects whose welfare lay in his hands. His was not the sly conniving with passion which characterized Judas; his was not the cold and sterile faith of Caiphas; his was the false geniality of the good-liver, the wine-bibber and the glutton. It was by a steady round of feasts and friends and excitement that

he drowned out any voice of conscience that remained. A surfeit of pleasure was his way of smothering the sense of duty.

Does Herod have his counterpart today? He does, if there is a priest who inflates and stretches pleasure and recreation beyond the bounds of moderation. A man *could* pyramid his golf and fishing and bowling and card-playing and visiting and traveling, until there would be little time left for that full giving of one's self which distinguishes the Christlike priest from the timeserver. If there is such a man, his people will wallow in their sins, while he wallows in his play. Contraceptives and intemperance in his parish? Petting parties among the young and jealousies and cliques among the old? A mere dribble of converts and vocations, a sparse confessional and many Justice weddings? He does not see these things, and if his conscience *is* twinged by a vagrant ray of grace, he steps up the tempo of the wheel of pleasure. That is, if there *were* such a priest.

Our eyes swing from Herod to Pilate, and we gaze upon the most pitiful of all the tawdry characters of the Passion. Poor Pilate! He wasn't a bad man, as pagans go. He was a well-meaning sort, really. But he was a temporizer, a buck-passer, a leave-well-enough-aloner, an evader of responsibility.

If Pilate were a priest, he would keep putting off calls, unpromising but necessary, that he should be making on the apostates and fallen-aways of his parish. He would manage not to be home when quarreling couples called to have him settle their differences, or when irate parents came to complain about the disciplining of their children in the parish school. He would read of some contem-

porary movement keyed to modern religious needs, and would convince himself that he was too busy to do anything about it; too busy, especially, for the study and preparation that he himself would have to make. Whether it would be the formation of apostolic lay leaders for a program of genuine Catholic Action in the parish; or whether it would be a liturgical revival in the parish, with congregational participation in the Mass and a restoration of liturgical processions and blessings; always it would be side-stepped as a disturber of established routine.

Pilate would not be a lazy priest. He would keep busy about a hundred little tasks, rather than assume the burden of one big undertaking. He would say, "Others aren't doing it. Why should I?" He would say, "The bishop hasn't commanded it. Why should I give myself unnecessary headaches?" He would wash his hands and say, "This isn't my responsibility; let others look to it!"

Pilate has another example to offer us. (Poor fellow, as we contemplate this weak and harassed man, it is a comfort to know that he is listed in the martyrologies of some of the Oriental churches. After all, he wasn't a believer; he wasn't expected to know better.) But he has another example to offer us, as he puts his pathetic question: "What is truth?", and then turns quickly away before Christ has time to answer. He was afraid, of course, of what the answer might be; afraid of what it might entail.

There are a lot of Christians—and can I be sure that I am not among them?—who ask the same question; and then, startled at their own rashness, turn quickly away for fear of what the answer might imply. What is truth?

Truth is love, and love means sacrifice, and sacrifice is a most unprepossessing word. It leers at us around the corner of every meditation; it keeps nudging us through every page of spiritual reading. Sacrifice! It has a bitter taste upon the tongue, and a rough hard feeling to the tentative probing of our fingers. Pilate caught a fugitive glimpse of where Truth might lead him and swung quickly away. It can happen to us, too. We can be laggard in our pursuit of Truth because of the demands we fear it may make upon our creature comfort—because we fear it may be too disturbing to our present complacency.

Here again, "Let well enough alone" has been the ruination of more than one potential saint. We forget that the forbidding wall called mortification, against which we fear to bang our heads, is made only of papier-mâché. One good blow will penetrate it; one good push will prove that it is not as tough as it looks. The only hard thing, really, about embarking upon a career of sanctity and letting God take us over completely is *deciding to do it.* After that one honest and wholesouled act of courage, the rest is easy, because God does most of it.

Physical penances, we find, aren't something we pile upon ourselves in a morbid sort of masochism. Penance is a joyful expression of love. As our love grows on prayer and a determined surrender of ourselves to God, our spirit of detachment keeps pace. Renunciations will be no penances at all. They will be the logical dropping away of things that no longer interest us, in our newfound love. And penances that we do deliberately assume, will be taken on because we *want* them—because our love drives us to them—because in our close union with Christ

we are eager, as was St. Paul, to make up what is wanting in the sufferings of Christ. The courage to dare was what Pilate lacked. It is a grace we need daily to pray for.

Judas the priest and Caiphas the leader; Herod the ruler and Pilate the judge; there is a little of each of them in all of us. It is not for mere historical reasons that God inspired the Evangelists to limn them so well.

But there is a man waiting at the end of Christ's agonizing road who offers us example of a different kind: John, the Beloved Disciple. Beloved, let us remember in passing, because he was a virgin. His fearless presence at the foot of the Cross—the only apostle with courage enough to follow Jesus to the end—gives answer for all time to those purveyors of lust who belittle chastity as being unmanly and devirilating. No matter under what scientific guise the cult of physical satisfaction may walk, John's dark silhouette on Calvary forever cries, "He is strongest who has conquered self!"

However, I doubt whether it was John's physical virginity alone which so touched the heart of Jesus. Because, after all, Jesus loved the Magdalen too. No, there is something still deeper here. John's physical integrity was merely the outward effect of his spiritual virginity, his undiverted singleness of purpose, his unprostituted loyalty and love for Christ. Whether or not ours is the lifelong innocence of mind and flesh that was John's is not what matters now—except as a possible motive for sorrow and penance. We know that there is no one who so completely blots out the past, and so entirely judges by the present, as does God.

What counts, now, is whether ours is the virginity that can be lost and regained, the virginity of a heart that has

been given wholly to God, without quibble, compromise, or lien. It is so hard to say (and to mean it), "Dear God, take all of me, and do what you want with me! To live and to labor, to live and to suffer, or to suffer and to die; it is all one to me!" To say that and to mean it; to implement it day in and day out with a definite program of prayer, and examen, and spiritual reading, and visit to the Blessed Sacrament, and unsparing labor for souls—in simplicity, and humility, and love; *that* is the undivided allegiance, the spiritual virginity, that is potential in each of us, *right now*.

And before we turn our eyes from St. John and raise them to the Agonized Figure Who will give us the strength we need, it is worth noting that of all the apostles, Christ in the end asked least of him who had given most. As we dodge and hedge and try to escape the implications of love: the *wholeness of* the giving which must be ours; as we think of the rigors of the path and the violence to self that might be involved in answering Christ's challenge, "Be ye perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect"; as we hesitate at the choice, we well may remember St. John again. Naturally speaking, lus career, after he hazarded all on Calvary, was the easiest of the Twelve. Radiating love, he went through life joyfully, igniting other hearts from his, bearing fruit a thousand- and ten-thousand-fold; and died peacefully in bed, with his disciples around him. Because the fire in his heart was hotter than that which burned beneath the cauldron of oil, he wears a martyr's crown that needed no blood for its purchase.

And now, finally, we do raise our eyes to the Cross. We have looked at the crucifix so often that our senses are

dulled to the vision. Can we ever clearly see the reality for which it stands? Can we ever hope to sense even a small part of the grief that filled the heart of Mary, for example, who saw on the Cross her Little Boy, whose curls she so often had fondled, the dust of whose play she so often had bathed away? What words must have been tumbling about in her memory—words of tenderness which He had spoken to her, words so precious that she gave them not even to St. Luke.

Can we share even a small part of the grief of St. John, as he recalls the bursting ecstasy that was his when he first heard those lips (so parched and twisted now) say softly, "Come, follow Me"? Can we put flesh on that plaster figure that hangs before us; can we make it real to our minds, until we hear the rattle and the wheeze of the labored breathing, until we hear the crackle of the tendons as the Body sags, and the Plead bends towards us? If we can, maybe we *shall* be able to feel something of St. John's grief, as he speaks over to himself the words he'll never forget, the words of last night: "I pray not for the world; but for them whom Thou hast given Me. . . . Holy Father, keep them in Thy Name whom Thou hast given Me; that they may be one, as we also are . . . I pray not that Thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that Thou shouldst keep them from evil. They are not of this world, as I also am not of this world. Sanctify them in truth!"

Can I bargain ignobly still, as I listen to the singleness of Christ's own love beat its crimson tattoo, drop by drop, in the dirt at my feet? "For you," I seem to hear the spatter say, "For you, for you." Can I look at Him open-eyed, and still say that there is anything I've got,

anything I love, anything I count as dear to me, *anything at all that Vm attached to,* that is worth the powder to blow it to hell, if it comes, ever so little, between me and Christ?

16. The Real Presence

As I kneel in the quiet of the late afternoon for my daily visit with the Master, it is not a feeling of emotional delight that I hope to arouse in myself. Rather, the state of mind that I want to capture is the conviction—I might almost say the cold conviction—of the reality of Christ's personal presence before me. I need to make real to myself the fact that it is the Living Christ Who is looking out at me, and waiting to hear what I have to say.

Life in this world is essentially a lonely sort of existence. Each of us is bottled up within himself, dependent upon the observation of his physical senses for what he may know of another. No matter of how large a family we come, no matter how wide our circle of acquaintances may be, I am sure that at times we have felt the sense of aloneness, of isolation, of moving about, unknown and unknowing, among our fellows.

But our sense of aloneness can never become loneli-

ness, so long as we have a vivid sense of the reality of Christ's personal presence before us upon the altar. Between brother and brother, between husband and wife, there can never be so complete a sympathy of nature, so intimate a merging and intermingling of soul, as between ourselves and Christ. We always know what His thoughts are; He has made His Heart an open book to us. We know what He wants of us, what He wants for us, what He will do for us. And it would be too elementary to remark that He in turn knows us in the deepest and most secret recesses of our being.

This is the Master, then, before Whom I kneel. But we are accustomed to His Presence, and it is so hard to live, even with a miracle, day after day, without having our sense of wonder grow atrophied, without developing callouses on our capacity for awe. (I suppose that even a child would lose the keen edge of his first-morning ecstasy, if he had to look at his Christmas tree every day of the year.)

So it is no wonder if so often we come into His Presence or bend our knee in outward reverence without actually thinking of Him before us to Whom we are making genuflection. It is not surprising, perhaps, that we can fall into the habit of regarding the Holy Eucharist as a sacred *Thing,* giving to Christ in His Sacrament much the same sort of respectful regard that we might accord, for example, a relic of the True Cross.

It is a hard struggle, this resistance that we must constantly maintain against human nature's innate tendency to inconstancy and boredom, against our proneness to become casual with whatever is familiar, even with God Himself among us. It is a hard struggle, but it is a

vigilance in which we dare never to relent. The whole fruitfulness of our priestly life—the achievement of the goals which have from all eternity been set up for us—depends upon our daily grasp of the reality of Christ's true, real, personal, living (I might almost say breathing) presence in the Eucharist.

God knows that I am not looking down upon others from some lofty height in this matter. If all the hours of rude inattentiveness which I have spent in the presence of Jesus Christ, in the Mass and out of the Mass, were laid end to end—well, they'd make a fairly long Purgatory, as I fear they one day may. I am drawing upon a wealth of bitter experience when I talk of our need for a more vivid faith, a more vital certainty, of the Master's actual and cognizant Presence.

If you have ever tossed away your cigarette butt (as I have) at the sacristy door, and entered with a cheerful good-morning to the altar-boys but no word of greeting to Christ, and vested and gone out to the altar and on through the Mass with about the same degree of advertence that one might give to any routine chore (such as addressing envelopes or calling the numbers at a Bingo game), then you'll know what I mean. You'll know what I mean, too, if you've ever lounged at your *prie-dieu* after Mass, trying to put in the decent interval of Thanksgiving that the conventions seem to call for; rattling through the *Trium Puerorum,* and then examining the cobwebs on the ceiling with your mind on your morning coffee, rather than upon the God-man Who at the moment has you within His embrace.

You'll understand what I'm talking about, too, if you've gone to bed night after night with no visit made

that day to the church or chapel; busy days, of course, but days nevertheless when there's been time for the evening paper, and a favorite program on the radio, and a dozen other unessential things that we manage to sandwich in between our real duties. Yes, I think you'll know what I mean when I say that it is an unremitting battle, this effort to live our day as though Christ really *did* dwell just next door to us. As though the light that flickers before the tabernacle really did mean more than a similar lamp burning before the statue of the Sacred Heart.

There is nothing, there is just nothing that will so transform our lives as priests, so breathe a new soul into us, as will a living, vibrant certainty of the immanent reality of Christ's personal presence in the Eucharist. Sometimes I've asked myself, as I've dawdled restlessly before the Tabernacle: "Is this the way you'd act if you were paying a visit to your bishop? Or the Pope?" More than once the mere thought has been enough to straighten my droopy back. "Christ is actually *there,* looking at me," I tell myself on such occasions, "Christ is *there."* And not in the awesome and incomprehensible way that God is everywhere, but Christ is right there looking at me, as my own bishop might be looking at me if he were sitting across the desk from me. Christ is thinking of me, and to all intents and purposes, at the moment He is thinking of no one else. He is listening to me; at least He is ready to listen, if I have anything to say. Above all, He is loving me.

There must be a certain sadness in His love, as He regards my own self-centered coldness, my imperfections and my infidelities. Yet in spite of my cheap smugness,

in spite of the fact that my own mother couldn't love me if she saw me as Christ sees me, He is reaching out to me with a prodigality of love that must leave the angels breathless as they contemplate it; a love as real, as palpable (could I but feel it) as an arm about my shoulders. And there I kneel, absently biting at a callous on my thumb, idly noticing a worn spot on the sanctuary carpet, glancing at my watch to see if I've put in a passable amount of time and can leave now. If only He would lean out and slap me in the face, instead of enfolding me so gently with His love!

If Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament is alive to me, it cannot but make a difference in my life. I am sure that if I had to appear before my Ordinary every morning to report to him on my plans for the day—I'm sure that some of my days would be different from what they are. Certainly a day planned under the scrutiny of Christ in the tabernacle—than Whose eyes none are more interested—certainly a day so planned would be different from some I've known. And if I were to drop back later in the afternoon or evening, to render Him a progress report, I am sure that many an hour, otherwise lost forever, might bear fruit for Him to Whom all my hours belong.

17. Holy Hour

Jesus, My Lord and Master, I do believe in the reality of Your Presence here before me. Help me by Your grace to be still more vividly conscious that You *are* here. Help me to understand that You are not a pious creation of my own imagination, nor yet an abstract dogma of faith. Help me to realize that it is a real Love in a real Heart that lives here, so thinly concealed beneath a whiteness that is not even the whiteness of bread, but an unsubstantial whiteness held up by Your own Hands before Your Face, precisely so that my knowledge of You may be by faith, as Peter's was; so that I may one day receive the reward of faith, and pass through that veil to the everlasting vision of Your glorious Countenance.

I *know* that You are here, my Lord. I know it, I know it, I know it. In witness to that knowledge, I here and now pledge myself to live henceforth, day by day, in the consciousness of Your Presence. I promise to have

no other aim nor ambition, but to do what You want me to do, and to do it in the way You want it done.

First of all, in order that this purpose of mine may not wither and die, as so many of my past resolutions have done, I shall commit myself to a daily period of mental prayer, no matter what difficulties I may have to override in order to do so. Because I know that the clear vision with which I look upon You at this moment may quickly blur and return to blindness if I do not renew that vision in quiet and recollection at the beginning of each day.

With Your Presence real and instant to me, I shall ascend to the altar keenly aware that by me, You in Your Mystical Body are about to offer to Our Father, Yours and mine, the sacrifice of Love which will adequately adore Him. The sacrifice, too, which will release unto all the members of Your Body the life-giving graces by which You will live and act in them.

As I lean to caress the bread and the cup, and prepare to loan You my lips for the speaking of Your words of immolation, my heart shall go with my lips and be one with Yours. As I later speak the Pater Noster, I shall gaze upon Your Face as the apostles did, when they first haltingly repeated this prayer after You. When I bend to salute You as the Lamb of God, it will be with an awareness that You are as immediately present to me, under the un-inhering whiteness, as You were to the Baptist, under the fleshly color upon which he looked, when he pronounced these words before me.

And when I receive You in that act of Communion which is denied even to the angels—that act of Communion in which I so often have joined in careless and unthinking fashion—I shall realize that, except for dying,

I am now in Heaven. Only in Heaven will our intermingling, our union, our oneness, be closer.

All through the day that follows, I shall walk with You; never forgetting that of Your Body I am a member; never unmindful of the fact that You have chosen to make Yourself dependent upon me in Your contacts with Your other members. No matter how foolish or ignorant or arrogant may be the souls with whom I deal, *You* shall speak to them through me. Ever mindful of Your compassion for the weak and the errant, I shall never force You to speak in accents of impatience, or anger, or scorn. No matter what demands may be made upon my time, I shall remember that all my time is Yours, and that all Your time is for souls.

Whatever plans of my own I may have made, when a call comes that You would answer, I shall go with You. Whether it is someone sick who only imagines the sickness; whether it is a family in trouble who have brought the trouble on themselves; whether it is a plea for assistance from those who are shiftless rather than poor; whether it is a salesman who disturbs my rest or a sodden drunk whom some glimmer of sanity has brought to my door;—all who leave me shall say in their hearts: I have found here the kindness of Christ!

Remembering how handicapped You are, without my voice, to win souls to Yourself and to draw souls closer to Yourself, I shall give great thought and effort to my Sunday sermons. I shall not aim to have people say, "How well he spoke!", but rather, "How truly he spoke!" As my people leave the church, some of them will have thoughtful faces because, through me, You have shown them their danger. Some will wear hopeful expressions because, through me, You have given them

new courage. Others will be happy of countenance because, through me, You have shown them an avenue of closer approach to Yourself. No, I shall never again look upon my preaching as an unessential duty to be discharged if, and when, and in whatever fashion my more pressing obligations permit. Not while I walk with You!

Mindful of Your all-embracing compassion for sinners —for the Magdalen and the woman at the well and the woman taken in adultery; for Zacheus the publican and James and John the ambitious and Peter the weak—; mindful that it is Your mercy and not my own that is being offered to sinners in the Sacrament of Penance, I shall never be miserly in dispensing it. I shall never be grudging with Your forgiveness, as though it came from an exhaustible supply. On the contrary, all who enter Your tribunal will have me entirely at their command—at *Your* command.

If they come ill-prepared or ill-disposed, I shall not hurry them or confuse them; I shall not listen to them with divided attention, hustling to finish the line which is waiting. With the obdurate and the poorly-disposed I shall reason sweetly, as You would reason. No impatience shall harshen Your voice as heard through me. And if ever there comes a time when I must close the slide upon a penitent unabsolved, it shall not be in anger at the penitent, but in sorrow at my own failure; in, sorrow that I have not found the word that was needed, and that my own prayers and penances have not been such as to win the grace that was wanted here. And the penitent will go away saying to himself, "I really must try harder and come back again; Father felt so bad to have to let me go."

Yes, my Master, conscious of Your utter dependence

upon me, I shall strive to let You work more recognizably through me in the administration of all Your sacraments—Your arteries of grace established at such a painful cost to Yourself. I shall no longer work the Heaven-shaking miracle of uniting new souls to You in the sacrament of Baptism as though it were a minor ceremonial, on a par with enrollment in the scapular. Never again shall I mumble the words like a magical abracadabra, and hurry through the ritual in such fashion as to rob it of all solemnity.

On the contrary, with You actually following my every gesture from Your place upon the altar, ready at my *Ego te baptizo* to send Your Holy Spirit, like a lightning-flash releasing a deluge from the sky; with You waiting to absorb to Yourself the new soul over whom my hands are hovering, I shall begin by explaining to those who are present, the beauty and wonder of what is to happen. And I shall move through the ceremony with all the dignity that is due to the act of presenting another member to You.

Even my marriage instructions will reflect my new-found consciousness of You. I shall not be content with a hurried presentation of such truths as the young couple should know. I shall draw upon my own vision of You, to give these hearts an understanding of the true meaning of their partnership with You. They shall see themselves as co-creators, and shall learn where their true happiness lies. They shall come to the altar conscious of their share in Your Priesthood, in the lifelong fulfillment of a sacrament which will keep You ever at their beck and call.

In the sick room, too, You my Jesus Who are so visible to me, will become all but visible to Your suffer-

ing member upon his bed, and to all who stand about. As I pronounce Your words of healing forgiveness and Your promise of hope, the worn-out or rotting flesh before me shall be forgotten, and the dimly seen glory of Your waiting and outstretched embrace shall rob death of its ugliness, and make all throats catch at the beauty of the fruition that is soon to be.

My Jesus, my Master, You *are* listening, You *are,* You *are.* And no one knows better than You, how much I shall need Your help to keep this reality of Your Presence ever vividly before me; the reality of Your Personal Presence here and in every tabernacle and on every altar at which I shall ever stand or kneel; the reality of Your Mystical Presence with me as I move through my day. But I *will* remember, my beloved Christ. And the memory will transform my every moment of every day.

I shall find falling from me, like dead leaves from a tree, all the petty attachments and self-indulgences with which I have encumbered myself. The little luxuries that I love, which seem innocent enough in themselves, yet leave me that much less love for You; and mar, be it ever so little, Your image in me. My pleasures and my recreations shall be such that You may be my companion still. My reading shall be such as You Yourself might choose for me. That which is idle, or worldly, above all that which is sensual, shall lose all attraction for me, because of the panicky fear that will clutch at my heart at the very thought that I may have taken, even for a moment, another path than the one You are walking.

And even as I have begun each day, dear Lord, with a long look into Your Countenance, so also as the day wears on, I shall return to review with You the way

that we have trod together. The disappointments and the failures that we have met, together, will now pass wholly from me to You. My shoulders shall straighten and my burden shall lighten. Even the failures that were wholly my own—the failures that came because I forgot You and tried to do, with human wisdom and human strength, what no man can do; even these failures You will now take upon Yourself. And in my fatigue there shall be joy, and such peace as I have never known on my most feverish days, when I have labored to save souls—without You.

These, beloved Master, are my resolutions. They are brave words, big promises. Many of them have a familiar ring; I have mouthed them before. But this time there is a difference, because I know what I need, and I ask it now. And I know as I ask it thus directly and personally that You will heed my prayer: Just give me the grace to persevere in these two things: my daily meditation each morning and my daily visit to You as the day declines. Given these two graces, all the rest will follow, as the night the day.

Dear Jesus, forgive me now all my foolish babbling. You have been looking upon me all this time, as I've been talking. Looking and listening with such a pitying love; with love for what You see of Yourself in me, with pity for the weakness and the crookedness that is myself. Forgive me, and keep me as close to You, as conscious of You always, as I am at this moment. I believe, O Lord; help Thou my unbelief!

18. Queen of the Clergy

It is an abasing admission to have to make; but the truth is that for me, sermons on Our Blessed Mother always have been the most difficult to preach. Always I have envied those priests who, at any time and on any occasion, with or without préparation, can speak fluently and beautifully of the Queen of Heaven—and who can shed honest tears as they recount her prerogatives. I envy them, even while I listen to them, myself emotionally unmoved.

There are emotional freaks, I suppose, as well as intellectual and physical freaks. Perhaps it is as a freak that I should classify myself. Whether there may be others who must build their devotion to Our Lady on as cold and realistic a basis as do I, I cannot tell. One just doesn't ask another priest, "How do you feel towards the Blessed Mother?" It would be a question just as personal, and in just as bad taste, as to ask a man how he feels towards his own mother.

But the fact is that, in the absence of any natural feeling of tender sentiment, I must establish my attachment to Mary by bonds of faith. Beginning with the lowest motive, the motive of self-interest, I remind myself that it is the common teaching of the Church that Mary is the Mediatrix of all grace. It is not, admittedly, a defined doctrine, not yet *de fide*. But when the Church, who guards the Missal so jealously, introduces into it a Mass in honor of the Mediatrix of All Grace, the matter seems settled. Certainly I do not make my Act of Faith with any reservations; I do not say, "I believe all the truths which the Holy Catholic Church teaches—de *fide."*

Well, if all graces are dispensed through the hands of Mary, I had better make sure that I am in her retinue. I know, of course, that she is not a heavenly politician, dispensing her favors to her favorites and disdainfully ignoring those who will not be her sycophants. In fact, if all that we have heard about our Mater Amabilis is true, she is much more concerned (with the serene and undisturbed concern of the Saints) about those who least realize their need of her. She is, I am sure, much more active in my behalf right now than she is about those whom she can count as safely hers.

Not that I may presume upon my privileged position of sinner. The graces which Mary is so eager to dispense, first must come from the hands of her Divine Son. The limitless mercy of His Heart, upon which Mary draws so lavishly, cannot entirely escape the demands of His awful justice. Even though Mary may look upon me as loving mothers ever have looked upon wayward sons—my Master, with more realistic gaze, will seek to discern

in me some trace of the priestly loyalty to Mary that He found in the heart of John at the foot of the Cross.

So I come to my second motive for devotion to Mary: I *must* love her, if I profess to love her Child. For all that He is God, for all that He is now glorified in Heaven, Christ's Humanity can never become so transcendent that He ceases to be human. You, nor I, nor any other man, ever loved his mother with the ardor of perfect, selfless love, which Christ had and has for His Mother. It is a human love which has not ended in Fleaven, which has not even been changed in Fleaven, since there was in it nothing of imperfection in the first place.

If I love Christ, I must love those whom Christ loves. I must love Christ in my neighbor, be he ever so repulsive. I must love Christ in His Saints. And above all and first of all, I must love Christ in His Mother. And here by a double exigency: not only as the Saint of all Saints, as the perfect fruit of grace; but also as Mother of Christ, *simpliciter,* Who is loved when she is loved, honored when she is honored. In other words, I should be bound to love and honor Mary even if she had not been immaculately conceived, even had she not been the spotless virgin that she is. I should have been bound to love her simply because she is Christ's Mother.

In trying to analyze my own shortcomings in this matter of devotion to Mary (and it holds true also of devotion to the Saints), it seems to me that the difficulty can be traced to a lack of simplicity in my faith. "Except you become as one of these children," is a tremendously hard lesson to absorb and practice.

After several years of philosophy and theology, during which we learn all about God's immensity and impassibility, we see the faith of our childhood as a touching bit of naïveté which, we gratuitously assume, it is impossible to preserve in our manhood. The picture of Mary standing before her Divine Son and pleading for the soul of some sinner, or arguing in favor of some cherished cause proposed to her by a client, is a picture, we feel, strictly for the kindergarten. Our minds have become emancipated from all that. God has now become for us a kind of nebulous, unchangeable Personality, filling all of space and beyond, incapable of change because He is incapable of imperfection. He is not to be wheedled, not to be cajoled, even by the Saints, even by His Another.

So we are patronizingly indulgent towards our people and provide them with vigil lights to burn if they wish, but we ourselves would never be so credulous as to lischt one. And we will have novenas to our Mother of Perpetual Help and our Mother of Sorrows if our people want them, but we never go near them ourselves unless it happens to be our turn to take the devotions. If we've got to spend an hour in church, a Holy Hour is the thing. Leave the rest for the untutored piety of the faithful.

Is the picture overdrawn? I should like to think that it is, so far as I am concerned. But I am not too sure. I am not too sure, either, that I may not have been influenced, in spite of myself, by the intellectual "liberalism" of my day and my environment. It is not an atmosphere conducive to childlike simplicity of faith. Even in my preaching and convert instructions, I find myself often tempted to soft-pedal such "archaic" doctrines as the

eating of the fruit in Eden, the devil and his power, limbo, the last judgment, and so on. I believe them all myself, of course, but I hesitate to expose them to scorn and ridicule by emphasizing them too obviously. I *say* that I believe them all myself; yet the fact remains that the moment I begin to compromise my faith outwardly, it suffers inwardly. My own hold upon Truth weakens, the moment I become afraid to champion it.

To most priests, strong in their devotion to Mary, unhesitant in their exposition of the entire deposit of Faith—no matter how offensive it may sound to "modern" ears—the foregoing will sound all but incomprehensible. In any case, the temptation to water down doctrine, the related temptation to view popular devotions to Mary as—well, if not puerile, at least as an emotional outlet for the untutored—is a temptation that succumbs quickly to a moment's meditation on the one great truth: that God has made man to His own image and likeness. Materialists smile pityingly at what they term the anthropomorphism of the Christian religion. Our God, they say, is merely a projection of ourselves, of our own fears and hopes and cravings. We have made God in our own image.

Their observance of fact is accurate enough. Our God *is* in our own image. But the materialist has confused cause and effect. Our God is an image of ourselves, not because *we* have made *Him* that way, but because *He* has so fashioned us. One of the great surprises that awaits us in Heaven, I am convinced, is the discovery of how *human* everything will seem to be. I say it will be a surprise to us, who have studied theology, and have explored the vast reaches of an Infinity in which there is no space and an Eternity in which there is no time.

It will be a surprise to some of us, but not to the body of the faithful, who see God and all that pertains to Him in the very simple and human terms in which He has chosen to reveal Himself. Their instincts are sounder than ours, perhaps, because they have not been confused by having to grapple with the metaphysical implications of truths that are so face-plain to them.

I think that we cannot emphasize to ourselves too strongly, nor too often, that there must be much that is "human" in God, because there is so much that is God in us. It is true, there are incalculable surprises in store for us when the veil of eternity is drawn back for us, and we see God as He is, Face to face. It is true that our first ecstatic reaction will be, "My God, I never realized it was like this!" But on the very heels of our enraptured amazement will come the reaction, "How natural it all seems!" Everything will so gloriously transcend our wildest imaginings, and yet everything will seem, even in its transcendence, quite "natural."

Which brings me back to the necessity of seeing in the Mother of Christ, a Mother of my own, devoted to my interests, my champion and advocate before God. I need not complicate things by speculating as to how her pleadings fit into God's prescience and God's unchangeableness. They do fit in; let it go at that. So I shall steep myself in the thought that I am never closer to Jesus than when I am in the company of Mary. I shall realize how unbecoming it is for me, a priest, to joke about the piety of the faithful as they flock to novenas, or as they kneel in unaffected trustfulness before Mary's altar. It is they who have the clearer perception, with vision unclouded by intellectual pride. It is they who will have the fewest surprises awaiting them in Heaven.

Not only for my own sake, but for the sake also of those souls entrusted to me, I must as a priest have a tender love and devotion to Mary. Is there a tough sinner I am trying to reclaim? Then I shall go to Mary. Are my labors mighty and the fruit little? Then I shall go to Alary. Has life become flat, stale and unprofitable; is my work a bore, the future discouraging; am I bedeviled by temptations that make me wonder whether I should have been a priest; has my house of cards collapsed and my pet project perished in disaster? Then humbly as a child, and with the confidence of a child, I shall go to Mary.

Even though her Rosary is not prescribed under pain of sin, it will take just as grave a reason to make me miss my rosary as it would take to make me miss my Office. I shall know her Litany by heart and recite it as I drive. I shall make her *Memorare* a part of my morning and night prayers. I shall wear her Scapular. I shall prepare two or three good sermons on her, her virtues, her lovableness—and I shall preach those sermons on the slightest provocation. I shall have her picture in my room, second in honor only to the crucifix. And above all, I shall have her name in my heart.

With a program like that, what priest could possibly go to Hell? I am not a secret agent for a candle company and am no advocate of parishes which commercialize vigil lights and promote them as a matter of revenue. But I do think that Mary could do with more priests who, alone in church, could guilelessly drop a dime in the slot and leave a flickering flame to plead silently for themselves and their people, before Mary's shrine. That is the kind of faith that will move mountains. It is the kind of faith that will save souls.

19. The End and the Beginning

If I knew for certain that I was going to die tomorrow, surely it would make a big difference in the way I lived today. All the petty problems that occupy my mind at this moment would fade like fog before a Summer sun. I would see my worries then as insignificant matters which my foolish mind has magnified out of all proportion. My temptations too would cease to be a major threat; I'd feel supremely confident that I could deal with *any* temptation for the space of one day. And how easily and how fervently I'd pray, if this day were to be my last! I never would have started the day by shutting off my alarm and snatching a few minutes extra sleep at the expense of my meditation. I might follow the classical prescription for my last day on earth, and find in my regular round of work the best possible fulfillment of God's Will. But it is a safe bet that I would not omit my spiritual reading on the plea that there was no time;

I would not mouth through my Breviary with one eye on the clock and half my mind on something else.

"Sub specie aeternitatis!" So often, at our annual retreat, we have been warned that this may be our last retreat. So often our meditation book has reminded us that we may die tomorrow and has urged us to live as though this day *veere* our last. The thought may have impressed us, just for a moment. But it had no lasting effect. Because in our hearts we knew that this wouldn't be our last retreat, that really we *wouldrit* die tomorrow. Every time we have felt that way, of course, we have been right. Another day has dawned for us, another retreat has come around. But *some day,* some day we'll be wrong. It really will be our last retreat; it really will be our last meditation, our last Mass; it really will be our last day of life. And we'll find it out too late to do anything about it.

We have heard it said that more priests die suddenly than any other class of people. Apparently God wants us, above all people, to be ready for death whenever it may come. Whether or not that is true, whether or not the actuarial tables would prove it—the fact is that death will be unexpected enough, whenever it comes. One priest friend of mine died alone in his Summer cottage; another dropped dead on the golf course; another on a vacation cruise; two died in highway crashes. Even the ones who died in bed did so, most of them, after very short sicknesses that they never expected to be fatal.

I am not going to become melodramatic about this death business. We priests are too sophisticated, I might almost say too cynical, to be taken in by any phony ap-

peal to the emotions. But the truth is, however vivid we get in our imaginings concerning death, we still shall fall short of the grim reality.

Let me suppose that I have the grace of a forewarning concerning my own death. I have contracted pneumonia, let us say, and my heart is failing. One of my priest friends, hesitatingly and fumblingly, tries to break to me the news that I am on my way out. "How are you feeling, Joe (or Fred or Tom)?", he'll ask. "Not so good eh? Well, you'll snap out of this; just keep your chin up. But don't you think it'd be a good idea to have old Father Peter come in and anoint you? Give the Sacrament a chance to do you some good, you know. What's that? Are you going to die? O no, no, no, sure not! There's too many prayers being said for you. We aren't going to let you get away from us that easy. But just the same, it's only good sense to get the benefit of Extreme Unction, just like you yourself have preached often enough. So how about it, huh?"

I nod my head weakly and my friend goes out of my room mopping his forehead, and old Father Peter, who has been waiting down the hall, is with me in a minute, whipping out his purple stole as he pulls a chair up beside my bed. "Now don't try to talk too much," he tells me; "just mention any sin you think of that you're especially sorry for, and include all the rest of them in your act of sorrow . . . *Dominus sit in corde tua et in labiis tuis* . . By this time I'm plenty worried. This doesn't sound like just a safety measure; this has all the appearance of the real thing. My last Confession. MY LAST CONFESSION! And I'm so sick and so weak, and my mind is so confused. Just mention the sin I'm most sorry for, Father

Peter says. O merciful God, there are so many of them! Which shall I pick? . . .

And then in a moment the room is full of people. My feverish eyes make out the faces of several of my family, and two or three nuns, and a couple of priests, all kneeling around the bed while Father Peter goes about his work. "Per *istam sanctam unctionem* . . ." My eyes, the windows of my soul; so often unguarded; the things they've looked at, the things they've read . . . My ears, so greedy they've been in listening to scandal, so thirsty in drinking in praise, so open to the risqué and the obscene . . . My nose, so discerning over a glass of brandy or a vintage wine; so easily intoxicated, perhaps, by a heady perfume . . . My lips, so loose with anger and sarcasm, so quick to judge and condemn, so unworthy of the Body and the Blood . . . My hands, my doubly traitorous hands, are they really a part of me? Must I answer for all that they have done? . . . And my feet (I do not feel the chill as they are uncovered; a greater chill has set in long since) my feet; where have they carried me? In every direction, it seems to me now; in every direction except towards God.

Then faintly to my ears there come the prayers that I myself have so often recited in casual fashion at other bedsides: "Depart, O Christian soul, out of this sinful world . . ." My vision is dimming fast, but my hearing still is acute enough to hear someone's broken sob. And then . . .

That is as far as I can go. Each of us must finish the picture for himself. What manner of man was this, whose hands they are so reverently crossing now upon his breast, whose glazing eyes they are so gently closing? What man-

ner of man was this, who stands now naked and stripped of pretense, beneath the terrible all-revealing light of God's justice.

Was he a man who sinned once, and sinned again; until it no longer seemed sin, but an inescapable weakness of nature; until he no longer bothered to mention it in confession, or glossed it over until it seemed but a pecadillo; a man in whom conscience, so often betrayed, finally turned traitor itself, so that compunction died and the complacency of atrophy reigned, and sacrilegious Mass after sacrilegious Mass piled up to his account? Is this the man of secret sin, of whom even now those about the bed are saying, "He was *such* a good priest; surely he'll go right to Heaven!"? And even while they say it, he has been judged, he has seen the searing truth—not God, but himself through God's eyes—the darkness where there should be light, the emptiness where there should be love. "He was such a good priest," they say; and even as they are dusting off their knees, the unconsuming fire of Hell is upon him; the awful burning thirst for the Love which he has forever cast away; the desperate, hopeless, racking hunger for the God Whom he must find, or perish; and he cannot find Him, yet he cannot perish. And the thirst intensifies, and the hunger grows and becomes insupportable, yet he must support it. And God is here and God is there, but it is not God, it is only himself that he meets at every turn; until in his frustration he would tear himself madly to shreds, but he cannot. Yes, he is in Hell, this man who so often made a mockery of God's grace.

But didn't he have the sacraments at the end? Didn't he make an act of contrition and receive absolution for

his sins? He knows now, too late, that it isn't as easy as that. Grace so often rejected is not so easily conjured at will. It wasn't sorrow that gave such vehemence to his last act of contrition. He wasn't sorry, only scared; scared with an awful fright at the possibility of death and what it might mean. But even in his desperation he couldn't throw himself, in one last and real act of love, at the foot of the Cross; he had been out of practice too long.

So they dressed him in purple vestments and the bishop came to celebrate his requiem and they laid him away. He helped a lot of other people towards Heaven. He offered Masses for their intentions, absolved their sins, fed them on the Bread of Life, preached the Gospel to them, assisted them to die. God, Whose arm is not foreshortened by His human instruments, let His graces flow freely and without contamination through these sin-calloused hands; so that souls were saved, yet he who saved them is in Hell.

Let us hope that the whole thing is a flight of morbid imagination—an eventuality that never happens. But it *cottld* happen; it could happen even to me. Our greatest danger, I think, is not from our familiarity with holy things; it is rather from our unfamiliarity with our adversary. It seems so easy for us—well as we know our faith and strongly as we believe—it seems so easy for us to forget that Satan is a very real person. He is closer to us, in presence and power, than the man who sits beside us on the bus or at the ball game. We don't exactly look upon the devil as a pious fable; we have too much intelligence for that. But he does fade into the far background of our thoughts, a very dim sort of reality. Yet he has the intellect of an angel, a cunning and cleverness far

beyond that of the most brilliant human genius. He has the power and command over physical nature which God gave to all the angels. He will not be clumsy in his approach to us. He will not be obvious. He will not be hurried. He is more devious than a communist, more patient than a chess-player. He may today be planning a line of attack against me that will not bear fruit for a year, or two, or ten. And if he fails, he will have another ready. We'll never see his hand, nor recognize his face—except at our *prie-dieu*.

It could happen to us, this death in sin. It could happen to us if ever we were such fools as to put confidence in ourselves. The moment that I say to myself, "I am strong·," is the moment when I am weakest. The moment I feel confident and fearless, is the very moment that I teeter on the edge of the abyss. We have only one defense against the world, the flesh, and ourselves: God's grace, God's love.

And that is why we can end this chapter, as we began the first, on a note of high hope. God made me because He wanted me with Him forever. As He cast His eyes—forgive the human imagery—as He cast His eyes over all the infinite number of images in His mind, preparatory to an act of creation, He stopped when He came to the image of me. And for some reason buried deep within the mystery of the Godhead, He loved what He saw, and called me into being. He *wants* me in Heaven; He wants me ever so much more than I want Him. He's not going to let me get away from Him easily.

It is this consciousness of (let me say it) God's stubborn determination to have me, that buoys us up as we recite our act of hope each morning, our act of contrition

each night. The picture of the dying priest is our picture, only up to the point where we ask, "What manner of man was this?" We shall have compunction in those last moments, certainly. As the faintly rancid odor of the *Oleum Infirmorum* penetrates our nostrils, we shall be thinking, "Dear God, I have used maybe one grace out of every thousand that You have given. I have done so little for YOU, Who have done so much for me. Always I was going to do better, and now it is too late." And as my ears strain to follow Father Peter's words, ". . . for although he has sinned, yet he has still retained a true faith in Thee, Father, Son and Holy Ghost... remember not, O Lord, the sins and ignorances of his youth . .
even as I listen, my fuzzy mind will be saying, "You know, dear Lord, I did watch with You each morning in my daily meditation, even though it was such a poor sort of effort; amid all the distractions of my Mass, I did try to unite myself with You, I did mean it when I said, at the Elevation, 'Do what You will with me'; I did, in quiet and recollection, try to speak Your praises *attente ac devote* in my Office; I did try to make Your Mother mine, as You will see if You look at the worn beads on my rosary; in my daily visit, I did talk out my problems with You, and did try to listen for Your counsel; I did try to preach You and Your Love, and not me and my cleverness; I did try to be patient in the confessional and charitable in my speech, and kind and compassionate always to everyone. I didn't do any of these things very well; I was forever picking myself up and starting over. But there's one thing You do know, dear Lord, I never stopped trying, *I never stopped trying*. It's so little I have to offer—but it's so little You ask . . ."

All is darkness now, and silence. And as my spirit gathers itself within the very fastness of my being, preparing itself for that tremendous leap out of time into eternity; as Christ stands smiling, waiting, with outstretched arms; and Mary beside Him, eager for the embrace of another wayward son come home; and all the souls whom I have helped onward before me crowd joyfully about them both; now in that last instant my soul braces itself for the blasting blow of the vision of God's glory, for the smashing impact of His love. And the last living cell of dying brain emits its last feeble spark of energy, and forms the words which are at once my release and my springboard: COME, LORD JESUS! And I am home.