

PASSIVE PURIFICATION—TEMPTATION

(Ancren Riwle, Part 4)

BY

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.



ACTIVITY in the part played by the individual's choice of a rule of life, by his seeking of solitude and shunning the world, is necessary for the first stages of the spiritual life, but it is of less importance in the soul's growth and formation than the purification which is brought about by God himself. As soon as the soul has begun to give herself generously to the work of her salvation, God begins to co-operate by sending her temptations or trials which show up the weaknesses and exercise the virtues which are most needed. We have called these trials passive because they are provided or allowed by God and the Christian does not have to choose the way to progress. But the will must choose to co-operate actively with God's grace in striving to master self and overcome the attack. In this way the first trials of the spiritual life require a great deal of activity and consequently are not technically Passive Purification in the sense generally accepted by spiritual writers. The first passive purification, strictly speaking, begins with the purification of the senses, the dark night of the senses, which leads from this first way to the second, or illuminative way. These assaults on the soul, however, prepare her for the beginning of the first night, and are to be accepted as the preliminary. They begin to be intense towards the end of the Purgative Way. For, as the *Riwle*, which dedicates the whole of the fourth and longest part to this subject, points out:

'The good, who have reached a high degree of virtue, are more tempted than the frail' (p. 133).

If a man feels no temptation he should beware, for his state is precarious indeed. A man will not watch who thinks his castle is secure; but there is no security without watching and the very self-assurance of the unguarded is full of evils of many kinds.

Many people in fact think that temptations are to be deplored, that temptation itself sullies their souls. There is a truth in this attitude in so far as fallen nature is implicated in the temptation and to that extent the individual becomes involved. But man can make no progress without such trials. The *Riwle* leads up to this section by speaking of the 'falling sickness':

'It is very necessary that an anchoress of holy and highly pious life have the falling sickness . . . an infirmity of the body, or tempta-

tion of carnal frailty, by which she seems to herself to fall down from her holy and exalted piety. She would otherwise grow presumptuous, or have too good an opinion of herself, and so come to nothing. The flesh would rebel and become too insubordinate. . . . God so wills it, in order that she may be always humble; and, with low estimation of herself, fall to the earth, lest she become proud' (pp. 131-132).

So in fact these trials are necessary and salutary on the one hand, dangerous and contaminating on the other. At one time we read that Christ was driven by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted, at another that we must ask not to be led into temptation. There is in fact a distinction to be introduced here which will explain the paradox and teach the beginner how to hold himself in times of testing and prevent himself from being unreasonably dejected by the appearance of crude carnal sins. The *Riwle* offers a very practical and much-needed warning to those who are tempted, not to be afraid and discomfited by what, in reality, happens for their salvation (p. 134). Our Lord himself pointed out to St Catherine that the reason why she so loathed and hated the foul images that flooded her mind when he seemed to be absent was the fact that he was still present in her heart repulsing the evil. For there are two sorts of temptations, external and internal. The external itself, which is derived from other things, may be either from without or from within. Internal trials come from the man himself and may themselves be either without or within, but in each case they flow from the weakness of his will. In speaking of Christ's temptation, St Thomas shows that there is one type of temptation which flows from the man himself not shunning the ways of sin, and this must always be repudiated most vigorously; whereas the type which comes from the devil must be tackled and dealt with as intended by God (III, 41, art. 2, ad 2).

The external temptations should be classed under the general title of trials, for the first one listed in the *Riwle* is that of ill-health, which can play a very important part in the purgative stage of the spiritual life. 'Sickness is a fire which is patiently to be endured, but no fire so purifieth the gold as it doth the soul' (p. 136). To read the lives of some saints it would seem that their frequent ill-health was brought on by their stupendous austerities. Their headaches, hæmorrhages, bilious attacks, general frailty and early death seem to have been the direct result of their prolonged fasts and vigils. Some might even foolishly think it a rather glorious thing to 'overcome the flesh' in such a way that it succumbed to disease or even to death through neglect and bad treatment. Whatever the inspiration of particular saints may have been, however, it is certain that such a policy is regarded by every good spiritual writer as foolhardy and a definite

evil, perhaps with a flavour in it of Manichean heresy. 'For many make themselves sick through their fool-hardiness: and this displeaseth God' (p. 136). The sickness that is a purification is one that comes from God's dispensation, in spite of the exercise of prudence in the matter of austerities and of the needs of life.

Through this type of purification Mother Julian herself was prepared for illumination and the higher forms of spiritual life. With due submission of will to God's design, she had prayed for sickness, and that is quite different from ruining health through excessive penance. A Christian may ask for this sort of purification as it is not a temptation of itself connected with sin, for which we pray the opposite 'lead us not into temptation'. Mother Julian was asking to be purged in this way:

'I freely desiring that sickness to be so hard as to death . . . myself thinking that I should die, and that all creatures might suppose the same that saw me; for I would have no manner of comfort of earthly life. . . . And this I meant for that I would be purged, by the mercy of God, and afterward live more to the worship of God'.¹

She desired it always under the necessary condition 'if it be thy will that I have it'. And there were times later when the sickness was upon her that she almost regretted having asked for it. God does in fact very often test the beginner with physical suffering and pains, and the other discomforts of sickness, as, for example, the pain to a generous person of being a burden to others, having to be served and nursed by them. Often people do not progress beyond this purification, but allow it to turn them more or less back on their tracks. The worst cases of such a misuse of the sacrament of sickness become embittered, unhappy people, the heart withered up and devoid of all warmth of love. But a good use of this trial does lead the soul quickly on the way. It reveals many defects which God helps to eradicate, it teaches many fundamental virtues such as patience and humility.

'Sickness maketh man to understand what he is, and to know himself; and, like a good master, it corrects a man, to teach him how powerful God is, and how frail is the happiness of this world' (p.137).

Common experience shows that a severe illness often has the most spiritualising effect upon people, particularly perhaps upon young children, who have less experience of bitterness; but at other times such sickness will produce a terrible despair which is utterly self-centred.

Other trials come from fellow creatures. Once the Christian has

¹ *Revelations of Divine Love* recorded by Julian Anchoress at Norwich, edited by Grace Warrack (London 1901), chapter 2, p. 4.

set forth with determination towards the new Jerusalem, he is inevitably assailed by slander, misjudgment, pity or contempt. Often this attack comes from people who themselves profess to be walking on the same road, pious people who are constantly at their prayers in church, or religious authorities who have the divine power of direction. Always it is hard to bear without protest and retaliation calumny and attacks from those one is bound by obedience and charity to revere. These are usually the sign of a genuine progress towards perfection. The violent attacks which Marjorie Kempe suffered for so long suggest that there was something genuine about her curious type of spirituality.

'Daughter', our Lord once said to her, 'the more shame, despite and reproof thou sufferest for my love, the better I love thee, for I am like a man that loveth well his wife. The more envy that men have of her, the better he will array her in despite of her enemies'.² It was a type of suffering very specially manifested in the Passion of Christ (p. 141); and as the deicidal Jews assisted in the glory of the sacrifice, so the enemies who wrong the good Christian are in fact files, filing away the rust and roughness of sin, or God's rod chastening his children (p. 138). Ignominy, contempt, ill-usage, these things, the *Rivule* says later on, make the arms of the ladder stretching up to heaven, supporting the rungs which are the virtues (p. 268). The soul must not allow herself to be cast down by opposition or by slights, by others' failure to credit her with what she has done. These are indeed hard trials to bear, harder than physical ills, but they are always indicative that God is leading the soul onwards, and they always bring with them a great increase in self-knowledge and purification. A man naturally patient and disliking fuss will find under such trials that there lurks deep in his soul a great impatience or contempt of others which is revealed by unjust attacks. He has to master all these instincts and learn to love all men, in particular those who have harmed him, to kiss the rod that beat him, to do good to or at least to pray for those who do evil against him (p. 14). A long time may elapse before a man can hold himself sufficiently firmly not to explain to his friends and acquaintances things about himself which they have been led to misunderstand through some busybody.

Inner types of temptation, which are still regarded as properly distinct from the soul and so coming from without, are simply the reactions which a man may suffer on impact with external evil. The devil himself often closes in on the soul of a beginner, not in the expected and hackneyed forms of horrifying apparitions and grotesque

² *The Book of Marjorie Kempe*. A modern version by W. Butler-Bowden (Cape, London 1936), chapter 32, p. 125.

suggestions, but with cunning subtlety. He will play on the powers which he finds dominant in a soul. Thus a man who is really generous and whole-hearted in his desire for perfection may be led to confuse the ideals of perfection which he has worked out rationally for himself with the concrete reality to which God is calling him. Such a mistake leads to a confusion between God and self, and the very love of the ideal becomes a passionate love of self. Another may be naturally sympathetic and easy-tempered, and he will easily become enmeshed in his relationship with those around him, anxious to help, but without prudence and without a sufficiently supernatural motive. Another will be led away by his very enthusiasm for the Kingdom of God into a great many activities and jobs which gradually dry up his soul and make prayer and solitude distasteful. The devil

'endeavours to make someone so zealous to flee from the things that make the life of man agreeable, that she falls into the deadly evil of sloth; or into such profound thought that she becomes foolish' (p. 170).

All these enthusiasms and energies are good in themselves but the devil can often redirect their force into evil channels. And it is often only subtle attacks which reveal the extent to which self is implicated in such delightfully powerful enthusiasms. It is by these attacks that the motive begins to be purified of the self-seeking inevitable even in the generosity of the beginner. All this the *Riwle* sets forth in a passage distinguishing light and heavy, subtle and manifest temptations; the devil thus transforms an anchoress into a 'housewife of hell'. 'Lo! thus the hellish traitor pretendeth to be a faithful adviser' (pp. 166-173). (Comp. *Dark Night of the Soul*, Bk 1, Chap. 2).

Such external temptations and trials do not of themselves contaminate the soul, and are in fact full of promise for the future, giving the soul the chance to practise, in an ever more heroic degree, the virtues required for perfection. They represent in a special manner God's love for the soul, though people are often inclined to think they signify that God has lost interest and retired.

'Every worldly affliction is God's ambassador. . . . As God loved me, saith he, he sent me to his dear friend. My coming, and my abiding, though it may seem bitter, is yet salutary' (p. 143).

As God does not allow a man to be tempted beyond his strength, there can be no fear of falling so long as he trusts in the Father to protect him. Every attack of this nature is in fact a sacrament fraught with much grace. For at the same time that the affliction or temptation approaches, the Father himself draws close with supernatural aid necessary to overcome the attacks. A man who trusts in his own strength is certainly lost, because he does not recognise the sacramental character of what is before him; he takes the sickness or the

calumny at its face value, instead of seeing that through it God is offering new graces, new purification. These are outward signs of inner grace, when a man is stricken with a painful disease when his friends forsake him, when he finds himself cast down with no joy to lighten his darkness, when his dearest relative dies or is removed to a distance. Such things point to a new power offered the soul by God, a power at once self-revealing, in disclosing a weakness where strength was supposed to lie, and purifying in the bitterness of its application.

As the soul progresses and God pours greater strength into her, so do these trials increase in their vigour and subtlety. People will often think that these trials come early and leave after a short stay, with peace and spiritual enjoyment following their sojourn. On the contrary, as his spiritual life grows strong, so does a man have to suffer more: he becomes more passive in these trials, but they are in themselves more bitter and painful. At first, they will be fleshly temptations, clearly such, and, to a generous person, overcome safely even though with great stress. Later these trials leave the obvious realms of lust and luxury and enter the spiritual realms. So the anchoress is not to be distraught should she find herself bitterly tormented after many years of contemplation. God treats her as a man treats a newly-wedded wife, at first gently, later, when assured of her love, with more vigour in correcting her faults:

'If Jesu Christ, your Spouse, doth thus to you, let it not seem strange to you. For in the beginning it is only courtship, to draw you into love; but as soon as he perceives that he is on a footing of affectionate familiarity with you, he will now have less forbearance with you: . . . Thus our Lord spareth at first the young and feeble, and draweth them out of this world gently, and with subtlety. But as soon as he sees them inured to hardships, he lets war arise and be stirred up, and teacheth them to fight and suffer want' (p. 166-167).

In this way grace and purification grow by geometric progression; the higher up the scale of perfection the more profound the temptation and therefore the more grace is offered and the deeper sears the knife of purification.

At first then a sense of security often accompanies the temptation. The Christian turns to God and recognises that he is held in the divine power, which is poured out anew with every new attack of trial. But when his spirit is grown stronger even this sense of security vanishes; God himself seems to withdraw. Acts of faith will convince the sufferer that God is still present, that the assaults are still redolent of grace and divine succour. But nothing else remains to assure him that it is so; he is left to the ultimate resource, truly the night of

faith. At that moment the full passive purification of the senses has commenced.

'When two persons are carrying a burden, and one of them letteth it go, he that holdeth it up may then feel how it weigheth. Even so, dear sister, while God beareth thy temptation along with thee, thou never knowest how heavy it is, and therefore, upon some occasion, he leaveth thee alone, that thou mayest understand thine own feebleness, and call for his aid and cry aloud for him' (p. 146.)

In this way does God assist in the purification and the revelation of self-knowledge which help the soul to burn away the dross. St John of the Cross has described this process vividly in terms of the mother weaning her child by putting bitter aloes on her breasts; and he goes on to show how necessary this process is for perfection, since many, practising great penances and spending long hours in prayer, yet retain many imperfections and remain very weak until all consolation is removed by such purification. The Spaniard then proceeds to analyse these imperfections and weaknesses in terms of the seven capital sins. (*Dark Night*, Bk. 1, ch. 1.)

It is here too that we may turn to these sins which these temptations and trials are intended to eradicate. For the *Rivule* describes the inward temptations in terms of the vices in the man himself, the habits which make him prone to sin in certain directions. 'Now the inward temptation is twofold: carnal and spiritual. Carnal, as of lechery, gluttony, and sloth. Spiritual, as of pride, envy, and wrath' (p. 146). These temptations which proceed from weakness in a man's own nature do in fact justify a certain type of fear and troubling of conscience when they arise. For, up to a point at least, they involve sin. They need not be actual sins committed by the deliberation of mind and will, but they flow out from a sinful state. They can hardly be listed as so many items in the list at confession, but the man is himself implicated.³ And further, owing to the very weakness and disorder in the passions whence they proceed, these temptations make it very difficult for a man not to be moved, however slightly. These are the evil fruit left by past actual sin as well as by original sin. Consequently in speaking of the inner trials, we are in fact speaking of the more predominant faults of this period of purification.

³ cf. Archbishop Temple and Victor White, O.P., on this subject in *Blackfriars*, March, 1944.