

## ON THE NEED FOR RECOLLECTION

BY

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*Nothing is really necessary for us except God. To find God means recollecting our mind in him. And in order better to recollect one's mind, all superfluous intercourse and friendships as well as unnecessary talk must be cut out; nor should a man desire to learn novelties; but he should rather shun all things by which the mind is distracted, and begin to consider the abyss of his miseries . . . for in all the world I delight only in two things, namely in knowing God and myself.*

Bl. Angela de Foligno.



THESE words were written in the fourteenth century, when Europe and Christendom were still synonymous terms. They speak of a state of mind and soul almost unknown in our modern world save to the few who profess to lead the contemplative life. Yet this state, which is called recollection, or the 'gathering together' of one's thoughts and desires, is perhaps more necessary now than in other times, for it is the one means by which our age can be restored to sanity.

'Nothing is really necessary for us save God'. This was at least theoretically admitted, even if not always practically acknowledged in their lives, by the men and women of Christian antiquity and the Middle Ages. Theology was then the queen of sciences; men cared desperately for a true knowledge of God; the heated theological battles of the first centuries, the fight against Arianism, Nestorianism, Monophysitism, as well as the medieval controversies on Platonism and Aristotelianism, Nominalism and Realism—what else were they but the expression of men's profound concern with the real nature of God and with his own soul?

It is as easy as it is foolish to laugh at the fight against an iota carried on by St Athanasius, the heroic defender of the *homoousios* against Arius—but with the absence or presence of this small letter stands or falls the divinity of our Lord and hence the dogma of the Trinity, that is to say the whole Christian religion. These men who so lived in and for their faith knew that there is nothing really necessary for us save God. But this is not even theoretically admitted by the majority of our contemporaries. There are many things without which they profess themselves unable to live—money or sexual love, cinema or cigarettes—all of them material. But that it should be necessary to have God seems a very dubious proposition to them, seeing that they believe themselves to have built up their lives to their com-

plete satisfaction without him. They live in a world without God—and what, they ask, is lacking to them?

Now it is, indeed, not so easy to find God. For this, as Bl. Angela says, it is necessary to recollect our mind in him. But this has become so difficult under modern conditions of life as to seem almost impossible. There are two things that are essential to recollection: silence and repose, at least during a certain period every day. Now the whole technical development of the last hundred years has been increasingly detrimental to just these two: gramophones and wireless as well as all the contemporary means of travel whether by land or by air are sources of perpetual noise and unrest, penetrating even to the remotest corners of the earth. We are all caught in this whirlpool—but God does not speak out of the whirlpool; his still small voice cannot be heard against a background of perpetual noise and haste.

Yet these external hindrances are but the lesser enemies of recollection and can be dealt with comparatively easily when the bigger and more interior ones are overcome. The things that prevent it most effectively are enumerated by Bl. Angela herself: they are superfluous human intercourse, irrelevant friendships and unnecessary talk. They were obviously common failings in her, as in any other, time, but they have increased in frightening measure in our age. The desire for constant intercourse with one's fellows, the living in the mass, the often almost pathological fear of being alone even if only for one evening in the week—these are symptoms which betray a complete absence of the inner life. The technical development, again, fosters this frame of mind: if there is no human being present, let us at least have the wireless on, so that some unknown voice from the air may prevent us from entering into ourselves, or let us go to the pictures and fill our minds made for better things with the emptiness of a foolish story of love or adventure.

Then there is the desire for knowing much, especially in the way of sensational novelties. With the wireless giving us news five times a day or more, with newspapers in the morning, at midday and at night, we are craving for information of any kind and every kind, however irrelevant, as long as it is 'news'—whether it be the latest football 'event', the new hair style of the Duchess of X, or the discovery of another and even more destructive instrument for killing each other. It needs a great effort to overcome this desire for knowing for the mere pleasure of 'being in the know'—but without quelling the desire recollection is impossible. A mind perpetually hunting for ephemeral news is unable to taste the joys of resting in the Immovable and Eternal, which is God.

Once a man has entered even a little way into the sphere of the Eternal—and recollection is nothing else—he will 'begin to consider

the abyss of his miseries'. It is this which holds so many souls back from a life of recollection. They have a secret fear of the abyss that will open up before them once they abandon the whirlpool and are left face to face with themselves. When man, relieved for a time of all the voices shouting into his ears how wonderful he is and how great are his achievements, begins to reflect on himself, he will realise that he is not a self-contained unit, but is a creature, desperately dependent on innumerable other creatures, animate and inanimate, and that, in the last resort, both he and they owe their very existence to another, a First Cause, the source of all being. He sees himself as a creature, whose life and death are under the dominion of Another, and so he begins to know not only himself but also that Other.

Then begins to dawn that light of wisdom which is the fear of the Lord, and things will gradually assume a very different aspect. For, while we realise our own weakness and dependence, we also become more and more deeply aware of the power, the wisdom and the love of the Triune God, who desires to communicate himself to us. In this divine power, wisdom and love in which we begin to participate according to the measure of our creaturely love we shall be able to make a stand against the evils threatening us. For as we enter into this divine strength that comes by recollection, we lose our fear of creatures, of events that might harm us, and at the same time that propensity to 'wishful thinking' that is born from fear and refuses to face the facts before us. For through recollection we shall see things in their true proportion, the nightmares will vanish and also the 'castles in Spain' of our daydreams, and in the light of the divine Reality which has entered our soul we shall know the realities of our earthly life for what they are, and from this same light receive the strength to deal with them in God's way and not in our own, feeble, self-centred way. Then, despite the noise that is going on around us, we shall have truly found God and shall realise with an ever-deepening conviction that there is nothing that is really necessary to us save him.