

FOR THE FEAST OF PENTECOST

BY

JOHN TAULER, O.P.

*Estate prudentes et vigilate in orationibus.**Be prudent therefore and watch in prayers.*

(1 St Peter, 4.)



LL over the world today Holy Church is celebrating the coming down of the Holy Ghost whom God sent visibly and with such glory to the apostles and chosen disciples. Of course it was necessary that those men, whose mission it was to be an example to the world and who were to lay down the way of perfection to all who should come after them, should themselves be enlightened and filled with the fervour of divine love, above all their contemporaries. It was only just that they should be consoled with a fuller grace of the Holy Spirit who had been deprived of all joy and altogether abandoned, left desolate within and without.

Now, after they had received the Holy Ghost, they became more and more capable of receiving him again according to the extent of their lives here on earth: from day to day their aptitude for possessing him would become greater. It happens so with every friend of God. Every day and at every hour of the day, he can and ought to be celebrating in his heart this wonderful feast of the descent of the Holy Ghost; every day and at every hour of the day he should be making himself worthy to receive him in a more excellent way and to celebrate the feast more splendidly. Indeed, according as he prepares, disposes himself, is recollected interiorly, his capacity will increase, and the greater his capacity, the more the Holy Spirit will come to him.

There is no room for doubt: just as of old the Holy Ghost was sent to the apostles on the day of Pentecost, so at the present time, every day, he comes down, with special gifts and choice graces, into the souls of all who sincerely prepare themselves to receive him.

Besides, so that no one need be under any illusion about the dispositions necessary for receiving the Holy Ghost, this is what St Peter, prince of the apostles, teaches us positively and clearly: Be prudent! he says. And by prudence, we must not here understand mere knowledge or wisdom, but still more and above all experience in virtue by which we are capable of knowing a thing better from having made frequent use of it.

Hence the apostle St Peter exhorts us to be prudent, that is to

say, experienced, provident, circumspect in all that we do or leave undone, studying attentively by the light of reason the object proposed to us, the end we are seeking, the intention, the love with which we are led. Is it purely and simply God, or is it something other than God?¹

Now, the first and finest preparation for receiving the Holy Spirit consists of four things, which make us specially apt for this participation without intermediary. They are these: true abstraction, interior nudity, dwelling within one's inmost soul, and unity. I affirm that by these four things we are directly and perfectly prepared to receive the Holy Spirit and I would add that the more we are in these dispositions and the more we strengthen and develop them in ourselves, the more capacity we have for possessing the Comforter.

But, you will ask me, what is pure abstraction, true abstraction? It is the quality that makes a soul withdraw from everything, to turn away from all that is not exclusively God; it is that which makes one examine all one's words and deeds, all one's thoughts with clear judgment and an undisturbed mind to see carefully if by any chance interiorly, in one's heart, there is not something hidden which is not purely God, to find out if, in all that is done or not done, there is not some intention other than God. And if one should find one is seeking anything else but God, it must be entirely rejected, excluded and cut off. And notice well, this does not only apply to interior souls, to those occupied with spiritual things and the mystical life, this becomes every virtuous man. It is, indeed, not a rare thing to find good people devoting themselves to laudable exercises of piety but who altogether ignore the interior life. Now, these are just as much obliged to take into account whatever could be an obstacle to the true love of God and their own progress and, when they discover it, they are bound to renounce and reject it for God without delay; that is to say, they are obliged to withdraw themselves entirely from whatever would be a hindrance to them.

This abstraction is therefore absolutely necessary to all those who wish to receive the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, and the munificence of his gifts: all should have only God as their end, and should turn their backs upon all that is not God. However, this abstraction and this communication of the Holy Spirit is not the same for all, it is established in each soul in a different degree.

Some, indeed, receive the divine Paraclete in a sort of sensual way by means of forms and images. Others receive him in a more excellent way intellectually in their higher powers, well above the

¹ Whoever can understand pre-eminently in what this preparation for receiving the Holy Ghost consists, is already perfectly prepared. (German edition 1826).

senses. Again others, not to speak of these two ways, receive him yet more in the mysterious depth, the middle throne, the bright centre which is the most noble part of the soul in which dwells the image of the most Holy Trinity. Here is the true and privileged dwelling of the Holy Ghost, it is here that he distributes his gifts abundantly in a way that is wholly divine. Every time a soul, with enlightened mind, turns her gaze inward to return to God, she immediately receives a fresh transformation; a new inspiration of the Holy Spirit is granted to her and at every instant she benefits by new gifts and graces.

Yes, I repeat, this is what we receive every time that we are interiorly recollected with the prudence and abstraction of which I have just spoken, every time that we scrutinise and sift our actions and omissions, every time we throw light upon our own conduct, our words and thoughts, to see if there is nothing hidden there that is not God, to discover if in our intention there is any other object but God. Should we notice anything that is not purely and simply God we must use our reason to judge, rectify and correct it. In fact reason by its own light should be able to direct and moderate first of all the natural and moral virtues such as for example, humility, meekness, piety, tranquillity, mercy, etc. It must study these virtues carefully to see if they come from God or not. It must then look into the cardinal virtues, prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. It is these virtues, I tell you, and all that takes place in the soul that the light of reason should know, light up, arrange, adorn and finally place in true and divine order. So that all will be carried on in God and for God.

And thus it is that, when the Holy Spirit, whose very nature is Goodness, sees that a soul has done all that was in its power to do, he comes with his own light, he adds his divine rays to the light of reason, he infuses into the soul the supernatural and theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, all that makes man pleasing to God, sanctifying grace. And this is how, in the way of abstraction, man becomes truly prudent, and I say more, virtuous, Godlike and divine. But again, all that must be carefully examined in the light of truth. It is true that many things will be mingled with it, things in which one thinks to seek only God, but when one gets down to the bottom of them one discovers it to be otherwise.

On this point it is important to know and to remember well that a soul, even though seeking God alone, can often become the subject of pain and even of extreme anguish. Under the influence of this oppression, it will seem that its intention towards God has not been pure and that consequently it has lost the fruit of all its labour and

good deeds. This fear deprives it of peace of heart and casts down the mind into trouble and sadness.

Now this anguish is sometimes the effect of weakness, of some natural indisposition or of an unhealthy constitution; sometimes again, it is the result of changes of temperature, or atmospheric influence; sometimes, finally, it is the result of the action of the devil who, by these evil suggestions, usually seeks to trouble the faithful soul. Then there is nothing for it but to let these feelings pass gently, preserving one's tranquillity and calm. This is the surest means of an easy victory.

They do not act wisely who, to overcome these worries, attack them with impatience and impetuosity; they merely weary the mind and make themselves ill. Ill-advised, too, are those who with no consideration, run to consult theologians and holy men to get help to extricate themselves from this exasperating state of mind. As no one can rescue them without great difficulty and ordeal for themselves, they come back more agitated than ever. And so, when this distress and storm rise up in our hearts we can only do what people do in heavy downpours of rain or hail. They go and shut themselves up at home until it stops raining or the hurricane is over. This is what we should do. From the moment when you can honestly feel that within you nothing is desired but God, if in spite of all you are filled with distress, well then; retire humbly and dexterously until perfect calm be restored to you. Meanwhile, bear the trial with patience and resignation and humble detachment, referring this affliction to God in tranquillity and peace. Ah! who can say in what way and for what reason God comes to us and lavishes upon us his graces and gifts? Keep yourself quiet, then, in gentle mildness, taking shelter under the divine will and God's good pleasure, persuaded that that will be a hundred times more profitable for yourself and more pleasing to God than if you were brimming over with sensible devotion, if you offered him many acts of virtue every day, or if, in your soul, all was verdure and flowers brilliant with divine light. Is it not true that in times of distress it is more difficult to keep command of oneself? It is so easy, on the other hand, when we abound in sensible fervour and are lulled with the sweetness of devotion. Here nature often enters in. When the soul is enjoying itself overmuch, defilement is not far off. God's gifts are not God himself, and we must rejoice in him only and not in his gifts, however abundantly they may flow from him. But alas! such are the corruption and viciousness of our nature that it is attached to nothing but itself by self-love; it is always meddling with everything so as to appropriate to itself what is not its own and take it to its own

profit. Thus it is that nature corrupts and tarnishes the purest gifts of God and hinders his wonderful working from being achieved in the soul. In consequence of the disease it contracted with original sin, nature everywhere and always is occupied with self, aiming at its own private interests.

St Thomas, speaking of this disease, says it is the cause of man's loving himself more than God, or his angels or anything else that he has created. God did not make human nature like that, it got itself into this state when it turned away from God and adhered to sin. The fact is that corruption and vice are so deeply rooted in our nature that the wisest and most experienced theologians cannot follow them to their roots nor understand them. Even with all our efforts, all our application, we can hardly succeed in rooting out this corruption and vice from our nature which is essentially evil at heart. This is why very often—what is so profoundly sad—we think we are solely seeking God when through the effects of this disease we are seeking ourselves and serving our own interests. This is what St Paul, writing to Timothy, predicted with so much truth: 'In the last days shall come dangerous times. Men shall be lovers of themselves'. (2 Tim. 3). Isn't this, alas, what we are seeing too much of already? Isn't it this that is so noticeable in both sexes, in all professions, at all stages, in ecclesiastics and religious as well as in seculars? Isn't it wretched to see with what audacity one will take another's things, injure them, spoil them perversely through fraud and deceit? And so as not to be reprov'd for their crimes they seek confessors who are tarred with the same brush, having the same ways and practices as themselves, and these obliging confessors can always find either in pagan authors or in holy writings a means of explaining away or covering up all crimes.² We can say as much of all exterior things. But the evil is a hundred times greater when it is a question of spiritual things, because it is in the soul that are to be found our true possessions.

And in fact it is a small thing to have left land and fields, silver and gold for God; but it is much to have left oneself interiorly, renouncing all one's qualities of mind and human nature, to give up oneself, to die completely to all interior enjoyment. Remember what I told you just now: human nature mixes itself up in everything, even before we have perceived it; it seeks itself in everything, not

² When critics affirm that the true Tauler that they oppose to the Master in the book of that name, never speaks of priests and monks except with deepest veneration, they doubtless have never read this and many similar passages in which Tauler does not stand on ceremony about telling the truth boldly. We should like to know what the Master has said that is any stronger. (Père Noël).

only in the practice of virtue but even in God. Such is the work of inordinate self-love.

Now, against this evil, an appropriate remedy and very sure rule have been given us by God in this saying of the Apostle St Peter: 'Be prudent'. And that there should be no ambiguity about it, to teach us to be prudent our Lord himself has told us: 'Be wise as serpents'. This seems a very trivial and very ordinary comparison. It is thus our Lord gives us a token of his humility, of which he always showed himself a zealous partisan. In putting forward such a simple and common example he wishes to hide the eternal wisdom of the Father, the unutterable splendour and brilliant clearness of his knowledge. This is also what he has done at other times. For he was absolutely humble and he wanted his doctrine to be humble and simple. But, let us return to the prudence of the serpent that our Lord asks us to imitate. In what does it consist? The serpent, when he finds his skin is beginning to get old, to shrivel, to become odorous, seeks for two sharp stones opposite each other and when he finds them he glides with a struggle between these two stones, leaving there his old skin and taking on a new youthfulness, because a new skin is not long in forming. Every faithful soul has an old skin, that is, his natural self, however beautiful and great it may appear. He must throw it off and become young again by sliding between two stones. The first of these stones is the eternal divinity, Truth itself; the second is the Sacred Humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was and who is always the Way. Unless we pass by that Way, we shall certainly encounter decrepitude and be overwhelmed with all vices.

To put it more clearly: it is necessary to lead, even forcibly to drag, through these two stones all our life, our habits, our deeds, our natural and moral virtues; otherwise all grows old and full of imperfections, like the words we sing in today's sequence: 'Without thy divinity, there is nothing in man, no, nothing that is without blemish'.

Sine tuo nomine

Nihil est in homine

Nihil est innoxium.

Yes, indeed, however choice, however excellent may be our natural virtues, they breed festers that are all the more difficult to heal as they are more subtle. Also in the same way the moral virtues bring in their train certain blemishes, a sort of decay. The only means of renewing youth is for the natural and moral virtues to be drawn across that stone which is Christ. There they will renew themselves by interior desires, by fervent prayers to our Lord. That is how we can be born again in Christ and without it we cannot be pleasing

to him. Christ, says the Apostle, is the stone upon which every building must rest, so as slowly to become the holy temple of God. He is the corner stone of which he himself said: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the head of the corner'. And in fact, whoever does not truly lean upon that stone by deep humility, be he wiser than Solomon and stronger than Samson, his wisdom and strength will serve him nothing.

Let each one therefore strive after contact with the pure poverty of Christ, with his chastity, his obedience and his charity. By all the virtues of Christ let him root up the imperfections of his own. To whomsoever acts thus abiding in Christ are given the Seven Gifts of the Holy Ghost: he receives abundantly the three theological virtues, faith hope and charity. And that is not all: he enters into the consummate perfection, into the truth and peace, into the joy of the Holy Spirit. Again it is there that are born and acquired true resignation, sweet long-suffering and patience, so much so that the soul becomes able to accept everything, adversity or happiness, from the hand of God with indifference and gratitude; and thus he draws immense profit from all that happens to him by God's permission, whether interiorly or from outside. Everything contributes to his greater good, to his eternal salvation, everything carries him towards it, everything assures it to him. Does he not know that all that happens to us, in whatever manner, all is foreseen and prepared by God and from all eternity, that it should be thus and not otherwise?³

It would indeed be astonishing if anyone who is in these dispositions, and who takes everything as coming from the hand of God, did not enjoy absolute peace, remaining always undisturbed. There is in fact no peace but in abstraction and in the soul's abiding in its interior life. It is only there that one can learn all that I have just said: it is very difficult, if not quite impossible, to find it elsewhere. We must, as I say, seek this peace in the soul, in the depths where truth dwells, in recollecting ourselves interiorly. It is there that peace fastens its deep roots, it is there that peace dwells in its essence.

Finally, all that I have said in this sermon will be ever before the eyes of the truly perfect and supernatural man, always present in his thoughts, his words and all his actions. And this is not impossible. Why, it will be easy, if in everything we have no other intention

³ Perhaps this reminds us of a criticism of Bossuet's reproaching Tauler with neglect of the humanity of Christ. Never was reproach more unmerited. We see, not only here but everywhere, the immense and necessary rôle which he assigns to the Body and Soul of our Lord. He is the indispensable mediator, the stone, as he says here, without which nothing good can be constructed. But who would dare to assert that we are to stop short at the Sacred Humanity? If he is a mediator, it is only to lead us to the divine essence. (Père Noel, O.P.).

but God, if we study how to saturate ourselves with his truths, making them the groundwork of our lives, how to fix our minds on God, how to acquire the knowledge and practice of all virtues, in fact to drag all that is of self across that true stone which is Christ. The more we advance in these dispositions, the more the Holy Spirit will give himself to us in a surpassing way and the more gloriously and sublimely shall we receive him.

It now remains to speak of the second part of our text; but we have already treated of that at length in the preceding sermon on the same subject—*Estote prudentes*. Be prudent. And now, as I have repeated to you many times today, watch, my dear children, seek God purely and interiorly, in a true abstraction, under the inspiration and through the mediation of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs, in all ages, the same glory and power as to the Father and the Holy Ghost. Amen.



CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor, LIFE OF THE SPIRIT.

Sir,—Your current issue carries a review of Canon Trochu's *The Curé d'Ars*, which will, I believe, cause some disquiet to those of us in the pastoral clergy. After noting the two general methods in biographical writing, i.e. the historical and the critical, and that here Trochu adopts the former, your reviewer asserts that at the end of the life we have a 'quite fantastic picture of the saint', etc. If your reviewer, Fr Tanner, concedes that the facts narrated by Trochu are accurate, then the resulting fantastic picture is clearly a criticism of the Saint, and not of Trochu's work. If however it is suggested that the fantastic picture results from facts not accurately and correctly narrated, then we have criticism of the work, and not of the Saint; and such criticism must impugn the veracity of the author, at least objectively if not formally. (A rash charge to make against a work crowned by the French Academy; presented for a Doctorate's thesis; which is now in its ninth edition, and of which 80,000 copies of the French text have already been sold.)

The purpose of Trochu's writing here (though not so in his later *L'admirable vie du Curé d'Ars*) is clearly historical (vide Mgr Convert to the author—'*Votre livre est une Histoire*'). Spiritual edification or theological criticism or appreciation are not in his purview. There can therefore be only one criticism of the book, i.e. historical; and that Father Tanner does not attempt. To want to see the work 'stimulating' the pastoral clergy and written 'in a style best suited to a popular Life' is not the aim of the author; and because it is not, your reviewer quite unreasonably castigates him.