

SIMPLICITY ACCORDING TO CASSIAN<sup>1</sup>

FROM a psychological point of view, what is it that distinguishes the life of a monk as described by Cassian from the ordinary life of a person living in the world? The question is an interesting one, and it is suggested that the answer lies in the striking simplification (or better, the simplicity) of the life of the monk as compared with life in the world. This fact, incidentally, is implied in the word *monachus*, which means one living alone for a single purpose.

But note, first and fundamentally, that the difference is not one of goodness or holiness, for there are saints in all walks of life, as the Calendar shows. Nor is it a question of the end, union with God, which is the same for all. The honest Christian living in the world and aware of why God made him, strives consciously after holiness according to his state of grace. But more frequently than not, his striving is what we call habitual. That is to say, in addition to his supreme aim in life he is bound by the nature of things to have other aims, other more pressing and immediate ends, and any number of different means for attaining them. Thus he has to play the role of a father, a son, a brother, a friend and so on. In the world of his work, he is at the same time an inferior, an equal, and a superior. In so far as he mixes in society, as he must do to a certain extent, he has to take an active part in clubs, associations, political parties, as well as in the manifold demands which society makes on every individual living in the world. What is more, the different situations in which he finds himself call—and this is very important—for the development of many and differing traits in his character. At home, a man may be domineering and irritable, whilst at work he may have to be much more considerate and gentle; or the reverse may be the case.

Now the monk, according to Cassian, has but one intrinsic end in view, which he calls purity of heart, or alternatively holiness or the love of God.<sup>2</sup> 'The aim of every monk', he says, 'and the

<sup>1</sup> This paper has been put together by a monk of Parkminster from the notes of a thesis presented to the Faculty of Arts in the University of Ottawa by Hans G. Furth of New York. In the following footnotes, 'C' indicates the *Collationes* of Cassian, 'I' his *De Institutis Coenobiorum*.

<sup>2</sup> cf. C.i. 4, 5 and 7.

perfection of his heart tends to continual and unbroken perseverance in prayer, and as far as it is allowed to human frailty, he strives to acquire an immovable tranquillity of mind and a perpetual purity.<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere<sup>4</sup> Cassian calls it poverty, but a poverty which enriches, as we shall see.

What is it that makes Cassian call his monks poor, and why is this poverty such a distinguished and surpassing one? It is not poverty in the ordinary sense. It is not with a view to the end, for that, as we have seen, is the same for all. Nor is it in view of the means as we usually think of that word. Cassian is comparing solely the various roles the man in the world has to play with the single role of the monk, which constitutes his vocation. Even more, the very means in the case of the monk are by the nature of the case barely distinguishable from the end.

For the end and the means at the disposal of the monk all narrow down finally to acts of charity, which lead to that perfection of charity or life of continuous prayer which is, or should be, eventually the monk's normal state. Here are Cassian's words: 'Our mind . . . working round the love of God alone as an immovable fixed centre, through all the circumstances of our work'.<sup>5</sup> In other words, a state of continual prayer at which the mind finally arrives, for which, according to our author, 'whatever it receives, whatever it takes in hand, whatever it does, will be perfectly pure and sincere prayer'.<sup>6</sup> Thus his whole life and all the thoughts of the monk's heart become one continuous prayer; the heart desiring one thing, thirsting for one thing, bringing not only its acts but its very thoughts to bear on that *unum necessarium*.<sup>7</sup>

This, then, is the ideal of the monk, of that state of true religious simplicity, in which even one's very distractions are brought, as it were naturally and spontaneously, into the general movement towards the life of prayer. 'And so it shall come to pass', says Cassian, 'that not only every thought and purpose of our heart, but also all the wanderings and roving of our imagination will become a holy and unceasing pondering of the divine law.'<sup>8</sup>

For the choir-monk, bound to the daily recitation of the Divine Office, the Psalms become, as those who have tried it know, the very background of his thoughts, and enter even into his sleep;

3 C. ix. 2.      4 cf. C.x. 11.      5 C.xxiv. 6.

6 C.ix. 6.      7 cf. C.vii. 6.      8 C.xiv.13.

'so that he be found the same during the night as during the day, the same on his bed as on his knees, the same alone as surrounded by a throng of people'.<sup>9</sup>

Now this restriction of *means* in the case of the monk would doubtless be an impoverishment, harmful to the full development of his personality, were there not along with the restriction in the *extent* of the means a greater integration at a deeper and more interior level of the personality. This is terribly important, and what every religious needs to be told at some time or other. The monk in his cell is by the very nature of his life cut off from any number of means, and legitimate means, of finding God; and unless he is able to live his life at a deeper level—that is to say, in the deeper recesses of his soul, as a habitual state—he is obviously worse off than the man of the world, who has not given up these things, but who sees God in all his creation.

Expressed in the language of modern philosophy, Cassian's monk is poor in so far as exteriorally conditioned motives and external means are concerned. These very means he has voluntarily simplified to a wise and prudent minimum, which have stood the test of time. But he has simplified them—or possibly, they have been simplified for him—only so that he may be more free to enrich and purify his interior dispositions, which are his main concern. The various states of his soul, his feelings, the energy, so to speak, that is basic to the human personality, are not cut off or maimed in their development, but on the contrary lived and worked out at the very source from which they spring. It is for the sake of these riches of the spirit that the poverty of the means is most willingly endured. This surely must be the meaning of the text: *O taste and see that the Lord is sweet, and blessed is the man that hopeth in him.* (Psalm 33, 9.) But these are riches that have to be paid for. . . .

The monk is thus able to reach an integration of his interior life, in so far as he has no other essential aim in view but to live every movement of his heart in the sight of the most excellent purity of God. Such a perfect ideal is normally, most would admit, incompatible with life in the world, however admirable and holy the latter may be—that is to say, *as a state*. The conflicting cares and aims of the latter of necessity require an increase of roles to be played and means to be adopted; and with the ever

<sup>9</sup> C.xii. 8.

increasing complexity and indirectness of motives, one is bound to live habitually on a more superficial level.

The ideal of the monk, then, consists in the complete integration of all the powers of his soul under one supreme and exclusive value, namely, to live his whole life in the sight of God, and this necessarily takes place at the deepest level of his personality. *Because all my ways are in thy sight*, says the Psalmist (Ps. 118, 168). It is for this, and this only, that we are relieved, and justified in being relieved, of the cares and burdens which are the lot of those living in the world.

But note that the simplicity of which the Psalmist speaks is not a cause but a result—the consequence of this interiorization rather than the other way about. ‘Nothing’, says Cassian ‘is our own save only what we possess with our heart.’<sup>10</sup> In other and more sacred words: *For where thy treasure is, there is thy heart also* (Matt. 6, 21). And so Cassian trained his monks and taught them again and again, not to consider the result of the deed so much as the purpose of the doer . . . not the progress of the work but the intention of the worker . . . not results but the desires of the heart.<sup>11</sup> At this deeper level there is no room for any kind whatsoever of insincerity or deception, neither to God nor to oneself. There, it is not possible to play a part which does not spring wholly and spontaneously from the source of one’s personality: in other words, from one’s true self. Cassian’s actual words are worth recording: ‘*de vera fide ac profunda cordis simplicitate*’:<sup>12</sup> the test is genuine faith and profound simplicity; and it is a test which will stand not only for time but for eternity; indeed the only test. In the eyes of others, the monk training himself or being disciplined in this manner may well at times appear childish or unreasonable, but his acts will be judged by God according to his single-minded concern for the depth and purity of his soul.

The story Cassian used to illustrate his point is the well known one of the monk who was commanded by his superior to plant and then water day after day a dried and withered branch, obviously fit only for the fire. This the monk did for a whole year, never once questioning the apparent absurdity of the whole thing. After a year, when he was asked whether the branch had

<sup>10</sup> C.iii. 10.

<sup>11</sup> cf. C.vi. 9; C.xvii. 11 and I. vii. 21.

<sup>12</sup> I.iv. 24.

begun to take root, the monk could but truly answer: 'I do not know'. In relating the story, Cassian does not intend us necessarily to imitate the act itself, but he relates it in order to bring out *profunda simplicitas cordis*, that deep simplicity of heart with which the monk obeyed.

It is a favourite axiom with Cassian that virtue is, as it were, the natural possession of man; that once the weight of worldly care is removed, the soul flies naturally—perhaps one ought to say supernaturally—to the heights of spiritual prayer. Our forefathers realized that the real motives of our actions lie deeper than the immediate external facts generally allow us to infer; but they were not content even with their interior dispositions until those dispositions had been relieved from conflicting motives: and who would not be glad to feel that his motives were single? Cassian teaches us that virtue is only reached when virtuous acts come straight from the depths of one's being: as it were, from one's very nature. So long as there is perceptible the faintest trace of conflict the perfect state of charity has not been reached. 'Therefore', he says, 'the innermost recesses of the heart must be cleansed with all diligence; for what those who fight in the arena desire to obtain by bodily purity, we should possess also in the *arcana conscientiae*',<sup>13</sup> that is, in the hidden places of the conscience. When this interior citadel is possessed by virtue, then indeed is virtue truly a part of the monk. Then will he begin to observe all rules, as it were, naturally and without effort,<sup>14</sup> because he will be moved, not by fear or desire (for as long as there is either, there is conflict), but from the love of goodness itself; or better still, from the love of God himself.

This striving for what Cassian calls purity of heart, and other spiritual writers call purity of motive or singleness of purpose, is perhaps the hardest thing of all that a monk has to acquire. Short of the saints, one ventures to suppose, the acts of most men, religious included, are a mixture of conflicting ideals and motives never easy to distinguish; some conscious, others habitual or due to force of habit; some direct, others indirect and hidden; so much so that it is exceedingly difficult, if not well nigh impossible, for any man to recognize and appraise the influence of each on any one particular act. Moreover, the motives themselves, whatever

<sup>13</sup> I. vi. 9.

<sup>14</sup> I. iv. 38.

they may be, usually lie on the superficial level of the personality, so that days, months, and even years may go by during which the deeper levels of the soul are barely touched. A modern philosopher<sup>15</sup> has estimated that 99 per cent of our normal activity is purely automatic and habitual, from our rising in the morning to our lying down at night. This is a terrible indictment, when you come to think of it, and gives one pause for thought. One can never be too much on one's guard against dropping into what one may term purely routine acts: that is acts which are neither moral nor immoral in the technical sense, and so very poorly disposed for merit.

Not that we should despise what theologians call 'habit'. On the contrary, the perfect religious must live by habit, but by habits that belong to the interior and deeper level of his personality. He lives habitually, that is *in recessu animae* . . . in the depths of his soul: his true life, the source of all his actions, is there. Provided he keeps this interior citadel of his soul pure and swept and clean, then truly virtuous acts will arise without any apparent effort on his part. *Anima mea in manibus meis semper* . . . my soul is continually in my hands (Ps. 118, 109). It is only the saints, one imagines, who find it easier to do right than to do wrong.

The more spontaneous and natural these acts become, the more they will be influenced by the dispositions of the soul within, and less by the immediate impact of environment or exterior happenings. 'And so', says Cassian, 'the mind of the upright man ought not to be like wax, yielding to the shape of whatever presses on it . . . rather should it be like the stamp of hard steel, that the mind may stamp and imprint on everything that meets it the marks of its own character.'<sup>16</sup>

Thus it becomes clear that the value of an act derives entirely from the worth of the soul that makes it. The blame for the evil of our acts can never be thrown upon circumstances; it must be sought within, in the soul itself. Cassian is adamant on this point. 'No one', he says, 'is ever driven to sin by being provoked by another's fault, unless he has the fuel of evil stored up in his own heart.'<sup>17</sup> In the same way, there is no such thing as a sudden fall, any more than the grace of martyrdom is a sudden or isolated

<sup>15</sup> William James: *Talks to Teachers*, Holt, New York 1899.

<sup>16</sup> C.vi. 12.

<sup>17</sup> I.ix. 6.

thing. The integration of the soul—that is, the gathering together of all its powers and forces under the influence of grace, and directed towards the supreme and eternal values—is the end and steady aim of the whole spiritual combat. When that is achieved, everything is achieved. For the man who has arrived at that point knows that by the grace of God, seconded by a constant and faithful correspondence on his part to grace, he has found his soul. Then can he say with St Paul: *I can do all things in him who strengtheneth me.* (Phil. 4, 13.)



## RELIGIOUS VOCATION—A MOTHER'S PART

E.B.

**W**HEN our Lady consented to bear the Christ Child, conceived by the Holy Spirit, in the natural order of things she was in many ways no different from any ordinary mother. The child must grow in the womb, be born, and then, as a helpless babe, and for long after, be fed and cared for. Although there is always a very special relationship between mother and child, partly physical, partly spiritual—the two are inextricably interwoven—and in a lesser degree between the father, the child does not *belong* to either parent. The parents cooperate with God and the result of their union is another human being, quite unique, entrusted to them by God, and in trust for God. Our Lady and St Joseph knew this very well, and although no comparison can be made with them since they were singled out by God to care for his incarnate Son, nevertheless they serve as the pattern for the ordinary human family.

Nowadays more and more of this parental care is taken over by the state with a corresponding lack of a sense of responsibility by the parents. Unless there is a very strong bond of affection between members of the family, and this again is founded in a deep love of God and in membership of his Church, the family unit disintegrates, with disastrous results. Much has been written about this and there is no need to go into it here. If it does not disintegrate it sometimes happens that it is held together by a subtle tyranny—the tyranny of the possessive mother—and this is more likely to happen in the small family of today.