

C'est L'amour Seul Qui Compte

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We were sitting on a hill in the South of France under the blazing sun and quietly listening to these words of St Thérèse: 'I have recognized my vocation . . . my vocation is Love . . . In the heart of the Church I am Love, *c'est l'amour seul qui compte*'.

At just that time - so I gathered from letters from home - people listening to the wireless were shattered to hear desperate appeals coming through: 'Help, they are burning everything down . . . Perhaps we can hold out another hour, send us help . . . People of the West, don't let us down . . . our last lines are falling . . . where are you?' And then quite suddenly the appeals stopped; there was a terrifying silence.

What had happened? That was in November 1956, and the Hungarians had tried to throw off the foreign tyranny: but Russian tanks were mightier than all the spirited pride and desperate fight put up by the young Hungarians.

No one came to their aid. But when, under cover of night and the November rains, thousands managed to creep across the border - a never ending host - they were welcomed with open heart.

And the streets of Vienna, usually so gay, looked quite different during these days. 'Please tell me, who is that? These ragged little groups standing about without saying a word - are they the poor fellows who have been chased out?' I looked in many, many a face, and how well I knew them! These, indeed, I had never seen before, but the tribulation in their looks, that I had seen in the bombed-out towns in Germany and everywhere where men and women were on their knees before the ruins of their houses, seeking for their loved ones, or perhaps for some treasured possession.

But our Hungarian brothers and sisters found open and helpful hearts.

The Viennese Guild of Charity (Caritasverband Wien) December 1956. Over the door a sign says 'open from 8 a.m. till midnight'. By the time I arrived it had for weeks already been the refuge of thousands who were suffering in body and soul: but there was no closing time, and there was always some one there to help.

But now I wish I had a poet's tongue or the power of an evangelist. What came to pass there was that great love which Christ the King

might demand. Happy days in Vienna, 1956, when every one who came was welcomed as though he were Christ himself.

And how much compassion was shown. This elderly professor comes to bring his beloved violin, which he lays down on the window ledge. He tells me very quietly 'I thought perhaps a young lad might turn up and miss his fiddle. Perhaps he would be happy to have this?'

The telephone hardly ever stopped. The whole day through came offers of help in every known European language. It was not only from the embassies of Vienna, but often enough from foreign countries, just as the lorries, one after another, came rolling in from Belgium or Holland. Often it was an incomprehensible babel. But the universal language which dominated those days was that of our Lord of Love - and no one needed words to understand that.

Christmas celebrations in the Caritasverband in Vienna. No Christmas tree, no candles, no presents. We were not sitting down to a feast - we stood round the Director:

'This year Christ has wished to become man in our homeless brothers and sisters. I cannot thank you all for the help you have given during these weeks, neither by any gift, nor have I words that would be adequate. But I may tell you of our Lord's promise - come you that have received a blessing from my Father, take possession of the kingdom . . . when you did it to the least of my brethren here, you did it to me (Mt. 25. 34). That we have tried to do, and daily we should do so. But understand this properly. The divine child wishes to be poor in these Displaced Persons. If a young man throws away his clothes in the W.C., that is not a joke. It is because he was ashamed of being dirty. Let us therefore not pass judgment. This Christmas may bring us deeper insight. Let us take as our measure the endless compassion of God, which is boundless. And it gives us joy . . . that is what I can summon you to: celebrate a happy, yes, indeed a delightful Christmas. For this year you may take part in his incarnation - though perhaps differently from what you have been used to.'

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in a D.P. Camp. 22nd December 1956. The rooms are all right; the camp is in a former palace. Now it shelters 225 men, women and children, and most of them have lost one or more relatives in the Hungarian battle for freedom. How can one celebrate Christmas with them?

We were a small band of helpers. Every morning kitchen duty began at seven o'clock when the breakfasts had to be ready and served; then

straight away you had to begin preparations for lunch. These did not always meet with the approval of our first-class Viennese cook, who knew well enough how to wield her cooking spoon like a sceptre. My fondest memory of this Christmas is of the 250 *Wiener Schnitzels* that had to be bread-crumbed. Back they were flung in a mighty arc, for I had not coated the first fifty thickly enough. It was the high light of that Christmas dinner.

I could neither speak nor write one word of Hungarian. The older people could, now and again, speak German, but the many youngsters could not understand my mother tongue. So I ordered a dictionary to be sent as quickly as possible from Vienna. Armed with this I went round every day, pointing out phrases like 'How are you today?' or 'Have you slept well?' These questions - how much laughter, how many eager and friendly answers they got! How often these simple women embraced us, and how often some lonely young man would stroke the arm of my coat. I did not object. My heart was burning. What, divine child, could we still give them?

Christmas Eve, about five o'clock. This evening at eight o'clock there is the Christmas Feast in the dining hall. Everyone has their hands full. Lots of parcels had arrived. The young men and girls had been sent in from the surrounding villages with many a kindly word to deliver their parcels tied up with so much care; each decorated with a sprig of fir and perhaps a star made out of tinsel or straw.

A knock on my door. There were a Jewish couple - Christians whom I already knew. He had been a professor in Budapest: she was a prominent socialite: 'Madam, please what should we do? Just now a man, one of ours, came into our room. He cursed us and said that we were Jews and ought not in any case to come to the Christmas feast'.

I felt myself blushing. The barbarities of my own compatriots against the Jews rose in my imagination before me like a dreadful Weeping Wall. 'My dears, couldn't I this Christmas Eve - after the dinner - ask you to join me in this tiny room? We'll go quickly and see if we can't still get a little Christmas tree'. The man began to smile; his wife wept. Then came the Christmas feast, with many speeches, and songs and presents. But nothing remaining so vividly to me as the red, white and green strips of paper that the little girls wore in their hair, flaunting the Hungarian colours: or a group of about twenty young men. They clustered round the Christmas tree, with bowed heads. Not one knew what had happened to his relatives. Nor had I ever before seen young men weeping.

Then came Christmas mass in the small house chapel. Two Sisters of Charity from some German town were there: some sisters from the German Red Cross and a few private people too who all rallied round to decorate the altar for Christmas. In the centre of the crib lay the child Jesus in his swaddling clothes on the straw. There was no Mary, no Joseph, nor even an ox or an ass, yet I believe that this crib was surrounded by the angels of Bethlehem who again brought tidings of peace to those who were kneeling in such deep sorrow. Nor had anyone reckoned with the priest. Who amongst us could have guessed that our Lord would have chosen a young priest to solace these Hungarians, these brothers and sisters who were so deeply sorrowing, or how he could so expound the message of Christmas to show that the love of God might be all the greater for those who had fallen on evil days.

When I had to arrange the vestments for mass I felt terribly ashamed. They came from the presbytery in the village. Everything except the cloth for the chalice was nearly worn out, and sometimes dirty - anyway, the shabbiest you could think of. The priest, who had come over from another camp, was a callow youth. He was pale in the face: the sleeves of his threadbare blue coat were far too short, but he carried it without the slightest sign of embarrassment. How happy I was to realize that he had no thought for himself but only for Christ. There was no need for me to waste one word about the shabbiness of the vestments - such a thing just didn't exist. There was only one reality: the Incarnation as the manifestation of God's love.

Hungarian friends had written out the sermon for me. And what had this young servant of our Lord to say? 'Rejoice then, oh rejoice, for now we may draw near to the poor Christ child. Here he lies on a piece of straw' - and he pointed to the child who lay there in the crib, lonely but smiling. 'This year we have scarcely more than had the Son of God when he came to this cold world. Let us rightly understand his mission. We offer up our poverty and become rich: for it is his poverty. He gives us his kindly smile; we bring him our Christmas present of poverty.'

Then there was the evening Christmas service. We were by ourselves, since the young priest had gone on to visit another camp. The old Christmas hymns rang out in Hungarian and German. 'A child is born in Bethlehem . . .'

We said our rosaries in both languages. Then I went up almost to the crib. A man was translating verse by verse, but his voice faltered. But there were a few simple words that I had to say; 'We cannot celebrate

Christmas unless something happens here that will increase the love of the child Jesus. Our hearts only too easily grow small. On Christmas Eve, when Joseph and Mary were seeking some shelter for their divine son - and, as you know, they had to face the cold indifference of people - there was a knock on my door. Two people had come to find shelter in your love, and you had turned them away . . . I didn't have to say anything more. A man got up, and in a few minutes two voices were singing the ever-new Christmas hymn.

Christmas in Munich: 17th December 1960. 'For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave or free, there is neither male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus'. (Gal. 3. 28). About midday an aeroplane hit the tower of St Paul's and crashed onto a tram, killing more than forty people - many of them mothers coming back from their shopping. On the 22nd the Cardinal of Munich held a Requiem Mass for the dead and their dependents. The words he chose were sombre, 'The Son of Man will come at an hour when you are not expecting him'. Yet these words gave all the comfort with which the Church can console her children who are in sorrow. Every word and every gesture showed the Cardinal's sadness of heart.

Munich was in mourning, though but a week ago it had been as gay as ever. The *Theresienwiese*, which was known throughout the world for its October festival had, for a whole week, seen hundreds of thousands of the faithful, from all over the world, assembled for the Eucharistic Congress. On the last Sunday there must have been nearly a million people round the altar.

Everyday life was transformed. Everything fell into place. Love of the eucharist gave us new insight, and we saw human beings as persons. The conductor on the bus; the policemen who were so friendly; the African bishop whose modesty alone made one draw him into conversation; all made one conscious of our Lord's goodness and love of mankind. Never had Munich appeared so gay.

As Christmas came near there were many under a cloud of sorrow. But again help spontaneously flowed in from all sides. Thus the birth of our Lord was celebrated.

Christmas at St Paul's College. When I was looking for somewhere, where for a short time, and especially over Christmas, I might take the work off some mother's shoulders, I never got to a bombed-out house. I went, instead, to a hostel for African and Asiatic students.

Again an apron, and just as four years ago, it was simple little things

that had to be looked after. Piles of sandwiches had to be made. The great Christmas tree already had its white candles and silver frosting and was crowned with a cross of straw. The tables were decorated with green pine sprigs and little candles stuck in red apples. As eight o'clock drew near the two large rooms filled up with young men of every colour. Soon there was a babel of voices and I could just make out here and there some English or French and between them the hearty tones of the German who was the students' leader.

But what is that little group sitting huddled together in a corner, ill at ease, and rather more shabbily dressed than the others?

Quickly enough there was a packet of cigarettes on their table, and I sat down with them. Has it not been said 'Go out into the byways and the hedge rows' (Lk 14. 23)? So these young men, Mohammedans from Jordan and Israel, sat down to murder the King's English while we ate and drank our Indian or China tea, and enjoyed ourselves.

When it was getting on for eleven o'clock the Father in charge of the students rounded up the guests who were still there, and invited everyone to come to midnight mass at St Paul's. (It was just near this church that the bomber had crashed a week before). Then he read the Christmas gospel in German, and asked a student to translate it into Arabic. 'My' eight Muslims leant forward to listen to the glad tidings. Then we went to church. One of the young Jordanians who was half blind, leant upon my shoulder. It must have been an odd sight, but blessed be those hours when simple human relationships come into their own, and etiquette is gently pushed aside. But there was much more than that - again the child Jesus was in these poor brothers, leading them to his crib.

I tried to explain to my young companion that in the festival we were going to there would be a moment when I and many others would go up to a long table to greet Jesus in the host, which he would see, but that he couldn't come with me then. When that moment came and the people stood up, very clearly a voice said 'I wish to accompany you - I want to go with you' and only under protest did he finally remain in his seat. But after mass we went together to see the crib, one of those Bavarian ones which are so gay and moving. And the child Jesus had seen that my protégé found on this holy evening a warm shelter in St Paul's College. God had laid his hand over Munich in 1960, said the newspapers that came out in the New Year.

After a rousing sermon at the end of the year, preached in the Cathedral, Cardinal Joseph Wendel died of a heart attack, when he was only

59. He it was who, as a young bishop, gave this wonderful answer when someone, in the dreadful winter of 1947, asked him 'What can we now give the people? Mustn't we now take out the last bit of cloth from the chest?' The bishop hesitated just a moment and then in his cautious, dry way said 'I believe that the people now want above all that we give them our hearts.'

Christmas in England, 1962. 'I have called you friends' (Jn 15. 15). Advent is still not here, but the Church has pearls which she has ever offered during the centuries from her rich store. 'The Lord draws near'. Dear child Jesus, what do you wish for your birthday in 1962?

It is in a home for old women, and for some time I have had the opportunity to live here as a guest in the happy atmosphere which is the hall mark of this home. This happiness is charity, the expression of a loving Christian.

I don't know if every German would find it so pleasant to make an English tea and serve it up to old ladies. I rather doubt it. But what is peculiar about it? I have got a list and there I read that Miss A., who is nearly blind must have a swallow-cup, a shallow cup decorated with roses: no sugar but a lot of milk with her tea: two slices of white bread with butter and jam, cut into four little sandwiches. Miss B. on the contrary doesn't like jam, likes brown bread and a lot of sugar in her tea. Every one of the ten old ladies has their own speciality which we know. And every time there is 'What a nice cup of tea' and 'Thank you very much.' Never have I received so many thanks as in this home for about 65 old ladies, nor thanks so movingly and shyly uttered, without any trace of subservience. Here there is no table of precedence that I have been able to discover, only an ever-constant good heartedness, patience and forbearance.

Perhaps, dear child Jesus, you may soon take many of these old folk by the hand and lead them to your heavenly crib. You will welcome them, for even to us it is clear that they are marked by the love which they bear to you. 'Unless you turn and become children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 18. 3).

This is a home run by the Anglican Church. The *Church Times* of 16th November 1962 carried a moving tribute by an Anglican priest to the priests of the French mission (*Visit to Pontigny* by Charles Shells) He ends by saying 'small wonder that, when it came to the end of the week, we none of us wanted to leave, for we had experienced such living Christian charity of the sort which surely one day will melt down the barriers between us.' And only recently I received a letter

from one of the Sisters in an Anglican convent. We had met several times with much joy and also sorrow. She wrote 'Small encounters indeed! But is not that the point? Small things can be the advance-guard and do what greater cannot. The heavy door between us, its hinges corroded by the rust of four centuries of our sin, is not open yet, but humility creeps through the key hole. The massive dyke of misunderstanding and prejudice still stands, but, in tiny rivulets, the water of the Spirit is seeping through, till the great floodtide of the charity of God shall break all barriers down.'

Divine child, how difficult are the riddles you face us with. Or have you pointed out the way? 'For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face . . . so faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.' (I Cor. 13. 12).