

Imaginitis

Robert Nash, S.J.

The strange word on our title page will not be found in a dictionary, I fear. It was coined some years ago, and it has now acquired a fairly definite and widely accepted meaning, though, for the purposes of this booklet, that meaning may be narrowed down very considerably.

We take “imaginitis” then, to be a disease of the mind which distorts the truth in one of two ways,—sometimes by over-emphasizing the difficulties of a given course of action, and sometimes by failing to lay sufficient stress on them.

Suppose you and I are walking together down the street and we drop in to see the dentist. The girl who answers our ring shows us into the waiting room where six or seven other patients have already foregathered. As we sit and watch them our attention is soon attracted by a man who is evidently on tenter-hooks. Each time the door opens he starts up nervously, expecting, it would seem, to have his name called for his interview in the next room. He looks at the secretary who summons each patient as though she was about to sound his death-knell.

When finally his name is announced he turns ashen-pale, throws down the magazine on the table, and follows the secretary with the air of a small boy being haled for punishment by an irate father. The fact is that the poor fellow has been suffering agony with several decaying teeth, and all along he has been deferring this visit because he has an exaggerated terror of the methods of the dentist. Meet him next week as we stand in the five o'clock bus queue and ask him how he got on. Why he will tell you with a smile, it was not one quarter as bad as he anticipated. He was a fool not to have gone long ago. And why did he not go? Because he was a prey to—*imaginitis*.

So the first symptom of the disease is to exaggerate difficulties. Undoubtedly the difficulties do exist—no one is expected to set out for the dentist's house in the same frame of mind as *a man* going for his summer holidays. But the panic is caused because the imagination paints the horrors in extravagant colours.

You have looked, I'm sure, through a pair of field-glasses at a distant object—a church spire or an old castle half a mile away. The effect of the glasses is to enlarge that object and make it appear to be quite beside you. Through these glasses you can actually read the inscription on the wall or you can discern the cross on top of the spire. Of course the object *is* in the same place all the time but if you were to be guided merely by what you see, you might believe that it had come close enough for you to raise your hand and touch it.

Now invert the glasses and look through the lower lens, This time the object seems to have shrunk to a sixth of its real size and to have withdrawn a very considerable distance. You know it has not shrunk or changed its position at all, but again you might easily imagine that it had.

One of the devil's methods of deceiving a soul is to play tricks with the imagination. Sometimes he hands you the glasses and bids you examine your proposed course of action through them. This is his advice, for instance, whenever there is question of the positive performance of some act of virtue. He shows it to you surrounded with all sorts of difficulties. Many of these may be real indeed, but he tries to score against you by enlarging them out of all proportion. At other times, when he tempts you to do a sinful deed, he will show it to you through the glasses turned the other way. He will try to minimize its guilt, persuading you that venial sin is very trivial in the sight of God; and, if there be question of a mortal sin, that one more or less cannot matter much, seeing that it is already so common in any case.

That these are his tactics is borne out by experience. You have had a difference, let me suppose, with a neighbour of yours. Next Sunday at Mass your zealous parish priest chooses to preach, of all subjects, on charity. He points out that Our Lord not only forgave His enemies, but actually prayed for them as He hung on the cross and even tried to find an excuse for their crime. He reminds you that you yourself have sinned, perhaps grievously in the past, and that you have contracted an enormous debt of gratitude to Christ for His mercy in forgiving you. Surely, then, he concludes, it is not much to ask that you, in your turn, should readily forgive someone who has offended you? Yes, even though the other person is unjust, or thankless, or utterly forgetful of your past kindness.

As the priest puts it, it seems fair enough and you begin to play with the idea of patching up the quarrel. You will salute that neighbour as you pass down the churchyard after Mass today and, even though you know you are right, you will ask forgiveness—much more so if you were in the wrong—the next time you meet him alone. At this point enters the enemy. He presents you with the glasses and bids you look through them at what you are proposing to do. “You—going to “kow-tow” to so-and-so! Have sense, man. Don't you remember the bitter things he said about you, and the bitterly harsh remarks he made about your poor mother who is now *in* her grave? Keep him in his place, the insolent fellow. No one could possibly expect you to do anything else.”

Or Lent is coming, and, in a burst of generosity, you promise faithfully to go to Mass every morning, perhaps, also—as we hope—to receive Holy Communion. But such a promise is all very well when you sit on Shrove Tuesday night, at your pancakes, and tea. The story is very different at half-past six on a cold morning when the strident notes of your alarm clock first arouse you, and then nearly deafen you with their echo. “What an idiot you were to make that rash promise,” whispers the tempter. “Stay where you are on this freezing morning.” Once again he bids you take the glasses into your hands and for one moment to open your sleepy eyes and see the immense difficulties that accompany early rising. It's too much to expect, so you turn over on the other side and hope the clock is not a repeater alarm.

Father N. has always been your friend and he knows well that you are ruining your health, bringing misery into the

home, and, worst of all, committing sin, through excessive drinking. He urges you to take the pledge like a man and stick to it. You would be the happiest man in the country if you were free of this slavery—but you feel unable to brace yourself for the struggle. Too hard! You are examining the proposal under the glass that magnifies its difficulties.

Or you are persistently tempted against purity. You groan as you recognise all the depression and despondency that accompany this sin, and you are willing to admit that even these are not its most deadly results. For all that, there is a fearful fascination about it, and you go for years, it may be, dallying with occasions, because *you* exaggerate the difficulties, or believe the father of lies when he shows them to you—real indeed—but enlarged and over-emphasized out of all proportion. The truth probably is, that the effort necessary to conquer them would have cost you immeasurably less than the toll following on surrender.

So, in general, wherever there is question of something you want to do for love of God—whether the performance of an act of virtue, or the breaking off from an occasion of sin—you will find that the devil is partial to showing you your proposal as it appears through the glasses, magnified and exaggerated. Illustrations from daily life abound. You come to make a holy hour—he suggests, first, on your way to the church, that instead you should go to a picture, to drop in for tea to a friend. Beat him there and get as far as the church, and he will urge you to curtail the time—half an hour is long enough, or at any rate you can be satisfied with fifty minutes.

He will tempt you to omit or shorten your morning and night prayers—because fidelity to them is too much trouble. He will prompt you to waste your time when your employer's back is turned, because you have to work too hard when he is on the prowl. He will try to draw you into useless or uncharitable gossip, to make you tell a deliberate lie in order to escape blame, to get you to take money that is not yours. Such temptations are the lot of many of us, and if we sit back and examine his line of attack, we shall find, I think, in many cases, that he relies on the deception we are discussing.

Prayers—you cannot be bothered saying them when you come home late; you are too tired. Drink—well unless you take drink, and treat your pals, and incidentally squander the money needed by your family, you will have rather a thin time. No one would blame you for telling that lie, would they? After all, you could not be expected to face the fury that would inevitably follow if you owned up. You detest that neighbour and haven't you good reason! You cannot keep your lips sealed when his name comes up for discussion, because silence is too hard. *Too hard*—it all comes back to looking at your proposed action through the magnifying glasses, doesn't it?

He employs the same tactics too, where there *is* a positive evil he wants you to commit. You know, and so does he, that a certain companion is sure to lead you into sin. Perhaps sad experience has proved this to you, and your confessor has rightly insisted on a firm resolve to shun that person's company. Or there is some house you have been frequenting—that kitchen where you have sat for two hours, that typist's office, that little cottage where lives all alone the young married woman whose husband is gone to England. Again you know, as well as you know your own name, that such a place is fraught with dangers. But you can't stand clear of it; it has a fearful fascination for you, and the temptation seems to overpower you, to fling all your promises to the wind and, at least, go there. You may frame some specious excuse to give an appearance of justification to your going; you may vaguely assure yourself, and even pray, that you won't commit sin. But the enemy laughs at such compromise. He has beaten you because you saw, at his bidding, the difficulty of avoiding the occasion—great indeed, it may be—but still exaggerated and magnified. It is a lie to assert that you could not refuse to go.

“God is faithful and will not permit you to be tempted beyond that which you are able to bear.” Closely allied with the temptation to frequent an occasion of sin is the inclination to lay false emphasis on the pleasures sin itself affords. One thinks that Judas was deceived in this way. Before he sinned, his imagination, distorted as it was, painted him a picture flattering to his pride and love of power. He would be the favourite in the eyes of the great men of Jerusalem. He wanted money badly, and they would give it. If Our Lord willed, He could easily escape, as Judas had seen Him do before. The wretched man kept looking at the satisfaction promised by the crime he contemplated, till it loomed larger and larger.

But swift on the heels of his sin comes the frightful remorse. He rushes back to the men in whose hands he had been a willing accomplice. With a voice hoarse with despair he declares, what every sinner must ultimately declare, that there is nothing in sin except shame, and disgust and self-contempt, the moment it is committed. The promised enjoyment was a mirage.

Judas' principal sin was despair, distrust of God's mercy. This is one of the sins against the virtue of hope. Presumption is the other, and Satan here too, leads souls to sin by presenting them with an image of God's mercy that is out of focus. The presumptuous man would like God to await his good pleasure. He blandly assures himself that God is too loving a Father to take him in his sins. He likes to forget about the sudden death of that public sinner, who was drowned or knocked down by a lorry. God must stand by accommodatingly till this man has had his full measure of sinful satisfaction; then, perhaps, he will turn and ask forgiveness, and he feels sure he will have time and opportunity to settle all his past before he dies.

Can words be found to stigmatize such insolence! The foolish man is in false security because he does not view his life and his sin with the unprejudiced eye. God is patient, it is true, and abounding in mercy to the sinner who seeks forgiveness and does penance. But this conceited, complacent, self-satisfied creature who calmly expects the all-powerful Creator to accommodate Himself to his conditions, considers himself a man of sound common sense when in reality he is a raving lunatic; as such he must surely recognise himself if only he would not persist in viewing his conduct through glasses that give an exaggerated view of divine mercy. He never allows himself to realise the in-

sufferable arrogance of a presumptuous trust in God's mercy because he refused to look facts straight in the face. His whole attitude is out of joint.

We must not forget to insert a word too about the difficulties which are almost invariably placed before a man or woman who is keen on works of Catholic Action. It would seem that God's work thrives on opposition. What is most astonishing is, perhaps, that this opposition will sometimes come from the very quarter where you expected, and considered you had every right to expect, warm support for your project or at least encouragement and approval. Of course there may be difficulties; we may even concede that there will sometimes be insuperable difficulties, in the way. But beyond question, too, often the difficulties exist only because they are set in the wrong perspective. If those who raise them would sincerely lay aside personal prejudice, or perhaps a feeling of secret envy, and a determination to keep this bumptious organizer "in his place," if they would refuse to be influenced by the thought that his zeal and initiative was a censure of their own apathy and laziness, and, instead of all this, would seek with open mind to discover if the scheme was going to promote God's glory and help souls, how much solid good would be accomplished that, now remains undone! Undone, not because there were not willing workers, but because their ideas and ideals would not be even considered by those whose approval was essential. Or, if they were considered, it was through glasses in which the scheme was shown as bristling with difficulties, real difficulties probably, but exaggerated and overdrawn.

One of the principal efforts in the devil's technique when he bids you see in this way, is to make you forget- the power of divine grace and its nearness to you in your difficulties. This is, so, whether you are trying to practise a virtue like silence about your neighbour's faults or prompt rising for Mass; or whether you are fighting against a persistent occasion of sin; or whether you are an apostle doing your best to lead souls to Jesus and Mary. In all three there will undoubtedly be difficulties, but it is a fatal mistake to pretend to tackle them single-handed. "I can do all things in Him Who strengthen me."

Open up the gospel story for a few minutes. Here is the first appearance of Our divine Lord in His Public Life—at the marriage feast in Cana of Galilee. A serious difficulty arose. The wine ran short and apparently there was no solution except that on this their wedding-day, the newly-married pair were to be humiliated before all their friends. But you know that the difficulty seemed so great and the proposed solution was arrived at, only because they forgot to take into account the presence and the power of Jesus on the scene.

Turn on a few pages farther and read about the multitudes that followed after Our Lord out in the desert. They forgot everything except their craving to be with Him, listening to Him, watching Him, Who exercised such an unprecedented influence over them because He was God. For four days they followed Him like this, many of them for long distances. At last the disciples think well to suggest that they be sent away lest they starve from want of food. But Our Lord orders them all to be fed, just as they are, here in the wilderness! How fantastic the suggestion must seem—unless you remember that the apostles were not to imagine that its accomplishment rested merely with them. Andrew is abashed. "Unde nos" "Where could *we* get food for all these thousands, and in this desolate place!" Exactly. *They* couldn't, but they were not alone in dealing with the problem.

Finally, you have the holy women going out to the tomb on the first Easter morning. They too had the vision of a difficulty that lay ahead. "Who will roll us back the stone?" On the previous Friday they had carefully noted where Jesus was buried and now they were hastening to the grave in order to anoint His sacred body and arrange it lovingly in its resting-place. But here was a real difficulty. The stone rolled over in front of the tomb was very large, too big for a few women to remove it. Their imagination seems to have played them false by summoning up an insuperable difficulty. Actually, when they reached the grave, they found the stone rolled away! All their worry was to no purpose after all! They forgot that Jesus and His power are never far off when a soul of goodwill is oppressed with difficulties.

So we might, I think, set down our first hint in order to arm ourselves when the enemy tries to overdraw the difficulties. "I can do all things in Him Who strengtheneth me." "The man who is united to God," says St. John of the Cross, "is feared by the devil as though he were God Himself!" It is possible to have an undue fear of the devil's power. Yes, we must fear him for it is indeed most true that he has a terrifying strength, that he has been studying the weakness of human nature at close range for thousands of years, that he can deck out sin in very attractive garb and paint virtue as something drab and joyless and abounding in difficulties. But there are cases on record proving that this weak and vacillating nature of ours can rise to astonishing heights of nobility and sanctity when it leans for support on the never-failing grace of Our Lord.

For proof of this, you have only to pick up at random, the life of any saint. Recall for a moment the story of St. Francis Borgia. He was possessed of enormous wealth. As Duke of Gandia he wielded much influence in the affairs of state and commanded the respect of his sovereign and his people. But he renounced it all—his money, his power, and all prospect of advancing himself further in mens' eyes. Why? Because God called him to be a Jesuit. He used often to say afterwards that one quarter of an hour alone with God in the quiet and silence of his little room was worth all he had given up. Now he was of the same human nature as ourselves—like all the saints—and the contempt he had for what we value so highly and the complete victory he gained over his strong passions, are proof positive of the power of divine grace. Had he kept on looking only at the obstacles he would have seen the Jesuit life as too hard, too exacting, and the life of opulence and power as irresistibly attractive.

Unquestionably there was the real attraction of the world, and unquestionably the life he proposed to himself as a Jesuit would demand constant self-sacrifice. But Borgia remembered what we are making our first hint—the mighty power of grace to encourage his first steps and sustain him on the road, till the end of the journey.

What he used to say about the happiness of even a quarter of an hour with God in prayer gives us our second hint when we have to deal with the difficulties that tend to loom too large. That is—to be well persuaded that if there is a man or woman who finds a corner of heaven in this vale of tears it is, beyond question, the one who tries perseveringly to be generous in God's service. We know and believe that our struggles will be rewarded most abundantly when we see Him face to face in heaven. But it almost seems as if God's loving desire to reward cannot wait till eternity. Even here He hastens to let the soul see and understand the blessed sweetness of sacrifice. Thus when a man is sorely pressed by temptation, to, say, impurity, or drink, he will have to put up a fight and take comfort in the truth that grace will not be refused him if he makes use of the proper means. When that struggle is over and he begins to breathe freely again, he will assuredly experience a marvellous joy in his soul if he can look back and see that he stood his ground.

To imagine that God's service means nothing, only the constant denying of every legitimate amusement is to court discouragement. Self-denial there must be indeed, in the measure demanded by the designs of God on the soul, but if He asks for a sacrifice it is only to reward us even at the moment we make it. It is true too that the more one tastes and sees how sweet He is, the more insipid and meaningless grow many of the good things that satisfy for the moment the desires of our senses. The person who tries sincerely and consistently to prove his love for Christ by sacrifice has a happiness in the secret places of his own soul little suspected by those who fight shy of sacrifice because they see it only through glasses that magnify its difficulties.

We have still to talk about what the inverted lenses show, but before doing so let us set down a final hint about dealing with overdrawn difficulties. It is to train ourselves, as far as is possible, to live in the present and seize upon present opportunities. When St. Ignatius Loyola was living in the cave at Manresa he subjected himself to a regime of penance and prayer that might well terrify us. One day the devil approached and asked Ignatius how could he possibly expect to endure such an existence of utter discomfort and continuous prayer for thirty or forty years. Right enough the prospect was appalling. Long hours of vigil every night for thirty years. Each day, for thirty years, barely enough food to keep him alive. The isolation of this cave for a man naturally fond of society and notoriety, for thirty years. No, he never could endure it! Better turn back and have sense! But then he perceived the deception. Who could guarantee that he would have this life for thirty years, or even for thirty minutes! He could live it here and now at any rate, and confidently entrust future difficulties to God's hands. This attitude of his provides our third hint when we are similarly tempted.

Moreover, when the time to fulfil our promise actually comes, we find quite often, that, like the man going to the dentist, "it was not quarter as bad as we anticipated." Much of the difficulty of early rising, of going out in the cold to Mass, of forcing ourselves to work when opportunity was at hand to waste our employer's time, was shorn of a great deal of the trouble we feared when we were actually face to face with the doing of what we promised.

So we have now collected three or four hints for dealing with our enemy when he tries to play tricks with our imagination by laying undue stress on difficulties. (1) Remember that he shows them to you enlarged and overdrawn. (2) Remember that when you tackle them you are not alone; divine grace is assured to you, sufficient to win through in every serious temptation. (3) Remember that there is undoubtedly a deep joy in victory over your enemy, far deeper than any sinful satisfaction. (4) Lastly, concentrate on the present moment and understand that often it happens that the actual doing of what you propose is going to be much easier than you anticipate.

If you but recognise that any given suggestion comes from the devil, you know that it stands condemned from the first. For he is your deadliest enemy, and you may rest assured that he never would advance anything that would make for your happiness, here or hereafter. Therefore, however specious appearances may be, if you see that he must be the author of any proposal you know, by that very fact, that you are to do the direct opposite. You are tempted to meet a sinful companion, let us say, or go into some sinful haunt. Now that idea is undoubtedly from the evil one. Any argument therefore which may be put forward in its favour *is condemned* in advance. The proposed course is intended to make you miserable, to rob you of your peace of soul—no matter how attractive it looks. It must be so, despite all appearances to the contrary, for it comes from him who hates you with all the violence of his nature and is determined to compass your ruin. Were this suggestion going to contribute even remotely to your well-being. Satan would take good care to ward it off from you. He will indeed coat the pill with sugar, but a deadly poison lies hidden within. Every argument in its favour falls instantly to the ground once you see the origin of the evil suggestion.

On the other hand, recognise that a proposal comes from God's grace, and, let it seem as hard as it may, the mere fact that I am sure He has prompted it makes it certain that it is for my well-being. If He asks sacrifice—and He does and will—it is not to make me miserable or try me unduly. It is to load with future blessings and even present delights, the soul that proves its love by deeds rather than by words.

What tricks does the enemy play with the inverted lenses? It will help to introduce the answer if we transfer ourselves for a moment in imagination to the waiting room of a local railway station. We have an hour to wait for the arrival of our train, and, as we sit here we happen to glance through the window. Outside, we observe a large furniture van drawing up at the entrance to the station. Two men open the door behind and between them they carry a huge coil of carpet. With this they proceed direct to our waiting room and apologise for disturbing us while they are spreading it on the floor. Next they return to the van and draw forth an enormous leather-embossed armchair. This too they bring into the room where we are standing, our curiosity not unnaturally aroused.

What is the meaning of all this! Well, they answer, if we look out the window again we will see a well-dressed gentleman heading for this station. He has one hour to wait for the train and, in order to be quite comfortable while

waiting, he has ordered all these elaborate preparations to precede him! You would exclaim that he was mad.

Yet the numbers who are very like him are to be counted by the million. For consider. You and I and every man and woman and child on the face of the earth are here in order to meet the train that is to take us to eternity. Our period of waiting is not even an hour when one remembers that time bears no sort of proportion to eternity. And, since our lot for eternity depends on how we spend this hour of waiting, you would surely conclude that our only concern will be to be ready when the train pulls in, and to have everything in perfect order for the journey. Any other course is sheer insanity.

Just as you smile at the idiotic conduct of the man disgorging all his baggage in the waiting-room, so does Satan laugh with fiendish delight when he succeeds in causing men to be preoccupied with the world about them to the neglect of due preparation for where they are going. How does he bring about this preoccupation? You find the answer by looking at life as it is lived today by the majority of mankind. What do we think of, even we Catholics, for the greater portion of our waking hours? We are absorbed in and ruled by trivialities. You cannot help overhearing a conversation between two girls behind you in the bus. Their chatter is all about last night's dance, or the latest film, or it consists of a lengthy account of some butterfly experience that is not worth the telling. What is the man beside you reading in his evening paper? The Pope has made an important pronouncement which occupies the front page, but your Catholic man is not interested in that. Sport is his line, so he turns at once to the account of today's race, or the forecast for tomorrow a big match or tonight's boxing tournament.

Drop off your bus and step into a hotel or lounge bar. You'll find all here thinking of eternity, won't you? This inane existence consisting of silly chatter and cocktails and cigarettes goes on one day after another, one week after another, and all the time these poor people consider themselves perfectly sane. So does our friend at the railway-station. Count up if you can the number of our cinemas and televisions and reckon how many thousands of our Catholic people have become enslaved by them. How many precious hours are squandered in this way?

For others the great preoccupation is the making of money. Life becomes a breathless rush—a rush to catch trains, to secure interviews or grant them, to discuss the situation with another businessman, phone-calls, telegrams, an endless stream of correspondence claim every moment and a man can scarcely allow himself breathing space to take his meals. He is obsessed with the desire to pile up money which he does not give himself time to enjoy!

At this point perhaps we should forestall a possible objection. You may want to say that in all this there is no sin. We are prepared to admit that that is at least a possibility. You may want to tell me that people must enjoy themselves, and that there does not seem to be any great harm in the forms of enjoyment we have been carping at. After all, you've seen priests at the cinema, you know that so-and-so whom you meet regularly at a "dance", is a daily communicant; this other chap, an inveterate card-player, is still a most loyal Sodalist of our Lady, and this other who is mad on sport, has done and is doing, magnificent organizing work in her Legion. So what's the quarrel! Are *we* all expected to become priests or religious, or at least to scowl and frown upon the world's innocent amusements?

No, there is no quarrel with dancing, or sport, or light reading, or cinema, or hiking, or card-playing, or racing, or boxing, in themselves. They have their place in life and they are meant to act like the drop of oil that keeps the engine running smoothly. This they do when they are used in moderation, as means to an end. We hasten to add that the tendency is to lessen such things rather than to multiply them, when one begins to see life as Our Lord sees it. But that *is* a further question. At the moment, the point is that for many of us amusement and "a good time" have assumed such gigantic proportions in our lives that we think of nothing else, speak of nothing else, we flit like bees from one round of exciting experiences to another. In such life there is no room for God, no serious remembrance of the purpose for which He placed us on this earth. We are pleasure—mad and all the time the train is fast approaching. It is the enemy's plan to keep us preoccupied thus. The object of such preoccupation need not be, at least in the beginning, something that is evil in itself. It quite answers his purpose for the moment if it so fills our thoughts and hearts and so crushes itself into our every spare half-hour, that the thought of God and of eternity has no room. And this is where the inverted lenses help him. For when he manages to make a soul look through these, he shows to the soul the shrunken image of something that is inexpressibly important. Seen thus in miniature, eternity appears of little importance; forget it therefore and seize upon what is to hand. What a terrifying disillusionment must come after such a squandering of life! There has been time for business, time for gossip, time for uncharitable words and thoughts and actions, time for golf or swimming or pictures or cards or moneymaking. The time to get ready for eternity was crushed out. This happened to the rich man in Our Lord's parable. He was eaten up with worldliness; eternity was forgotten or seen only in miniature. God called that man a fool, as you call our friend at the railway station. It is not uncommon for fools to fail to recognise their own folly. An inmate of a mental home will tell you that everyone around him is quite mad and that they all think he is like them!

It is often affirmed that this absorption in worldliness is not a sin. Suppose for the moment that this is true. The Catholic's argument then resolves itself into some such form as this: "I owe everything to God. He created me and preserves me each moment in life. I was born in a Catholic land, of Catholic parents, receiving from God the inestimable blessing of the true faith. Had He decreed otherwise, I might have been born in the heart of China, a pagan. As life has gone on He has strengthened me with His sacraments. If ever I sinned mortally I owe it to His mercy alone that He gave me time to repent. Had He treated me with justice, I should at this moment be in hell, instead of being seated here reading this page. My debt of gratitude to such a munificent giver is beyond all reckoning. But I am not bothering about that. I intend to forget about Him and His claims upon me except in so far as such forgetfulness would endanger my own precious security hereafter. I am far too fond of myself to run the risk of going to

hell, so I shall always step short of mortal sin. Worldliness weakens the bond of love between God and my soul, but I am not concerned about that bond of love. I am satisfied to view God's love and the gifts with which He has loaded me through the lenses that show them as remote and little."

That is the mentality of the Catholic who urges that, because a course of action is "not a sin," that therefore it is open to no objection.

But, in point of fact, is it true, I wonder, that a life immersed in worldliness is so free from actual sin? One must suspect strongly that here too such a Catholic is minimising the meaning of sin and its gravity. Our present Holy Father has been telling us that one of the most terrifying evils of the day is the world's loss of the sense of sin. From forgetfulness of God the transition is easily made to forgetfulness of His commandments, of His rights, of the sanctions with which He has guarded His laws. Listen to the loose-talk, or the unashamedly immoral talk, of this group at the street-corner. Does the thought remotely cross their minds that God's ear listens too, that that coarse joke or foul expression is an offence flung in the face of God? What are the reactions of the young fellow on waking up in the morning after a night of drunkenness or impurity, or both! Will he fall on his knees and beg God's pardon! Will he thank God that he hasn't died last night in his sins? Where is the thought of God in the mind of the person who steals, or runs up bills, or who has accumulated debts which he has not a notion of trying to pay off? Who thinks of the innocence robbed by the frightful sin of scandal, of the soul of another which was God's property and has now, through the example and teaching and co-operation of the scandal-giver, been sold as a slave to Christ's Enemy!

No, we don't think of sin on those lines because we keep on viewing it in miniature. If you steal, the all-important aim must be not to get caught. If you sin against purity, don't take any risk; make sure there won't be any results that would compromise you. If you borrow money, or let your debts run on, keep clear of your creditors, or, better, cheat them if you can. If they bring you into court and you think that you can get away with it, do not hesitate to swear a false oath. We have to live, you know, and in these times every man is out for himself.

This ignoring of God's rights, this complete disregard for the Ten Commandments grows out of worldliness. It is the product of a mentality that considers life a sheer waste of opportunity except in so far as it ministers to the craving for "a good time." "O ye sons of men, how long will you be dull of heart? Why do you love vanity and seek after lying?" (Psalms 4. 3).

One of the masterpieces from the pen of St. Bernard is entitled: About Consideration. It was written for Pope Eugenius, who had been a monk in the saint's monastery before he was raised to this high dignity. In his new sphere Eugenius will find many a change. Constant calls on his time and a multitude of external affairs will claim diligent and unremitting attention. Hitherto, in the silence and seclusion of his monastery, he was able to live a most regular life of prayer and labour. That is finished for him, now that God's Providence has called him to rule His Church as His Vicar one earth.

You might think that Bernard will urge his former disciple to spend his energy generously on these many external cares. After all these have been forced upon him by the Will of God, and, now that he is no longer bound by a religious rule, the great object to set before him must be the discharge of his duties. This Bernard is far from denying, but he stresses in the most emphatic language that for the perfection of his exterior works, it is imperative for the Pope to have regular periods during which he will retire to pray and to meditate on eternal things, be the calls on his time as numerous as they may.

Now if St. Bernard was convinced that even the Pope whose works after all might be considered by the unreflecting to be prayer in themselves, should yet be adamant in seeking retirement and seclusion and space to fill his mind with the thought of God and eternity, surely we can deduce a similar argument for ourselves. If our lives are steeped in worldliness and sin, much more imperative for us is consideration than it was for a man whose works were concerned directly with the furthering of God's kingdom on earth. That is the only remedy we propose for dealing with the deceits caused by viewing life through lens that give a shrunken view. Violence may be necessary, probably will be necessary, to tear ourselves out of this environment and force ourselves to see the silliness and insincerity of the world we love, and the heinousness of offending God by sin.

We do not think, or else we think along wrong lines. The films do our thinking for us and determine for us what is to be our view of life. The sensational novel thinks for us and fools us into living in a dreamland of unreality. The so-called sensible man of the world, so like his prototype in the gospel, thinks for us or rather forces upon us his viewpoint and it does not occur to us to adopt any other—though, if we were not looking at it awry, we should see it was diametrically opposed to Our Lord's. Men like St. Bernard who lived in solitude, come face to face with God and reality, and their words vibrate as they warn us of our folly.

For us too there has to be retirement for periods of regular prayer and prayerful thought. For us if possible, a regular enclosed retreat. For us it is imperative that we reaffirm for ourselves values that are eternal and abiding in a crazy world that is being shaken to its foundations because men's thinking is all wrong.

If you want the correct image, in perfect focus, you must look on the object before you with the naked eye. This will show you things just as they are in reality, and this is how Jesus Christ would have you look at them and keep looking.

This gives a sane, balanced view of life here *and* hereafter, and a correct solution of the problems that meet you. We have been discussing imaginities and the tricks it plays with us. Now for an illustration that will supply us with a truth to counteract the devil's deceits. The truth is that we can attain to a very large measure of control over our imagination. We can get into a happy position where we are able to decide what thoughts we are going to admit and

what thoughts to reject. I do not say that we shall secure complete control, but a little self-discipline, aided by the never-failing grace of God, will give us a very fair measure of this control. That is the truth, and here now is the illustration:

You are sitting on a summer evening reading at the open window of your front room. Presently the gate is pushed in and a gypsy woman appears. She has a basket of trinkets on her arm and she wants you to buy. You have no intention of stirring, interested as you are in your book, and in no way desirous to disturb yourself to get up and inspect the contents of *the* basket. She holds up a necklace; you don't want it, so she drops it and displays instead a photo frame. You are determined to take no notice, no matter how persistent or ingratiating she proves herself to be. Your determination is matched against hers and it is with difficulty you restrain yourself from buying something you don't want, just to get rid of this troublesome interruption to your reading. But you know at the same time that you are in the superior position and there is no sort of compulsion on you to admit them or to buy.

Finally she gives up in despair. Twenty minutes later the gate is opened again and this time you see with delight an old friend who has been very ill for weeks and is having his first outing today. This time you forget all about your interesting book as you rush to the hall-door and down the steps to make your friend welcome. This is a pleasant surprise and you ply your visitor with questions about his health as you lead him back with you.

Thoughts present themselves before the imagination like different visitors at your front door.

With you rests the decision what to admit and what to reject. Evil thoughts, distorted views of life, may be very vivid and very persistent, but you have always the power to say "no." Saying "no" ought not be difficult when you realise that what you see is the image through lenses that magnify or minimize. The mere fact that such thoughts persist in coming back and trying again does not by any means imply that you have consented to them. On the contrary, it argues, rather, that they have not secured the admission they seek.

In these times when, outside the Catholic Church, there is so much doubt and uncertainty and ignorance about even the fundamentals of religion, it will be worth while setting down, in these few final pages, an outline of what we believe as Catholics. We believe that nearly two thousand years ago, a child was born who was not merely in every sense a human being, but was also God, uniting in Himself the divine and the human nature. He taught a very specific doctrine and taught it with all the authority befitting Him as God. He proved to men that He was indeed God by exercising before their very eyes power such as only God could use. Thus it was beyond question that He raised men from the dead and drove forth evil spirits from possessed people. In particular, He threw down a challenge. He foretold that, in proof of His divinity, He would Himself rise from the dead. This He did, and the evidence in support of this miracle is incontrovertible.

Therefore, Jesus Christ is God as well as Man, and therefore He is to be obeyed even as God in heaven is obeyed. Now it was His Will and intention to propagate throughout the world, and throughout all ages, the very specific doctrine He preached. He told men that they were in this world in order to serve God and save their souls. And He taught in clearest terms what the conditions were upon which they would do so. He left them a wonderful gift, which we call divine grace, to enrich these souls with a new life, and to strengthen them wondrously in their struggles against the powers of evil. He gathered a group of apostles about Him. These He trained with special care. To these He entrusted the task of continuing to preach whatever He had taught them. He guaranteed to them immunity from error when they were authoritatively transmitting His doctrines to men. He commissioned them to go throughout the length and breadth of the world and spread everywhere the knowledge of Him and what He taught.

These men were the nucleus of the Catholic Church which since their day has extended its branches everywhere, like the huge oak that develops from the tiny acorn. If it be true that He is God, that He sent these men in this way and promised to preserve them from error; if it be true that the Catholic Church today inherits this teaching and this divine commission to preach and the divine guarantee against teaching error, what follows!

It follows that whatever that Church teaches me is presented to me just exactly as it is in itself. There is no deception possible. I am absolutely certain that here is truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Therefore there is immense peace of mind for the Catholic for he realises that, in matters of the utmost importance concerning his conduct into a happy eternity, he has a most reliable and trustworthy guide. He will not always see why this guide orders him to do this or avoid that. He may not be able to understand the arguments which lead up to a decision about a hitherto unsettled question. But one solid assurance he does possess; he knows he cannot go wrong as long as he obeys.

His Church does not at all wish to cloak over her decisions with a veil of mystery. She welcomes discussion and investigation *and* she will readily be able to supply sound reasons for whatever she does or does not do. The Catholic Faith appeals powerfully to man's reason. It does contain mysteries which the human intellect cannot fathom, but it shows too that mystery involves no contradiction. We believe, for instance, that there are Three Persons in one God, not because we understand how this can be, but because Jesus Christ has told us it is so. We believe that Our Lord is really present in the Blessed Eucharist, not because we see Him there, nor because we can claim any special individual revelation but because Jesus Christ says He is there.

Religion is thus not a matter of sentiment. Non-Catholics will sometimes tell us, well-meaningly, that ours is a beautiful faith. Unquestionably it is, but we do not adhere to it and hold ourselves ready to die in its defense merely because it is so lovely. This we do because it is true, its truth being divinely guaranteed. We are not Catholics merely because our fathers before us were Catholics. We are Catholics because everything taught us in the Catholic Church is eminently reasonable, because every Catholic dogma rests on sound arguments, because the Catholic Church alone

has been commissioned to preach what Christ taught, because she has done so, and will continue to do so, till the end of the world. And for no power on earth or in hell will she tone down that doctrine or change one jot or tittle of it in order to make it more palatable to the world. This, the Catholic Church refuses to do for the simple reason that she is not free to do otherwise. It is as impossible for her to sanction, let us say, birth control or divorce, as it is for a mathematician to admit that two and two make five.

Surely we can see that her attitude is the only sane one. Given that she believes she has a divine commission to preach, that she is guaranteed immune from error, that Jesus Christ her Founder is God incarnate, what other course is open to her except to refuse all parley or surrender?

So she presents us with truth just exactly as it is. For the Catholic who sits back and takes the trouble to think, it must be a source of tremendous satisfaction to have all the assurance that such a Church can give him when she asks him to believe. It can only look with intense compassion on the truncated forms of Christianity found about him in which men have no authoritative teaching, and in which the vaunted freedom to pick and choose for oneself what to believe is fast leading to the inevitable chaos and disbelief in even the existence of God or the divinity of Christ. For many a non-Catholic it is a surprise to learn that we Catholics regard religion as reasonable, as appealing to the mind and intellect as well as to the heart and will. To many of them the thought never occurred that religion was anything more, or could be anything more, than a matter of sentiment, to be taken up or cast down according to the mood of the moment.

With the naked eye you see also how reasonable are the Ten Commandments. If you buy a new lawn mower, or a new radio, or a new typewriter, the man who sells it will usually present you with a book of rules and hints. These you will read and follow out carefully if you are wise, for, after all, the man who built the machine or put the wireless-set together ought to be the best judge as to how it should be treated. He claims to know how to get the most satisfactory results and you do not question his judgment. On the contrary, you value his advice and study your book of rules and hints gracefully and willingly.

The Ten Commandments, even on quite natural grounds, are framed by the Author of our nature with a view to running the human machine in the most effective manner. They are His book of directions, and, even if there were no life after death, man could devise no surer rules for even his temporary well-being on earth. Think what a revolution there would be in human affairs if even one of the Commandments was kept perfectly for a single year. Suppose that everyone observed the Seventh Commandment, what would happen? You could immediately cast aside all locks and keys. You need have no anxiety about where you leave your money. Shopkeepers need scarcely bother keeping accounts for they are assured that their customers are conscientious and will remember to pay. There would be no black-marketing, no overcharging, no attempt to pawn off inferior goods for more than their worth. What a wonderful sense of security must inevitably follow! And yet we have only sketched the state of things that would happen if even one of the Commandments was perfectly observed.

Suppose that even portion of the Eighth Commandment was kept in the same way. Suppose that every man always told the truth. The mind reels while it begins to think out the happy results that must follow. No distrust between us for we can believe unquestioningly whatever our neighbour tells us. No need of any courts of justice for if a man commits a crime he will readily admit his guilt. No need of witnesses or judge or jury. Isn't it silly to look on the Commandments as being restrictions to one's happiness and freedom? If you want to go from Dublin to Limerick you must follow the guidance of the signposts along the route. It is nonsense to say they hamper your liberty. Rather, do they keep you right. A fool may try to maintain that he would prefer to be free to wander where he wills, but anyone who has any sense knows that it *is* reasonable to follow the signposts if you want to get to Limerick. The Ten Commandments are just such signposts, stationed along the route that leads from earth to heaven. But, when you examine them with an open mind you see that they are even more; they constitute an invaluable book of rules for even man's temporary happiness on earth, even if there were no heaven and no eternity to follow.

What is true of multitudes is true also of each individual. The more faithfully each man keeps the Commandments the more happy he will be. He will taste that peace of a good conscience, the peace of God which surpasses all understanding. Let him ignore the book of rules provided by the divine Architect Who fashioned the human machine, and he will experience at once the bitterness that must follow.

To see the Commandments in this light is to see them as they are in reality. Such an attitude is a sure antidote to imaginities.

Throughout these few pages we have been mindful of St. Paul's words that to give entire obedience to God is a service that is *reasonable*. It is not easy to be clear-visioned in a land of fog, and the world today is stumbling in the midst of fog and cloud and darkness. It is refreshing to climb, far out of the depression of the drab valley, up high into God's holy hill, and there see life, its purpose, its difficulties, its temptations and their remedies, just as they are in themselves. It is heartening to recognise the reasonableness of the Catholic's position, to understand that down in the valleys, in the rough and tumble of life even we Catholics may be led astray by false appearances. But up here, in the light of God's countenance, one breathes in the bracing air of the supernatural.

On the mountain of Sinai God deigned to hold intimate converse with His faithful servant Moses. On the mountain of Thabor Our Lord showed Himself in His glory for a flashing moment to Peter, James, and John. On the mountain of Olivet He appeared after His Resurrection and, in the sight of His blessed Mother Mary, and the little group of His apostles, He ascended before them up into heaven.

But Moses had to come down from Sinai and lead his people across the desert into the land of promise. Peter,

James, and John would love to build three tabernacles and remain on Thabor, but, they too must descend and toil for the salvation of the world. After the Ascension, angels appeared and asked the disciples why they kept standing on Olivet looking up to heaven; Jesus would come again, but meantime there was work for them to do. And when the Catholic climbs up into the high mountain, when he sees how soul-satisfying is his position as a follower of Christ in His one true Church, when he recognises the deceits and the insincerity of the flattery of the world, when he understands how wide of the mark are its standards of value, in a word, when he begins to draw near to God in prayer and see life as He sees it, he too would often wish to remain up here where there is such peace and such solid contentment of mind and heart.

But that may not be. "Why stand ye here?" For him too there is work to be done. He must share the good tidings with the others below. He must awaken men from their lethargy. Having seen and realised the truth himself, he must come down and walk amongst those who have lost their way and lead them to the light which he himself has discovered. "When once God takes possession of a soul," says St. John of the Cross, "He does not long remain inactive."

De licentia Superiorum Ordinis

THOMAS BYRNE, S.J.,

Praep. Prov. Hib. .Soc. Jesu.

Dublina, die 31 Maii, 1948.

Nihil Obstat:

JOANNES PINKMAN

Censor Deputatus.

Imprimatur:

✠ JACOBUS JOSEPH,

Episcopus Ardacadensis.

16 Junii 1948
