

LOVING GOD

From a Series of Conferences given by Fr. D. Considine, S. J.

I

Life More Abundant

“I AM come that they may have life, and may have it more abundantly.”

It is a good thing sometimes to have one thought running through a series of conferences. I propose this one of *life*. By which I mean, of course, supernatural life, the full use of all of our faculties, senses, powers, in the knowledge and love of God.

But we don't use them. To begin with, we are very blind, we live in a mist, and see nothing clearly. The Providence of God means little to us; we hardly acknowledge that even what we have prayed for comes from God. Our Lord asked that poor man who came to Him what he wanted: why, that he might see. And this is what we must pray for. God says to us: “You ask Me to help you to love Me, but you won't look at Me! You don't know Me. Ask for sight.”

Next, we are very deaf. They say people are getting more so nowadays, on account of the increasing noise and high tension in which they live. We can't expect a flash of lightning and a roar of thunder from God; we must attune our ears to a still small voice. The Holy Ghost usually whispers—doesn't shout. But even if we hear His whisper we take no notice. “God can't mean that for me, poor me!” He does: He means each of us to be a Saint.

As we advance in years the atmosphere gets clearer; we see better. We can trace God's work in our own souls. (It is comparatively easy to do so in the history of a nation or a Community.)

We see how, so many years ago, He sent that illness, that misfortune, which has brought us nearer to Him. We realize the countless jewels—graces, inspirations, opportunities—we are in danger of losing daily if we don't look out for them.

Let us then begin by praying that we may hear—that we may see.

II

God our Lover

“YEA I have loved with an everlasting love; therefore have I drawn thee, taking pity on thee” (Jeremias xxxi. 3).

God doesn't change. He is Eternal. People are apt to think that in the Old Testament He is the God of Justice; in the New, the God of Mercy—which idea is quite untrue. He was and He is the God of Love and the whole of Time has been one long preparation for the coming of God as a little child at Christmas.

It is difficult to get a true idea of God from the world as we see it today—a place for people to get lost in, as it seems. To understand Him we must go back, not in imagination but in memory and thought—for it really happened—to the time when God in His Love created two human beings, and place them, not in a dungeon, but in a paradise of pleasure to be for ever happy with Himself.

It is a pity to be afraid of looking difficulties in the face, and we may put two in the form of questions:

1. If God is so loving, why didn't He make people and then take them immediately into Heaven before they could get lost?

2. Or why didn't He create just those souls who were sure to be saved and no others?

1. Our nature is such that it hardly values what it gets gratuitously; it would be a tame sort of Heaven we hadn't to work for, and God wanted us to have the very best Heaven that could be. And if we loved Him, He wanted to give us the very best opportunity of proving our love; our whole nature cries out for this.

2. If none were created but the good and perfect: if we had no one to be patient with, no one to bear anything for—if nothing but piety were the fashion, why, we should be killed with *ennui*. A dull world! No one to admire for one thing, for we cannot help admiring those who are faithful in spite of obstacles, patient under difficulties. And to be worthy of admiration there is no need to be preaching or going on foreign missions, etc. It is enough to love God.

To go back to this earliest manifestation of God's love—this idyll, in which God walked with His creatures in the

afternoon, and talked with them as a Father with His children—no sort of embarrassment, all love and confidence. If this triduum could only make you full of trust in the Love of God it would be well spent.

I am afraid if God were to come and ask us to take an afternoon walk with Him here, we should say: “Oh no, not me—I shouldn’t know what to say.”

There are two ideas we must seize:

I. This world, with its hospitals, its wars, its dying children, its starving people, is not the world God intended it to be. He gave us free-will. He did not wish to be served by slaves—and we have made it what it is. As to the explanation of the presence of wicked people in it, St Augustine says they are meant to exercise the virtue of the good, who (1) strive to convert them and bring them to God, and (2) are tried and proved by them.

2. This world of our soul, in which our passions torture us and try to gain the upper hand is also not as God intended it to be: He meant our senses and passions to be subject to reason, and all to Him.

Thus God always was, God *is* our Lover. Let us think of this when our soul is racked with troubles of any kind; the people and the troubles round us, as things are, are just a greater proof of His Love. He wants us to have a better Heaven. Let us hold on to that idea of His Eternal Love, the same in the garden of Eden as when He became a little child for love. His desire is that there should be intimacy, confidence, between the Creator and the creature.

III

Confession

A **PHYSICIAN** examining you enquires if different organs are doing their work, if heart, lungs, etc., are all right. In the same way, in these conferences, which, whatever else they may or may not be, ought to be practical, we shall make enquiry about the two main channels of grace in the spiritual life—Confession and Communion.

Today I shall lay before you some thoughts which are not original, but which may be a means of light. The Holy Spirit is always moving on the face of the waters, and they may do good to one soul or another.

Confession ought to be a relief, something to look forward to: if it is not, then we ought to go down on our knees and ask God to tell us why it is not, and what we are to do to make it so. Why should it be a bore? Why should it be, as it is to some, a torture? Our loving Father and God wants to make things easy and happy for us—He knows we none of us like to be teased and nagged. Confession ought to be just the time when God is sure to give us devotion. Odd if we look at it as a mere item in the week. “We are going to see God!” Oh but we go so often.” Fancy if we made the same objection to going to see any dear friend, and looked upon it as a conventional nuisance made worse by happening so often.

We ought to be deeply grateful to God for allowing us to do it so often.

As to the sins. As long as we are in the same place, we shall have the same temptations, and consequently much the same kind of faults; but there ought to be a diminution either in the number or in the intensity of the faults.

I once asked a person how long she had been confessing these same faults, and she answered cheerfully: “Oh, for the last forty years.” Fancy acknowledging that you haven’t bothered to overcome a fault—say drumming your fingers on the table—to please an earthly friend, for even five years. It is not the fault which is so great as the habit of mind this shows.

Some say it is a mystery how they have had a fault for so long—for instance, not being able to put up with the peculiarities of one’s neighbour (at the Office). It is no mystery: they haven’t taken the trouble, but take it for granted they must say the same sins time after time, so that in many cases after the first few words a Confessor would be able to prompt them. My advice is, mention very few sins, say three. I gave this in an instruction to a Religious Community, and a nun said to me afterwards:

“But my Confessor would have a fit if I only said three!” I don’t know whether Confessors get fits so easily.

Do this: Ask your bosom friend to tell you what she thinks is your chief fault— what really keeps you back from God. She will want the courage of a V.C. to tell you, but if she has it, she will say: Selfishness, Conceit, etc., as the case may be. Work at that fault in your Confessions, and if asked how you are progressing, don’t say: “Oh, I really don’t know,” that is not the frame of mind out of which Saints are made. Take care and pains. We could not keep friends with anyone

we treated as badly as we treat God. Make if you like a little chart of your spiritual condition, though you need not leave it about initialled. And make *your* Confession in such a way as to pinch yourself, mentioning circumstances, e.g. which make your fault more mean. You are not obliged—but God will repay you by giving you more devotion than ever at Holy Communion.

IV God's Mercy

YOU see that I do not keep to any fixed plan in these conferences; I simply speak of anything which may bring out the goodness and the love of God. When God created Adam as He did, He was forced to allow sin, and its consequent misery of every kind. And why? Because God is absolutely sincere and simple. He is the most plain and simple Being there is, and it is because we do not understand Him that we do not love Him. He gave Adam free-will, and He meant it. He is not like men, who so hedge themselves in when they grant anything, and use such meaningless language that we do not know where to have them. We must have a true idea of God's designs in Creation—set up a counter-influence to the prevailing ideas of the day. Men think of Him as an angry God. No, He is a loving, merciful God. His mercy, like all His attributes, is infinite, and if you want to prove it, presume upon it.

Take this as your first indication:

What does Holy Church say about that almost glorious sin of Adam—for she *acclaims* it—Oh happy fault, Oh truly necessary sin of Adam which has merited such a Redeemer. God's designs were partly frustrated, but not entirely, for He saw fresh means of showing His Love. But for this sin, some theologians say He would never have become Man.

God never changes: when He forgives a sin it is forgiven and wiped out of His memory. He does not continue, as we so often do, to bear a grudge: He does not say, as we so often do, "I forgive you, but we can never be the same again." It is this difficulty in believing God has forgiven them entirely which probably hinders many from becoming great Saints.

The relations of God with the Jewish people make a good parable of His dealings with our own soul. How He chose them out of all nations, took them for His own people, made Himself their King. How He loaded them with favours, made Himself their Pillar of Cloud by day and of Fire by night. How they, in return, made themselves a golden calf, fell down and worshipped it: sought after earthly kings like the nations round about them. How, when He condescended to their wishes and gave them a King, they never ceased rebelling against Him. We might waste much breath in calling them stiff-necked, hard-hearted, etc.—but let us return to ourselves: are we not very like them? Do not good people again and again tell God they will be devoted to Him if only He will make some little amendments in their lives which they would suggest? Are we ever satisfied with what He does? Are we ever grateful?

Another parable: the ground must be prepared before the seed can be sown. Had not God devoted thousands of years to preparing the Jews for His coming among them as a little Child? And yet when He did come, in the fullness of time, at the right moment, they were unprepared, and all that He did was misunderstood. In the same way, we need sight, we need hearing if we are to understand God's ways with us. We misunderstand Him, we do not trust His love which never changes.

V Understanding God

THE three evils of past times as well as our own are:

1. Creatures forget God.
2. Creatures misunderstand God.
3. Creatures, not finding God, turn to other creatures, and make little gods of their own.

Now God is not only most lovable but also most loving, and His one wish is that His creatures should be at home with Him, with the feelings of children for a Father, and He wished to get Himself understood by becoming Man. So long as He was just God, He seemed separated from us by an impassable gulf. It is true we can overcome this difficulty as long as

we do what God wants: but He is out of sight, and it is so easy to forget Him. There was only one way: that was to take upon Himself that nature which we understand because it is our own.

He would pass through all the stages of life, beginning as a little Infant like us all: and this would be the most satisfactory answer to all our difficulties. He would be a God who could be a companion to us. How would He manage this—this the most wonderful work of His Hands?

1. He would be born of a most pure virgin.

2. But what rank would He take? He was the Creator, the King. Surely He would be born in a palace made by Angels—or if this were too striking a miracle, He might take one of the magnificent palaces of Herod. But He didn't want to stun or frighten His creatures. He wanted accessibility, and He was born where all could get at Him, laid on a little straw. It is true there was the Angel's message, but that was necessary for the fulfilling of the prophecies to show that the Promise was come.

3. And what were the circumstances of His coming? They all showed that He wished to attract by His Poverty, Simplicity, Weakness.

He wants to be easily known by us and by this fact that the memory of Him should be full of pleasure. When we are hurt by the coldness of the world, let us turn to the fire of God's love—to the God who never disappoints, who is always loving, always attractive, always elevating, always comforting. If we think of Him under any other form, then we may know we have the wrong idea. And if God is Father and Mother to me, all the world may cast me out, and what does it matter, when my Maker wants me for a friend? My friends tire of me, I know that because I tire of them, but what does it matter as long as I do not doubt His gentleness and loveliness, and know that He loves and looks for my poor little service?

So much for the forgetting and misunderstanding of God, now for the turning to creatures.

Creation is from God, and whatever has His hallmark is full of beauty. The world around us is most beautiful, but still more the human creatures in it—we know their power over our hearts. In old times—and indeed in our own—men went mad with love of riches—power—the pleasures of the senses. How could God remedy this? By taking for Himself the opposite of what the world made a god of. For riches, He took Poverty, for pride—Humility, for luxury—the absence of all comfort.

Books are dry things: we learn best from a Person, and Our Lord's Doctrine is *Himself*. Here is the work of Christmas: to make us see that in proportion as we imitate Him we shall be happy. All true *life* consists in sharing the life of Our Lord. He is flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, and all of us should feel that He is our life, for He has given us a heart so exquisitely fashioned that it can only be happy in the full possession of Jesus.

Emmanuel. God with us. God wants to be a great deal with *me*. Ask Him to teach us His love, His view of things: for that is the only true view for me. Let me seek His company who alone can change all bitterness into sweetness, all sorrow into happiness—the only One who can give me content.

VI

Humility

I WANT to speak in this and the following conferences of the Virtues characteristic of Our Lord's Sacred Childhood, and first of His Humility. And yet I don't quite like the way we have of chopping straws—cataloguing Him as if He were a Museum; we don't sufficiently look upon Him as a human being like ourselves, taking the impression which He makes upon us as a whole: and in this way we rather lose touch with the influence which ought to come from Him. If you want to know how to deal with Him, you have only to look at what goes on in your own lives. We are made to the image and likeness of God, I and how do our fellow-creatures impress us with like or dislike? Not by lists of their virtues or bad qualities, but by themselves as a whole. Often we cannot give an account of why we love them. No, the way is, open your bosom to Him to receive Him as He is. In our scientific elaborations we don't get a life-like image of God, but miss getting really nearer to Him. Thus I purposely don't give these conferences in such a form that you can easily refer to

them afterwards, but—I am talking to you about Our Lord, and that is all. Treat Him as a human being, not in sections. Some, in their anxiety to get all done, get nothing done.

God Himself is our model and teacher—it doesn't matter what anyone else says or doesn't say. But if a certain aspect of Our Lord's life strikes you, dwell on that. You won't get the love of Our Lord by adding up His virtues, but by the general impression He makes on you. If He makes you feel: "The love of God is easier than I thought it was"—you will have received some good.

Humility is most important for us: it is the virtue which, helps us most. It is the virtue of every day in the week; it is an atmosphere out of which we ought never to come. It is indispensable for the working of God in the soul. Give God humility, and He will do anything for you; refuse God humility, and you put a bar which God's power can't or won't break down.

How could Our Lord be humble at all? is the question of people who think that humility means to have a low idea of self. It doesn't mean that, but to have a true idea, which is quite another thing. It takes us a long time to get to the bottom of things—to the truth of the matter. God doesn't want you to think yourself very bad when you are *not*. You may know you are sweet-natured, that people like you, that you have a lot of sense; and you may think you couldn't be humble and think all that of yourself. You can, and you would displease God by thinking the opposite. God wants truth. St Paul thanks God for the great things He has wrought in him—and there is our dear Mother's *Magnificat*.

We ought to try to have the same opinion about ourselves that God has. What opinion had Our Lord of Himself? He could not have had a *bad* one; but His Human Nature was infinitely below that of God, and He showed His Humility in all His actions. The mere fact of His becoming Man was an infinite humiliation. This we can bring home to ourselves by imagining ourselves taking a lower nature than our own, preserving the use of reason and yet hiding it, and being treated by all as if we had it not. The humiliation would be terrible. Everyone treated Our Lord as a little child, later on as a mere man, not having the Infinite Knowledge, the Infinite Power which were His. Beside this, how do our little notions of the respect due to us look—our little losses of temper, our feeling that people don't know the great things God has done for us?

So He wants us to love Him and watch Him, and we will ask Him to remind us that if our whole life were passed in the deepest humiliations, it could not come near one day of what He underwent—the great God becoming Man. Ask Him to show us the truth: if He was content with such humiliations, what business have you and I to be running about trying to make ourselves respected?

VI

Counsels—Thoughts

WHAT does the Spiritual Life really consist in? Is God a sort of person who does not show His Hand at once, and keeps us in a state of suspense? It is a sign of want of light if our conscience is in a state of timidity. Isn't the Spiritual Life a sort of puzzle, a maze: doesn't God wish us to be more or less in doubt, not quite "happy"? Are not seasons of depression and doubt signs that God is going to lead us higher? God is a God of love and light. So many think of Our Good God as if He were some sort of tyrant.

Now, by way of correcting these false ideas:

What God wishes is that you should love and trust Him. Whatever distresses you distresses God. One of the best tests of sanctity is always to be thinking how good God is.

How are we to renew our strength? Some seem to think we can't overcome habitual faults—temper, etc. We can, altogether. Speaking quite sanely and soberly we must say to ourselves: this is not conduct worthy of the friend of Christ. We shan't draw near to God as long as there is any habit under which we sit. You must go to the root of it, and we should have no doubt as to the ultimate results. You need not pull so many faces over it, and hug yourself with the thought that seasons of darkness and bitterness are sent by God in preparation for higher things. It may be so, but it is most unlikely, and God is telling no lie when He says: "My Yoke is sweet, and My Burden light."

Now quite a number of spiritual books are quite wrong about the way to go to the root of faults. Take Charity. They say: First conquer thoughts—then words—then deeds. Just the other way about: thoughts are not nearly so much under our control as words, and still more deeds. Look after *deeds*, then *words*, against Charity, and thoughts will gradually die out. Apply this to any difficulty whatever in the Spiritual Life. Half the trouble of modern life comes from paying so much attention to thoughts, feelings, daydreams. The less you trouble about them the better. So many excellent people waste time beating the air, horrified at the thoughts which come into their mind; or, again, worrying about what other people think of them, which they can only judge of by their own thoughts: or, again, about their distractions in prayer, which are of no consequence. Ask them if they think they are pleasing God. “Oh, I can’t expect to know, I oughtn’t to care!” Small compliment to God! If people love us and we love them, we like them to know it, and there is no harm in knowing it. God wishes you to know He loves you, and as for you, you couldn’t want to love God unless you did love Him. “But I never know if I am doing His Will.” It is the easiest thing in the world to do. *Simply want* to do it and it is done.

Even if you are like the fat man who drank vinegar to make himself thin to please God, it will be all right.

Don’t be like the ass who died of hunger between two bundles of hay because it did not know which to eat first. Go ahead.

No. God is not so unreasonable or so without heart as to give you Himself, Body and Soul, every morning and refuse you lesser graces. Believe this, that nothing hurts His Sacred Heart so much as for you to say that that Sacred Heart does not love you immensely, immeasurably.

VIII

Human Respect

I AM going to say something about Human Respect. It is something you will not find in a child. Let us be sure of its definition. It is taking the judgements of men as worth more than the judgements of God. I was lately reading notes of the thirty days’ Retreat of Father de la Colombière and was struck by this sentence: “Human Respect is one of the greatest enemies of Religious Life.”

People outside probably think of it as something utterly beyond holy nuns; but I am afraid that it *is* an enemy even of Religious, even of those who try to give their whole selves to God. St Teresa of Avila, at the beginning of her conversion, says that one of her greatest difficulties was—the opinion of her Sisters. We know that the standard of a whole community is never so high as that of some of its members, and it is never a good thing to say: “Oh, I do as the rest do.” God judges us one by one, not as a corporation: each of us exists for Him as if there were no one else, and not even to Our Blessed Mother would He sacrifice one of our souls. There is not a detail in this world that He has not arranged expressly to suit us, foreseeing from all eternity how it would affect us. If we are told that something we do is quite unworthy of a Catholic and reply: “Oh, but others do it,” that will not please Him, for it is of no use trying to hide behind the rest. This tends to isolate us more and more (by which I do not mean separating ourselves from others or coldness of heart towards them), but standing on our own feet, and regarding merely what God wants.

Whether He wants these things from others or not isn’t your business—only attend to giving your whole heart to pleasing God, not others. “I’ve given you a heart,” God says to you; and perhaps you may reply:

“You’ve given me a heart that is not up to very much”—but nevertheless it is meant to please and imitate *Him*, and not So-and-So, however good she may be.

We get wrong ideas sometimes from reading a Saint’s life—“She did such a thing, and I’ve never done it.” God won’t examine you on what the Saint did but on what *you* have done.

Sometimes even our love and admiration for each other may be a danger to us, in that we think we must imitate them. No. “Be ye perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect.” Imitate Our Lord. Again I say: stand on your own feet. In Religious life there is a tendency to herd together. “I break Rules, of course I do; but so do others. A Rule is only a Rule.” “But God wishes it.” “What does that matter?” How can God help being hurt at being treated with such little consideration? Wouldn’t you be hurt if a friend treated you so? If you are on God’s side, i.e. if you treat Him as you

would a friend, all will prosper with you.

You must make for this isolation from the opinion of others as one who must give an account of self. It is quite common in any group of people to find much Human Respect—that we are afraid to do something God wants because of the tongues of others. It is one of the greatest blights on perfection. We naturally value the opinion of the holy: but let us stand or fall to Our Master, God alone. What comfort when I am doing what God wants. Suppose you do make a mistake: well, God won't mind if your will is good.

What others think has a paralysing, constricting effect. Ask yourself: "Whom am I really to take as my standard?"—Take Him, who will never ask of you anything you cannot do.

IX

Prayer

I AM going to speak on *Prayer*. In my opinion it is as much a mistake to set apart any definite time for prayer, as for breathing, or for one's heart to beat: we should never dream of setting aside other times in which to go without breathing.

The old monkish saying is true: *Laborare est orare*.* It is not a joke, as some people think—those lazy monks, they wanted to get out of praying—but a reality. For the essence of the Spiritual Life is doing God's Will—putting oneself in communication with God, and that is all prayer is.

It ought to be difficult for us to make a distinction between times of prayer and times of not praying, for it all consists in our will being in union with that of God. So much for preface.

I will begin by saying it is an illusion to talk of prayer as of something you do with your mind. No, it is something you do with your heart. I am not speaking now of what they call prayer of affection. I mean, the very essence of prayer is communication with God—through the will being in unison with Him. It is a question of the heart: we can always control our heart, but not our mind. "I never could pray, Father; my mind is not made that way, I never could fix it." Bother your mind—what mind you've got! distractions of the mind don't matter; you've not got to fix **To work is to pray*.

your mind on God the whole time. You come into the church to please God: you kneel down: you have something to worry you: you think about it: all sorts of thoughts pass through your mind—even shocking thoughts. But God is in your heart. You might see His Face brighten as you came in—there are not so many to visit Him; and you have only got to say to Him: "You've made my mind—it can't help wandering." But you have given your heart to God, that is why you are there—and it is all He wants. When fellow-creatures love one another, it is a pleasure merely to be together. So it is with God and us. Don't mind those dreadful people who are always talking about distractions. A distraction of the heart, which is the only one that matters, would be getting up and going out; that is plain enough I think. As long as you are there of your own accord you are giving your heart to God. And here what I said before comes in again: if we want to please God, we do so, all day long. If we want to be with Him, we are. Attitudes don't matter. So bury all that nonsense about distractions. Prayer consists in only one thing; we want to get into communication with God.

Some people think God wants information, and tell Him a long story. Well, if they do so in simplicity, it is quite a good prayer. But if you like, simply come and present yourself—no words needed. Don't forget sanctification comes from God, not self.

"How did you begin your visit?" "I began with nothing." "What acts did you make?" "I made nothing." "What resolutions?" "Nothing." "What results?" Well, where did that peace come from which gradually filled my soul? A change was wrought in me by someone who knew all the windings of my heart without my telling Him anything: comforted me, drew out the thorn of suffering. God values me more than 10,000 worlds. He is so pleased by my visit, does not stop there, but loves me all day through. You don't think a person you love cares for you only at certain hours; when you meet, it is true the love springs up; but it is there all day. The same with God and you. The more easy you are at your prayer, the more at home and like a child, the more He is pleased.

Now: how must I get rid of distractions? Don't get rid of them. If you are walking down a street, and a little dog barks at you, you may, if you like, throw stones and chase it; but a sensible person passes on. And if you have a distraction,

don't make a face, so that everyone wonders what has happened to So-and-So. Don't go in too much for reciting the beautiful prayers of the Saints. God wants to hear *your* voice, not your imitation of someone else's.

Nothing is easier than Prayer.

X

Simplicity

SIMPLICITY is the next great virtue to be studied in Our Blessed Lord's Childhood, not that the Gospels say anything about it, but we know it from Our Lord's whole character and from what distinguishes all children. "As simple as a child" is a common phrase—a child acts and speaks as if everyone were good and to be trusted. The derivation of the word is perhaps from *sine plica*—without fold—everything to be seen which is there. It is a most noble virtue, characteristic of God Himself—for He is without any deceit or guile, and has no ulterior motive in what He says to us. The reason why a person is not simple is, that instead of giving all her attention to what she says, she is looking all round it and its consequences. Look at the conduct of Our Lord compared with that of the Pharisees—so simple—so direct. He never tried to make people think that in following Him they would have no troubles; on the contrary: "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself . . ." (Matt. xvi. 24). He never held out false promises. He never truckled to persons in power as He might easily have done. He had, as we say, no axe to grind, no private ends of His own. We have got a habit of thinking of things not as they are in front of us, but bringing in all sorts of other things: e.g., we want to explain matters so that no one shall think *we* are to blame. Even in ordinary conversation it is so difficult to find a person who is purely simple. Such a one speaks of things as she sees them—you feel there is nothing behind, that she has no axe to grind. She does not speak in order to shine or monopolise the conversation, but simply because she has something to say. She may be wrong, and if she is contradicted she is not huffed, for she only wants truth. Our Lord was so plain, so simple, so direct; and if you are simple, you can do anything with God. Go to God, and say from your heart that you are a dreadful sinner, and He will do anything for you. Nothing pleases God more than when without phrases you acknowledge your sin and say you are sorry for it. The publican: "O Lord, be merciful to me a sinner"; the Prodigal Son: "Father, I have sinned against Heaven and before Thee."

My first bit of advice to you is: —Don't want to be highly thought of by others. If you do, it almost invariably makes you look after your good reputation in everything and warps what you do or say—you want to "get well out of it." No soul is more favoured by God than a simple soul; He Himself always means what He says. Take for instance the well known "seek first the kingdom of heaven," or "My yoke is sweet and my burden light." A simple soul might turn to God and say: "Lord, You have said this; but I don't find Your yoke sweet or Your burden light," and God would make it so for her. We must believe, the saints are those who take God *literally*; they accuse themselves of their faults without any attempt to defend themselves.

Again I repeat: don't set much store on the opinion of others. How often the opinion of men is mistaken—how little good it does us if we have it. Yet we find people most anxious to please superiors, not in order to please God—for that would be simplicity— but for ends of their own.

Secondly: Defend yourself as little as possible. What valuable time is wasted in proving that we *did* know where Timbuctoo is! Let it go against you; it is an excellent way of getting nearer to God. It doesn't matter a row of pins what other people think, unless of course you are in a position of authority and other people are involved. You are in God's Arms—speak to Him about it, and no harm will come of it. How hard it is, I repeat, to find a perfectly simple person: one whom you can trust to speak truth; or who, if she makes a mistake, does not mind being set right, and whose mistakes do not come from selfishness; one to whom you can go in trouble, and who will rather give you no advice at all than give it to you for ends of her own, or what she thinks you will like; who is true to you through thick and thin.

God loves truth. God hates self-defence. If we are simple with Him we shall advance high in His favour, and He will work great things through us. Yes, when God finds a soul that works for Him and is not trying to get a bit for herself—through that soul God will work great things.

XI

“Why you do it”

I PROPOSE to speak on some of those principles of the Spiritual Life concerning which Our Lord says that He came, that we might receive more abundantly, principles which are in danger of being obscured in our daily routine, and which nevertheless underlie all things. God gives us a sort of instinct in the matter: they are part of that common sense of which we say there is nothing more uncommon.

All improvement in our Spiritual Life comes from God. We are inclined to lose heart, we don't seem any better than we were. I often run the risk of shocking people when I reply: “Better? All that matters is that I should be loving God more.” Do you love God? That is the question. The less we have to do with these financial calculations, this stiffness and starch, this having everything planned out, the better. The longer we live, the easier, the more full of zest the Spiritual Life ought to become, and the younger we ought to feel about it. On the contrary, when everything, prayers, acts, etc., are done by routine, the spiritual muscles tend to stiffen, senile decay, as we are told to call old age, comes on, and we grow harder in everything, even our judgements of others. Anything you do without heart soon becomes a bore.

Now if I want this improvement, this youth, it is to God I ought to go—not myself. Get this well into your head, and you will never have any cause for despondency at all! I am so apt to think that if I were more fervent I should succeed better.

It doesn't follow. It all depends on what God does. Our improvement in the Spiritual Life does not come from self—but from God. I may do all my spiritual duties most perfectly and exactly, but if God is not in it, I shall not be one whit the better.

Remember that what we do ourselves doesn't matter in itself—it may be ruling, it may be teaching, it may be eating your dinner—it is all one as far as God is concerned. No occupation in itself is more noble than another in His sight. We are apt to distress ourselves because we are not given the work most suited to our gifts. But with God nothing is great, nothing little: “Thou art my God, because Thou hast no need of my goods.” Otherwise, He wouldn't be God. Whether, humanly speaking, we are doing the work well or badly doesn't matter at all; whether we succeed or fail doesn't matter at all. God can do all the work, and very much better, without you. We say, perhaps: if only I had health and strength I could do much more for God. God doesn't want it!

One thing matters: not what you do, not how you do it: one thing matters, why you do it. If it is to please God, it is everything. Our Lady sweeping the house pleased God more than if she had been a great preacher, gaining many souls. Even the highest of our actions comes under this law, e.g. Holy Communion. If God has laid you on a bed of sickness, He doesn't *want* you at Holy Communion. God can give you Himself without it—can give you more grace than if you were always strong and well.

Here is a Talisman through life: just make sure of why you do things. Don't worry if you are misunderstood—don't worry if you are put in the wrong place—don't worry if your whole life is a series of disappointments—all this doesn't matter one brass farthing. If you are only able to answer:

“I am trying to please God”—this short formula will be your comfort, your peace of soul.

It is much easier to aim high than to aim low: do not think of how to become better, or of how to gain more merit: do not keep incessantly balancing in your mind which way you will gain most, e.g. by making an act of love, or by making an act of hope; do not think of how to gain Heaven; but simply, how to please God! By making elaborate plans for holiness we may be building barriers instead of getting close to God. God loves you: love Him back. And even if you are mistaken in what God wanted of you, if you wanted to please Him, He *is* pleased.

Of course obedience is always a sure guide. “If I had only known earlier,” we sometimes say; “but now, my whole life has been a failure.” It has been no failure if at the present moment you acknowledge your fault, and love God now. You take rank with God now according to your love now.

This is the Talisman to blow away cobwebs, to make life easier, to lighten the burden.

What God wants you to do is what you *think* He wants you to do. In all things carry out His Holy Will.

XII Charity

“By this shall all men know if you are My disciples—if you have love one for another.”

A long experience makes me of opinion that the reason why so many souls fail to get really near to God is a want of fraternal charity. There is no point on which Our Blessed Lord was so particular or so tender. He was always telling His disciples that what we do to anyone else we do to Him. And it wasn't a mere form of speech, we see it in His whole behaviour. It has been often a puzzle to me how souls I have known who had really great virtue, quite out of the common, failed, as time went on, to get as near to God as they should have done; and at last I came to the conclusion it was through some flaw in charity.

Real love is not necessarily emotional; it means simply readiness to do all we can for our neighbour and to abstain from what may harm him. Everyone isn't equally lovable, and we may be put off by faults— want of tact, spirit of contradiction, always saying the wrong thing at the wrong times; people can be very “contrary,” but this is no impediment to love. We must love everybody though we needn't *like* them. Who knows human nature better than He who made it? He knew that certain persons with their fads, etc., would try our patience. Yet He loves them and does not ask impossibilities of us. If you want to get very near to Our Lord you must get rid of any want of charity.

How does this show?

Why, without perhaps causing any scandal, you let a particular person know you dislike her. She has offended you, and “I can't help feeling bitter,” you say. You can. Our Lord is most sensitive on this point, and so would you be if one you loved were being ill-treated; you would rather it were being done to yourself than to the person you loved. “I can't love you,” Our Lord says to you, “if you don't love My friend.” You must not be content with saying, as I have heard a Religious do: “I don't do him any harm: I avoid him.” Is that your way of showing love to God? It is a serious matter; we can't change Our Lord's order, though we may say to Him sometimes: “So-and-so is one of your creatures I believe, but not one to be proud of; couldn't you make her better?” Well, it comes in the life of a saint, that she, suffering from her Superior's bad temper, asked Our Lord to give her a sweeter one. “No,” said Our Lord, “it is very good for you, as you get merit, by bearing it; and it is very good for her, as her deep humility after an outburst gains for her more than she loses by the fault.”

There is no one whom Our Lord would approve of your excluding, so the sooner you set about including them the better. Don't make a resolution, but *do* it. “I can't.” You *can*. “That person has behaved badly to me.” How have you behaved to Our Lord?

“Love me, love my dog,” is a saying in point. Now I would offer a suggestion: if there is anyone you don't like, cultivate her.

Seek her company. Give her every opportunity of making fun of you, etc., and she will soon cease to do it when she sees you are not annoyed. Even humanly speaking this is sane advice. Do anything you can for her. The mere doing of a thing for a person makes you like her; in fact it may end in a particular attachment! Put the best construction on her actions, and you will not only get a great blessing from God, but win the person herself.

His command is simple to carry out. He Himself says: “If you love Me, keep My Commandments.” If you want to love your brethren, do what they want; do as you would be done by. Do away with every root of bitterness; cultivate gentleness and love; be patient and bear.
