

SANCTITY

A CONFERENCE ON THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

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Jesus said: 'So is the Kingdom of Heaven, as if a man should cast seed into the earth, and should sleep and rise, night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up whilst he knoweth not. For the earth of itself bringeth forth fruit: first the blade, then the ear, and afterwards the full corn in the ear. And when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come.' Mark iv. 26—29.

A simple parable indeed; but one full of very deep meaning. Its short trenchant phrases tell the whole story of the supernatural or spiritual life of a soul: they contain the whole secret of Sanctity.

In the following pages we intend to unfold that secret and trace that story, following as closely as possible the parallel set up in the parable of the mysterious growth of a plant.

Life

Life, as the very name implies, is a property or quality of the living as opposed to the non-living. There is this great difference (among others) between the living and the non-living: the living is produced by another living being that is actually or eminently of its own nature, and, once it is produced, the living grows intrinsically by an innate, inherent power of its own. On the other hand, the non-living can be produced even by an agent of a different nature, be that agent living or non-living, and it can increase by extrinsic addition. An example will make this clear. We cannot make a plant grow by adding branch upon branch or leaf upon leaf extrinsically: the plant is a living thing that grows from within. But we can make a wall by adding stone upon stone extrinsically: the wall is non-living, and can increase by external addition.

Spiritual life

It is clear from the above that spiritual life cannot be produced except by one having that life, and that it can grow intrinsically by an inherent power and not by any extrinsic addition on our part.

Supernatural life

The spiritual life that we speak of is a supernatural one. Therefore, it can be produced only by a supernatural Being. And the only supernatural Being is God. Not all men and angels, not the entire natural creation put together, can produce the smallest degree of this supernatural life. Thus in the Sacrament of Baptism, when this supernatural life is infused into the soul, a mightier work is performed than the creation of the whole natural universe of things visible and invisible. For, in so creating the universe, God acts as the 'Author of Nature,' in imitation of His attributes; whereas, in infusing supernatural life in Baptism, He acts as the 'Author of Grace,' communicating His Nature according to its intrinsic specification.

Sanctifying grace

It is this supernatural life that we call sanctifying grace. By sanctifying grace we become children of God, not by mere extrinsic adoption, but by an intrinsic communication of divine life. We become participants or partakers of the divine life. Without being changed into God, we become divinised.

An example or two may help us to understand this a little. We take an iron and place it in the fire. The iron gradually ceases to be cold and dark; it becomes warm and bright. It becomes a participant or partaker of the nature of fire. Without being changed into fire, it becomes fiery. It is in a somewhat similar way that the soul becomes divinised.

Here is another example. We take a crystal and hold it to the sun. The bright light penetrates and permeates it; it

becomes a mass of light. Without being changed into the sun, it becomes bright like the sun; it participates in the nature of the sun. The communication of divine life is somewhat similar.

The eye hath not seen nor the ear heard the beauty of a soul in this state of sanctifying grace. It is beautiful with the beauty, the majesty, the splendour, the nature of God. A glimpse of this beauty communicated to the body itself, the Divine Saviour showed us on the Mount of the Transfiguration.

But this is not all. When a soul lives by this resplendent divine life called sanctifying grace, immediately the Most Holy Trinity, the Father, Son and the Holy Ghost, enter therein as guests and make Their abode therein. The soul becomes the living temple of God more precious than the most precious Basilica erected to the honour of God. For very much as Jesus is present in the Tabernacle in His Divinity and His Humanity, God becomes present in the soul in His Divinity. But whereas the Tabernacle itself has no life, the soul becomes the living temple of God.

God, who was there before as the Author of Nature by His immensity, now becomes present according to His own intrinsic Nature, as He is. Once again an example: it will help us to understand this new presence a little, namely, how God who was already present can become present again. Let us take a radio set. We place it in Ceylon. From Rome a beautiful symphony is transmitted. The sound waves of the symphony reach the set in Ceylon. But as long as an electric current is not switched on to the set, the symphony is not received as *it* is. It is present physically in the set, but it is not received as it is by the set. The reason is that, as long as the set is not raised to the level and nature of these sound waves by a transfusion of electricity, the set cannot receive the symphony as it is. So it is with a soul destitute of sanctifying grace. God is present to it as to all created things. But as it is not of the nature of God, it cannot receive God as He is.

Now just as, once we switch the current on, the radio set immediately receives the symphony as it is, so, no sooner is a soul elevated to the nature of God by sanctifying grace than it receives God as He is.

Continuing our example a little further: the radio set may not reproduce it unto perfection. This reproduction depends on certain conditions, external and internal. *Externally* there must be no disturbances by bad atmospherics, etc. Internally the apparatus must be delicate and well adjusted. Similarly a soul receives God when it is in sanctifying grace. But the perception of this presence depends on external and internal conditions: externally there must not be bad atmospherics or the noise of the world; this noise is caused in a very special way by dissipation due to the attachment chiefly of the senses to created objects. This attachment must be destroyed by mortification; this stage is the *Purgative Way* of the spiritual life. Once this is done, the soul begins to be recollected and there is no external obstruction: there is a degree of silence. *Internally* the soul must be adjusted to the correct wave length and must be well attuned: in other words, it must become like unto God in its activity by the acquisition and the exercise of virtues, and must have a perfectly upright intention or a will in complete conformity with the will of God; this is the *Illuminative Way* of the spiritual life, which sets the intelligence and the will attuned to receive the divine communications.

Now comes a difference between our example and the reality. In the case of the radio set, once the current is on and the atmospherics good, and the apparatus is adjusted and attuned, the transmission is reproduced. But in the case of the soul, even, if it is in the state of sanctifying grace, recollected and rectified by the acquisition of virtues and a pure intention, still it will not perceive *ipso facto* the presence of God. The above conditions are necessary as pre-requisites. But there must be a further operation of God. God is completely free in this operation. Hence our Lord says: '*Spiritus ubi vult spirat*,' 'the Spirit breatheth where it wills'. But when a soul is generous God usually produces these communications. The soul then perceives the divine presence in a quasi-experimental way. We say quasi-experimental because it is still through the veil of Divine Faith, though at times this veil may become almost transparent. The complete experimental perception or the face-to-face vision is reserved to the native air of Paradise where, purified completely from the impediments of the material body and elevated still higher in its perfection, the soul will behold God face to face. When a soul receives these quasi-experimental perceptions of God present within itself, as the object of its knowledge and love, it is in the *Unitive Way*, for in that state the soul's activity and God's activity in the soul become identical or unified to such an extent that it becomes one activity, the soul's function being purely passive or receptive to God's active operation.

Perfection

Just as a plant must normally reach full growth and realize its perfect development, so the spiritual life in the soul must also normally reach this full growth and attain this perfect development of the Unitive Way, called infused contemplation. But very few souls actually reach it. Not because it is abnormal, but because souls are under abnormal conditions.

An example again to illustrate this point. An oak normally grows into a magnificent tree—the king of the forest. This, however, will take place only if the sapling is under normal surroundings and under normal conditions. Planted in Ceylon it would be a dwarf-plant, not because the oak is normally a dwarf-plant, but because it is in an alien land under abnormal conditions.

By original sin, we have been transplanted in an alien land: hence our dwarf-growth in the spiritual life, not because this is the normal one, but because we are under abnormal conditions.

Redemption, however, has made it possible, and even more than possible, for us to come back to normal conditions. For *'Ubi abundavit delictum superabundavit gratia'*: 'where sin abounded, grace has become still more abundant.' But this implies great generosity and self-sacrifice on the part of souls. And because this generosity and self-sacrifice are lacking, few actually reach the high state of perfection expected of them.

Now arises the question: in practice how is the soul to realize this great normal development of its spiritual life?

To answer this we come back to the point from which we started. The spiritual life is a quality of the living. At Baptism this life is given to the soul which as a living thing must, of itself, like the seed in the parable, reach full growth and maturity in sanctity, provided it is under proper conditions and provided there are no obstacles. A difference, however, must be noted between the growth of the seed and the growth of the supernatural life in our soul. In the case of the seed, once it is under proper conditions and there are no obstacles, it will grow by its inherent vitality alone. In the case of the soul, besides the proper conditions and the absence of obstacles there must be an additional quality, i.e. our free co-operation. The reason for this difference is that, unlike the seed, the human soul is endowed with free will, and this free will must also play its part and that by co-operation. Nevertheless it is not we nor our efforts that make the spiritual life grow. It grows by itself under the action of God. The part of our co-operation is illustrated by a charming little example, by Karl Adam. In a garden there is an apple tree laden with ripe fruits. A little child wishes to pluck one but he cannot reach so high, nor is he strong enough to pluck the fruit. His father then takes the child in his arms and, making the little one hold the fruit, plucks it for him. It looks as if the child plucked the fruit. But the father did everything. The child only co-operated. The soul's co-operation is of a similar nature.

In other words, the supernatural life grows by the inherent vitality of sanctifying grace under the operation of God. Our work is to provide the necessary conditions, to remove obstacles and then to co-operate with our free will.

To explain this work of ours, we take once again the example of a plant. For its normal growth the plant needs certain conditions.

1. Light

Lack of light leads to etiolation. The plant finds its stem becoming thin and elongated, it turns pale and dies. But if it is placed in light, it turns green and produces a normal healthy growth. The light of the soul is Divine *Faith*. The soul must see things in the light of Faith and live in the *spirit of Faith*. Faith sees things more differently than does nature. For instance, take two religious. One works in the kitchen and another in the chapel. According to nature, the latter's seems to be the nobler work. But according to Faith, if one works through obedience, to work in the kitchen is as noble as to work in the chapel. Jesus had not yet preached— nor worked miracles. He had only planed wood at Nazareth: still on the banks of the Jordan God proclaims: 'This is My well beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.' Jesus had done the will of His Father: He had been obedient. By the spirit of Faith we see in our daily duties the will of God; in our companions children of God, living tabernacles of the Holy Trinity; in our lawful Superiors the Person and the Authority of God. To live in the Divine Light is to live in the spirit of Faith.

2. Warmth

Light alone is not enough for growth; there must be the necessary warmth. The winter light of the sun produces no growth, because there is no warmth in it. The warmth of the supernatural life is *Charity*. After seeing things in the light of Faith we must act in Charity, i.e. do everything to please God. Just as the vital internal warmth of a plant is increased by respiration, we must, by a spiritual respiration which is prayer—the oft repeated lifting of our souls to God—obtain greater and greater divine charity, from God. The intensity of our spiritual growth will depend on the intensity of this charity or love of God that animates our actions.

3. Soil

The soil must be *well prepared*. It must be dug up, broken, freed from stones, aerated. In the spiritual life this is effected by the proper performance of one's daily duties. For in acting thus, we exercise ourselves in self-denial and in all Christian virtues and prepare a perfect soil for the spiritual plant. The soil must also be enriched by manuring. We may compare our spiritual exercises of the day or the week, such as prayer, the reading of good spiritual books, etc., and these done well, to the enriching of the soil. Without them the soil of the soul gets exhausted and the spiritual life weakens.

The soil must also be *watered*. A plot may be watered with a can, or with rain from heaven. The latter undoubtedly is the more efficacious method, though the former may also be necessary. The water needed for the soul is divine grace in the fullest sense of this word. We can obtain --it by all good, supernatural actions: these are like watering the soil with a can. We can obtain them also by the Sacraments: these are like the rain from heaven. Thus we realize the importance of frequent and worthy reception of the Sacraments. As this is of the utmost importance in the spiritual life, it may be useful to develop this point somewhat more at length and speak in a special manner of the Sacraments which are received oftenest: the Sacraments of Penance and of the Holy Eucharist.

The Sacrament of Penance

The Sacrament of Penance may be called the Sacrament of the compassion of the Heart of Jesus towards the sinful soul. It cleanses the soul from past sins, increases sanctifying grace and gives new strength to overcome future temptations and sins. However great may be one's sins, one need not fear to approach this Sacrament, for, if one's sins are great, the compassion of the Heart of Jesus is infinitely greater. Need we give examples of this boundless mercy of God? Their number is greater than that of the stars of heaven. We shall take one example from the Holy Gospels. Jesus had loved Peter. He had raised him from the dust of the earth to be Prince of His Apostles, the head of His Church. But Peter, on the very day of his first Communion, on the day of his sacerdotal ordination, commits a shameful sin: he denies his Master. It was a deep wound for the Heart of Jesus to be thus treated by His own beloved Apostle, at a moment when He was abandoned by all and delivered to the cruel vengeance of His enemies. But Peter is sorry. Jesus casts on him a look, not of reproach, but of mercy and compassion. And Peter going out weeps bitterly. His sin is forgiven. Not only is it forgiven, but it is also forgotten. . . . After the Resurrection Jesus does not even mention it. He only asks, 'Simon, son of John, lovest thou Me,' and when Peter expresses his love, 'Lord, Thou knowest all things, Thou knowest that I love Thee,' He commits to his care His entire flock, 'Feed My lambs, feed My sheep.' Not to confide in such compassionate love is to do the greatest and cruellest injustice to the Heart of Jesus. Only, if we have sinned much, let us now love-much, not merely in word but in deed.

But when we speak of perfection, there is normally no question of mortal sin. The soul has habitually only venial sins to confess. But often, especially because these are venial sins, they are confessed time after time with little amendment in one's conduct and little progress.

On the other hand if the oft repeated confessions are well made they are a great means of spiritual progress. How then are these weekly or fortnightly confessions to be made?

We answer briefly thus:-

There is not the least doubt that in the case of mortal sins, one and all, without any exception, of those remembered

after a careful examination, must be confessed in order to obtain pardon. It is not the same with venial sins. One is not bound to confess them. Hence even if some are voluntarily omitted they could be pardoned indirectly. One need not, therefore, spend too much time in an over-detailed examination of all the venial sins. A general review of the week or two after the last confession is sufficient for the majority of the sins. But there is one sin or perhaps two which may be called the predominant sin or sins. This is the root and cause of most other sins. This should be examined in detail, not only with regard to the number as far as possible, but also with regard to its causes and occasions and other attending circumstances. The act of contrition, which is the most important part in receiving this Sacrament, while including all other sins in general, should be directed in a special manner on this root sin. Then, very concrete and precise and practical resolutions should be taken against this sin and its occasions for the following week or two as the case may be. At the confession itself, it is sufficient to mention the other venial sins in a general way. But the predominant sin should, with due prudence, be confessed in detail, with its causes and occasions, not omitting those details which may be most humiliating. This humiliation of oneself at confession is one of the best and most efficacious acts of humility. One's resolutions also should be mentioned to the confessor and his advice taken. Subsequently, during the daily examination of conscience and especially at the particular examen, of which this sin should form the subject, one's faults on this point should be examined carefully and also the manner in which one has carried out one's resolutions. At the next confession the same process is followed as for the previous one, and so on till this predominant sin is eradicated. Then other sins could be taken in hand one by one in the same way.

If these frequent confessions are made in this manner, instead of being the indifferent routine acts that they often tend to become, they will be a means of great spiritual progress.

Holy Communion

Holy Communion is of still greater importance and efficacy in the spiritual life.

Jesus came but once to the house of Zachaeus, and that one visit was enough to convert him from a prince of publicans and sinners and make him a saint. Jesus comes often, even daily into our souls, and we remain indifferent. Is it because the action of Jesus is less efficacious now? Certainly not so. If we go to the vast ocean with a thimble, we can fill it. If we go with a large pitcher we can fill it also; and the sea is not the emptier for it. Jesus comes to us with infinite graces. But if our capacity is that of a thimble, He cannot give us more than we can hold. If our capacity is that of a pitcher, He can still fill us without exhausting His abundance. In other words, what we receive in Communion is proportionate to our capacity to receive; this capacity is according to our preparation. To receive much we must prepare ourselves well.

Communion is a food. Hence preparation for Communion or dispositions required for Communion are similar to the dispositions required for taking nourishment.

Appetite is the first condition. To eat well, we must be hungry. The greater the hunger, the better the food is assimilated. Hunger for Holy Communion is a great longing or desire to receive this Sacrament. To renew this desire often during the day, especially by spiritual Communions, is to increase this spiritual hunger.

To eat food with profit one must be *empty*. If one is already full, to force down more food is to court indigestion? So, too, with the Eucharistic fare of our souls; to derive benefit from it one must be empty, empty of self-love. Jesus comes to give us divine love. But if we are already filled with self-love, there is no room for divine love and His coming will be of little use. We must, therefore, empty ourselves of self-love and become more and more humble. Our capacity for divine grace will be in proportion to the depth of our humility. Mary was 'full of grace' because she was full of humility. Hence Holy Scripture says that God looked down, not on her purity or virginity or any other virtue, though these were very precious, but on her humility: '*respexit humilitatem ancillae suae*': 'He looked down on the humility of His handmaid.'

Finally there must be *similarity* between the nature of the person who eats and the nature of the food; else the food cannot be assimilated. For instance, we cannot eat a stone and assimilate it. The dissimilarity and distance between our nature and that of the stone is too great. On the other hand, certain foods are more easily digested because they are nearer in their qualities to our nature. In Holy Communion we are to be as it were assimilated spiritually to Jesus, i.e. our disposi-

tions are to be converted to His. In order to realize this better we must try to approach nearer to Him, to be more and more similar to Him.

To take another example: Jesus comes to enkindle in us the fire of divine love: *'ignem veni mittere in terrain'*. I have come to spread fire on earth.' Fire embraces the wood better and quicker, the drier the wood is. The reason is that by dryness the wood approaches nearer the nature of fire. On the other hand if the wood is wet or green, it is remoter from the nature of fire, and will catch fire with greater difficulty. In a similar way, we also shall catch the divine fire better and quicker in proportion to our nearness to Jesus.

This similarity or nearness to Jesus is realized by our conformity to the will of God. We must try to practise such conformity during the whole day. The first degree of this conformity is in not violating the will of God, i.e. in avoiding sin and in being faithful to the duties of our state of life: it is the 'Thy will be done' of the Our Father in its lowest degree. The second degree is in positively resembling Jesus, the living image of God, by practising virtue and thus being perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect: it is the realization of the 'Thy Kingdom come' in our souls. The third degree is a more intense union by prayer, suffering and sacrifice, like the union of Jesus with the will of God, when He immolated Himself on the Cross for the glory of His Father. Thus the 'Hallowed or sanctified be Thy name' is made realistic to the full in our life as in the life of Christ.

If we prepare ourselves thus for Holy Communion—by hunger, emptiness and resemblance, i.e. by desire, humility and conformity to God's will, and if to this we join a fervent thanksgiving after Communion, incalculable will be the graces we receive in Holy Communion. We shall run like giants in the path of perfection. By our Communions alone we can become great saints.

The plant of the supernatural life will thus have all that is needed: light, warmth, and a soil well prepared. It only remains to protect it against noxious animals, i.e. against occasions of sin: and it must, of itself, by its own inherent vitality, develop into a full grown tree, provided always that we co-operate with the action of God.

But this spiritual tree is not merely to bear leaves: it must bring forth flowers and fruits. A further process is necessary for the production of abundant fruit: the tree must be correctly pruned. The vine, for instance, if not duly pruned, will bear very little fruit. In other words, there must be suffering endured for the love of God. Hence our Divine Lord says: 'He that beareth fruit in Me, My Father will purge him that he may bring forth more fruit.'

It must, however, be remembered that the pruning is done, not by the plant itself, but by the gardener. That is to say, it is God Himself who supplies us with the best mortifications.

There is no doubt that we can impose on ourselves mortifications of our own choice. But in order that these may not be against God's plans and thus do more harm than good, we must always ask the advice of a prudent guide, especially of our spiritual father. But much more efficacious than mortifications of our own choice are those of God's choice, viz, for the generality of Christians the penances imposed by the Church of God, such as fasts, abstinence, etc.: for religious, the penances according to their Rules in addition to those of the Church; for all, the various inconveniences, sufferings, contradictions, etc., of daily life resulting from our work, our surroundings, or companions, etc.—in one word, all that is unpleasant, permitted by Divine Providence. Often this Providence may not be so clearly visible. We may see only the human instrument that, like a pair of sharp scissors, cuts us mercilessly. But let us look with the eyes of Faith and we shall see that these scissors are held by a Hand crucified for love of us.

The comparison of the spiritual life with a plant can be carried with profit a step further. The Church is like a large, beautiful, well-laid-out garden. There are in it trees and plants of various hue and colour, of different size and growth. Some are giant trees, others low-lying grass. Some are in well-trimmed beds or elegant rows, like the religious families, others are in scattered variety, like the ordinary faithful. But it is an important point to be noted, that it is the gardener who chooses the plants for the respective places in the garden. In another place the plants will not thrive well. So in the Church, God has a special place for each soul. In another place it will not realize the degree of sanctity that should be achieved by it. Some are to be priests, others religious, others the faithful laity. Each one's full sanctity is to be realized according to this divine plan and in no other way. Hence, says the Divine Master, 'It is not you who have chosen Me, but I

have chosen you and placed you that you may go and bring forth fruit.' To go out of this plan may perhaps mean to miss the mark completely. Hence the importance of choosing one's vocation prudently and correctly: if God wishes us to be in the world, then it is in the world that we shall realize our perfect sanctity; if, on the contrary, He wishes us to quit the world, then it is in the priesthood or the religious life that we can reach our normal growth and development.

Once our vocation is chosen with due prudence, then our sanctity is to be realized therein, by being faithful to the duties of our state of life in the manner described in the body of this exposition. In the garden the rose attains its perfections by producing very good roses, the lily very good lilies, the violet very good violets, the vine very good grapes. The violet must not try to go to the bed of roses lest the gardener pull it out and throw it away. Nor must it try to produce lilies. So the highest sanctity for each soul is to fulfil unto perfection all its duties, spiritual and temporal, where Divine Providence has placed it, whether it be in the home, in the workshop, at school, in the cloister, or in the priestly ministry.

Then, like the seed growing in silence, it will produce, though unobserved, unnoticed, 'first the blade, then the ear, and afterwards the full corn in the ear' in personal sanctity, in good works and in glory to God, a hundredfold.

So may it be for each one of us through the motherly care, mediation and example of Mary. From a parched land, under the Breath of God, she sprang forth as the one living Rod from the Root of Jesse, bearing the fair Blossom, Jesus. So may we also in this world, parched with sin, spring into life and vitality under the Living Breath of God and blossom forth in virtues unto the likeness of Jesus.
