

WHAT HABITS HAVE YOU?

By Rev. Robert Nash, S.J.

On today's paper I see a heavy-typed headline. It informs me of a very distressing accident that took place on a country road. There was a collision last evening at five o'clock between a lorry and a donkey-cart. It seems that the man at the wheel was a reckless driver and people are saying that often before this he has driven when under the influence of drink. His friends had warned him repeatedly, but at last the inevitable has happened. He has run right into this little donkey-cart at a bend in the road. The old woman was killed on the spot and the eight-year-old granddaughter has been taken to hospital to be treated for serious injuries. The driver has been arrested and will be tried in court in a few weeks' time.

A Lame Excuse

A month later the press gives a full account of the proceedings. The man is asked if he has any defence to make. Yes, to be sure, he has. He tells the judge and jury that several times before this he had successfully turned that bend while driving at the very same speed; indeed he had often been driving even faster. He had taken that risk so many times with impunity that he was quite satisfied to believe he might try again. The fact is that he had gone that way so often and at that rate of travel that by now he had acquired quite a habit. Of course he had no intention whatever of killing the poor woman or maltreating the child. No one regretted the unfortunate affair more sincerely than he, but he felt confident that the court would take cognisance of the fact that it was all due to an unfortunate habit and be lenient accordingly.

You can imagine how judge and jury would smile sarcastically at such a strange defence. Only a habit, to be sure! But men must be taught to control such dangerous habits and this reckless fellow must learn by serving a severe sentence. And every single man and woman in the court nods warm approval.

You and I, were we sitting there, would also applaud the judge's verdict. But are we quite consistent, I wonder. For here arises the query on our cover. What habits have we? And, if the habits we have cause annoyance to others, do we exonerate ourselves on the same absurd plea which we resent in the careless driver?

Here is a young fellow of eighteen or nineteen whose violent temper makes life nearly unendurable for those condemned to live with him. He will answer his mother sneeringly; he will flare up if his Sunday collar is not laundered to his liking; he will sulk if asked an awkward question by his father, or if he is told to be in at night at a reasonable hour. Only eighteen or nineteen and no one can stand him; what will he be at twenty-two or twenty-five? Yet, when he is in an amenable mood, this boy will whisper in your ear that really he does not mean half of what he says at such times. He just has the habit, that's all, of flying off the handle.

Here are two ladies seated over the tea-cups in the restaurant and they gloat in tearing in shreds the character of the luckless woman who lives in the next block. But you must remember that once again they do not mean any great harm; they have just got into the habit, you know, when they are together like this and there is not much else to talk of. They do not like her, that dame in the next block, and quite imperceptibly they slip into harsh criticism of her whenever her name is mentioned.

Consistent?

This young shop assistant handles quite a lot of money. This girl at the bookie's office passes many a note through her fingers.

It's tempting, of course. An odd half-crown for the dogs or cigarettes, or a few shillings for cosmetics or the pictures now and then, would never be missed. Challenge the young person with the sin of theft and, while the acts are admitted to be wrong, you will probably be told that they are largely the result of habit. As though that were sufficient excuse to evade responsibility or escape blame! Sullivan accuses himself in Confession of taking the Holy Name, but adds that there is no irreverence meant; it's only a habit he has acquired. Mulligan has been late for Mass five Sundays in succession; yes, he knows it is not right, but then, you see, has got into the bad habit of lying on in bed. Where is our consistency? We are not wrong or too hard when we approve of the judge's sentence. That man in court deserves

whatever is coming to him. But we are utterly illogical in thinking to find a way-out for ourselves when, we for our bad manners, or lying tongues, or our repeated acts of dishonesty, or our violent tempers, we serve up the silly excuse that these are the result of a habit.

We sometimes fail to remember a very consoling truth where there is question of good habits which we have acquired. Perhaps we can best bring out the mistake by a little illustration. Suppose, then, that every evening of your life you inspect personally each door and gate in your employer's premises in order to satisfy yourself that all are carefully locked. You have done this conscientiously for the last twelve years, so you have long since acquired the habit. You would feel there was a gap of some sort in your evening's programme if you happened to omit the customary route and inspection.

Now arrives the thief but he is foiled. Every door is barred; every desk is locked securely; the main switches are all turned off and the keys lie safe in your pocket. The man intent on the robbery goes home disappointed; perhaps even through some device you have invented, his identity is discovered. Next morning the word gets around and your employer sends for you, shakes hands and thanks you. Your fidelity in discharging your duty has saved him perhaps six or seven hundred pounds, and in expression of his gratitude he rewards you handsomely. Your fellow workers clap you on the back and congratulate you on your luck. Your wife and children receive the news that evening with a cheer, and you yourself do not try to restrain your grin of satisfaction.

You haven't any scruple about accepting this gift from your employer, have you? Scruple? Why the thought did not cross your mind. What is there to be scrupulous about, anyhow? Well, you see, it cost you very little to go on your usual rounds and take the customary precautions on the night of that attempted burglary. You had been doing it so often and so regularly that by now you had acquired quite a habit. Is it quite fair to accept a large sum for what had by now become second nature? Of course you flout the suggestion with indignation that there is anything remotely unjust in taking your reward. The trouble to you may have been small indeed, but it has been an immense benefit to your employer, and you rightly regard as a fair recompense what has come into your hands so opportunely.

Second Nature

We forget sometimes to make the consoling practical application of our parable to the good habits we have acquired. Once you were a slave to drink, but you took the pledge and you have kept it faithfully for the past twelve years? Yes, you tell me, but no thanks to me now. The craving has died down ages ago and there is no longer any struggle with the old temptation. I have got the good habit, thank God. Or you were an inveterate gambler, and it cost you nearly a superhuman effort to shake yourself free? Yes, but that was all in the dim distant past; now, I have lost interest in gambling; I have got out of the habit. For the past seven months, since the mission in your parish, you have received Holy Communion nearly every morning? Well yes, I have, but it's easy enough now, you know, since I got into the habit of jumping out of bed at the first tinkle of my alarm clock. Every day at lunch hour you drop into the church for three or four minutes of fervent prayer, and in the presence of Jesus, or before Mary's image, you kneel and beg for the grace to avoid some occasion of sin, or to grow in divine love and zeal for souls? Well, I heard a priest speaking strongly in favour of that practice at a retreat four years ago; I got into the habit at that time and it is quite easy now, second nature in fact.

And so on with any number of excellent habits which our readers have probably acquired. It is a comfort to remember—what we sometimes tend to forget—that the mere fact that constant practice has lessened the difficulty does not by any means imply that the merit has depreciated proportionately. One has known people to get into the habit of taking tea without sugar or eating meat without salt. This they did as an act of wholesome mortification. But after a while they grew quite used to the privation. When the tea or the meat ceased to taste unpleasant, they imagined that their sacrifice had lost some of its value in God's sight. It is by no means certain that they were right.

It is easy enough to break across your knee a single piece of dry firewood. Take two together, though, and you will not experience the same facility. Three together are more difficult still, and, according as you increase the number, you finally reach a stage when, in spite of all the strength you can summon, you fail completely in your effort. Every day a man lives he is developing good or bad habits and these exercise so powerful an influence on the formation of his character that they might almost be said to determine it. That is why we want to talk about them, and already it must be clear that our discussion is bound to raise questions and lead to suggestions which will be of immense

practical value in the living of our daily lives.

Untiring Industry

A few words about four or five specific habits will probably be useful, and we might introduce the first of them by turning over together the pages of the Old Testament. As we do so, my eye falls upon three conspicuous names to be found there. Their stories are appropriate as showing the necessity for cultivating the habit of constant, useful occupation. "An idle mind is the devil's workshop." The first is the story of King David. There was none more valiant than David in his youth in combating the enemies of God, but ultimately he fell into sins of the most abominable kind. What happened? The king was assailed by fierce temptation to which he succumbed—largely because he had allowed himself to slip into the habit of idling his time.

A few pages further on there is the history of Samson, one of the strongest men who ever lived, physically and perhaps morally, too. So long as Samson applied himself with vigour to diligent toil he held an unblemished record. But, like David, he drifted, through idleness and easy living, into the habit of dallying with vice. It was idleness that robbed him of his will power. He too sinned grievously. His enemies watched their chance and pounced upon it and finally succeeded in taking him prisoner.

The wisdom of Solomon has passed into a proverb. He it was whom God chose to build a magnificent temple in His honour. The pious and wealthy monarch spared neither time nor thought nor money in order to execute perfectly the commission entrusted to him. Nothing was more remote from his mind and heart at this period than thought or desire of sin; rather, was his soul steeped in divine love and burning in its devotedness to God's interests.

The temple was completed at last, and on the day it opened Solomon knelt before all the people and with arms outstretched prayed a sublime prayer, begging the Lord's blessing on the noble edifice and entreating for himself the gift of wisdom. "Give me wisdom, O Lord, that sitteth by Thy throne." After the years of labour repose came, and the wisest of men began to love indolence and excessive comfort. He fell lamentably and his fall is one of the most painful tragedies in history. The wise man became a fool and prostrated himself before idols; strange women beguiled his heart and he plunged headlong into vice.

Conclusion? St. Augustine will draw it for us. "Be on the alert, my brethren, and beware of idleness. I know you, and you are not more holy than David, nor are you stronger than Samson, nor wiser than Solomon." And, consistently with this sound advice, Augustine gave the example of untiring labour. He was converted to the true faith at the age of thirty-three. In the forty-three years between that and his death he wrote so much that, for a man living to average age, the mere study of it might well be regarded as a good life's task. And this phenomenal amount of work he accomplished during the period while he was a busy bishop with innumerable calls upon his time, and while carrying on his shoulders the weight of all the problems and responsibilities attached to the administration of a large diocese.

Watch Your Chance

It has been well suggested that the motive which impelled him to work thus incessantly was abiding fear lest he should fall back into those evil habits from which he had so mercifully been delivered. But, over and above this, in a man of Augustine's calibre you will always find a most vivid perception of the truth that this fleeting life is his one opportunity of doing anything to extend the confines of God's kingdom on earth. God's precious gift of time is handed out to him only second by second. He has grasped the fact that each second well spent is recorded by God's angels. Each second comes to him laden with enormous possibilities of doing good that is eternal in its value. Thoughts like these haunt him by day and by night, and they prove to be a stimulus that is nearly impossible to resist, warning him against the disaster of squandering a single second of his treasure.

St. Alphonsus Liguori made and kept faithfully a heroic vow never to lose a moment of time. And the tomes that have come from his pen, fragrant with a burning love of Jesus and Mary and filled with solid doctrine that has won for him the title of Doctor of the Church, bear to this day eloquent and edifying testimony to the steady perseverance with which he pursued his goal.

One sometimes hears the question asked how men like Augustine or Alphonsus manage to get through such a gigantic amount of work. It is almost a commonplace that the man who accomplishes most is generally the one who is most ready to take on an extra job. The loafer has not time, but the really busy man will fit it in somehow, somewhere.

How is it done? Well, look through your day and count how many moments are let thoughtlessly slip through your fingers, moments which, if utilised, would run into several hours in the course of a week or a month. When there is a big, compelling motive like the one that urges on the saints, these moments are not allowed to slip. It would be easy to show what splendid work has been done in these “odd moments.”

But let me forestall an objection. Let not the reader ask querulously if he is never expected to relax at all. Is it to be all work and no play? Certainly not, and the query leads on naturally enough to the discussion of another habit—taking leisure.

Leisure is something quite distinct from idleness. Leisure is the lawful relaxation permitted to a man in order to refresh himself after honest work and prepare him for further labour. Idleness is the loafing, lazy way of the sluggard. It is leisure to enjoy yourself at the seaside on Sunday when all the week you have been working conscientiously and now need a break. It is idleness to hang about the street corner doing nothing, because you have a prejudice against hard work. It is leisure to read a light book which makes little or no demand on your powers of intellect when you are weakened out by sickness or about to face a serious operation next day. It is idleness to read nothing but one thriller after another when you are well and up and about, and quite capable of useful occupation.

Hours Off

Leisure when taken in the right way and at the right time wins God’s blessing and approval and stores up merit for you in heaven.

Idleness brings His curse, and, as we saw, easily leads to grave sin. St. Alphonsus, notwithstanding his vow never to lose a moment, rightly considered it the correct thing to take recreation regularly with his brethren. He would often play a musical instrument, he took good care to be a pleasant companion and joined eagerly in whatever simple amusement was afoot. To unbend in ways like these was no loss of time. He recognised that relaxation was necessary, to be taken in the right way and at the right time. The human body in many respects is like a machine, needing the drop of oil to keep all the parts in perfect condition.

But too much oil will clog the wheels of your machine, and too much leisure will sap the powers of concentration which are needed to develop a man or woman of character. So leisure has to be kept sternly within bounds if it is to be protected from degenerating into idleness. You will sometimes hear the Church blamed for curtailing opportunities for excessive leisure and too much pleasure. The Church is no enemy of lawful recreation, leisure that is taken at the right time and in due measure.

When she warns you about cinema or dancing or hiking, she has no wish to deprive you of these things. All she insists upon is that you train yourself to regulate them. She knows well that if pleasure be indulged in immoderately and indiscriminately her children’s higher interests are certain to suffer. So she counsels them, and indeed often orders them, to practise denial of their natural liking for these things, lest their leisure should degenerate into idleness, and idleness pave the way to serious sin, and serious sin lead to the eternal loss of the immortal soul. That is always her point of view; “what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” Just as a mother will not allow her child to drink poison, be it ever so sweet to the taste and ever so beautiful in colour, so the Church insists, and must insist, on the right use of pleasure and leisure in order to make sure of the spiritual health and life of the children entrusted to her.

One of the functions of education is to train a person in the habit of being able to employ his leisure profitably and pleasantly. An educated man is rarely “at a loose end.” He is not too dependent on radio, or the newspaper, or the cinema, or the novel, to fill in an hour or two of his time off. He is resourceful and versatile in his interests, so that he never feels the need of sitting vacantly waiting for something to turn up. He does not inflict himself unduly on his long-suffering neighbour. He knows that people may tire of him if he comes along too often, and anyhow there are always so many things he wants to “get at,” that he has no great inclination to encroach on the other person’s time.

Have a Hobby

This contented and independent disposition is very largely the result of having a good hobby. We need each other, it is true, for men are social animals. But it is highly desirable, too, that we cultivate the habit of being able to employ ourselves usefully and pleasantly when we are thrown back on our own resources. The name of useful hobbies is

legion—stamp collecting, reading, writing, photography, radio, gardening, fishing, rowing, painting. But this is the place to stress that, if at all possible, the hobby should be one that will advance the interests of souls. If it is good to see a man harmlessly occupied, it is excellent to see him” apostolically” occupied. If you are glad that he finds lawful pleasure and relaxation in his pipe and paper and armchair and fireside, or in his garden, or with his camera, you are overjoyed to discover that he has made a hobby of some form of Catholic Action, and extracts from it more pleasure and puts into it more zest, than into an occupation that is merely innocuous.

The person who would learn to take leisure in the right way and in due measure is going to have the pull against him, especially in the modern world. Pleasure for pleasure’s sake, and as much of it as you can, and wherever you can, would seem to be the rule most people follow. “An Englishwoman’s day,” writes Douglas Reed, in *All Our Tomorrows*, “is made up of shops, tea, and the pictures; the pictures, tea, and shops. When they are at home they open tins, make tea, and listen to the radio—and what poison drips into their ears!” A Catholic has to cultivate the habit of recognising that leisure, like everything else that goes to make up his life, must be governed by some principle. He may not permit himself to be the plaything of his whims and inclinations. The principle to govern him is thus enunciated by St. Ignatius: Leisure must be used and availed of in so far as it helps him to serve God, and ruthlessly ejected from his life in so far as it hinders him in this service.

The measure of relaxation which each one will allow himself, while keeping faithfully to this principles will vary enormously. One man’s meat will be another man’s poison. There are some who need more, and others who need less, and still others who give you the impression that they have discovered the secret of perpetual motion.

How much leisure should you allow yourself? If you are quite sincere with yourself in trying to apply St. Ignatius’ principle, you will probably succeed in hitting the mark fairly accurately. It may be said, too, that our Lord’s best friends, the saints, and those who are trying most faithfully to follow in their footsteps tend to less rather than to more. They are always studying Christ’s ways, you see, and they cannot be blind to the fact that He inclined towards what was hard. That is one big reason why they have the habit of tipping the balance on that side themselves when a choice is given them.

Don’t be a Gossip

Useful employment of time and right principles concerning leisure have no more deadly foe than the gossiping habit. We smile at it tolerantly enough and readily condone it, but are we right in doing so? X and Y meet and proceed to discuss the shortcomings of Z. It’s only a habit, you know, and there isn’t much else to talk about. So, across the table X whispers confidentially that Z is a tippler, or that, although a married person, there are shady stories abroad. Y now chips in and adds that the unfortunate Z is running up bills all over the place. In fact it seems true that a solicitor has been engaged to try to retrieve some of the bad debts. Ah, mention of that solicitor’s name recalls another interesting item. He too is a married man, you know, and . . . But the next remark is sotto voce, and we can gather the drift of it only from the knowing smile of the tale-bearer.

It is a hateful habit, this of gossiping. A conversation of this sort spreads like a plague, collecting more and more poison on its route. Of course, though, you must not forget that it is only a habit. No harm at all is meant, as the driver told the judge after he had killed the old lady and knocked the child unconscious.

The gossiping habit injures at least three persons. First, it betrays the one who gossips as showing him or her to be empty-headed and superficial. Gossip is the golden opportunity for such people to shine. Let the conversation turn on any subject that calls for intellectual interest—travel, literature, art—and the gossipier is tongue-tied. His vacuous mind has not a word to contribute. But introduce into the conversation the name of the absent neighbour and observe how the gossipier will brighten up at once. Now you are inundated with a torrent of eloquence as the hitherto silent man or woman emerges from the corner and stands exulting in a blaze of light and glory, getting an “innings” at last.

But gossip injures the slave of this habit in another way too, a more serious way. For it is rarely indeed that gossip does not lead to the commission of at least venial sin. “In the multitude of words there shall not want sin.” To yield to uncharitable gossip, to placard the faults of the neighbour without real necessity, is undoubtedly a sin, and than sin there is no greater evil that could befall anyone.

And did you ever meet a newsmonger who was popular? Or one to whom any sensible person would turn for

advice? Or to whom you would entrust a secret? People will laugh at the person who goes about collecting or spreading gossip. They will sometimes lay snares to betray him or her into believing false, or extravagant, or distorted, or exaggerated rumours, and they will chuckle when the ruse succeeds. The gossipier will be the butt of many a joke. Some will feel sorry to see him or her so silly and credulous.

It is obvious that the second person injured by gossip is the person criticised. One could cite a dozen examples to show how husbands and wives have been estranged, how life-long friendships have been shattered, how the seeds have been sown of distrust and suspicion, how candidates were kept out of positions for which they were eminently fitted, how life itself was made quite intolerable for decent men and women who ultimately had to leave their own homes—and all this as a result of the poisonous influence of the gossiping tongue. But, to be sure, gossiping is only a habit! As spoke the reckless driver.

Lastly, gossip injures the person who listens to it. To discover in your neighbour faults hitherto unsuspected, and of which you yourself are, perhaps, quite free, is not going to raise that neighbour in your estimation. The knowledge may easily develop your innate pride, and it will almost certainly lead you to look down on the other fellow. So, on the whole, you would admit that it's a habit to shun.

Telling Lies

Much that we have been saying about gossiping holds true also for another hateful habit—telling lies. The habit of lying is sometimes excused on the plea that it does nobody any harm. Indeed we have invented the mitigating expression, “harmless lies,” which is, of course, a contradiction in terms. For there is always sin in a lie, an injury done, therefore, to God's honour. By necessary consequence, there is the harm effected in the soul of the liar, for even venial sin, as St. Francis de Sales reminds us, “weakens the strength of the spirit, hinders divine consolations, opens the door to temptations, and, although it does not kill the soul, makes it excessively ill.” Harmless lies, forsooth!

It is well, too, to watch your step when you affirm so confidently that the lies you tell do not injure your neighbour. Are you quite sure? A lie which appears trivial as I utter it, has a way of gathering momentum on its journey from one mouth to another, and the final result to the victimised person may be serious indeed.

“A lie is a foul blot in a man,” principally because it is a sin. But, over and above this, there is the cowardice of the liar. He has got himself into an awkward corner and he has not the manliness to own up and face the consequences; So God's commandment is set lightly aside and the liar stoops to a course that is thoroughly dishonourable. To be guilty of sin in the first instance was bad enough, but it is a shocking added offence to bolster up one's sinful action by trying to distort facts.

Sometimes you may be questioned officially about the suitability of a candidate for some responsible post. This young man wants to be a priest ; this girl has applied for a position where she will have the handling of a lot of money. You know well, let me suppose, that if you tell the truth it is going to stand in the way. It is no sort of justification for a false statement that you want to be “decent.” A lie is always a sin and nothing can ever make it lawful.

A ready means of bringing home to ourselves how foul is the lying habit is to observe how vehemently one resents being called a liar. Look your man straight in the face and say to him slowly, with conviction in your voice “Liar! He will wince as at an unexpected and violent blow across the face, or he will instantly bristle up with rage.

Jealous?

Jealousy is often the parent of the lying habit. To a person soured and disappointed it is always a comfort to fling mud at one who is a success. A man has made money, has built up by his industry a fine business, his son has passed brilliantly in a recent examination, or his daughter's marriage to a leading man in town is just announced. The jealous person will revel in twisting facts so skilfully and viciously that there is real danger of the successful man's character being ruined or seriously injured. If distortion be not possible, the slave of jealousy will pry into motives and proceed to show that if success has been attained, it is only because the truth about the successful man has never been brought into light of day. The habit is disgusting even to write about. One experiences difficulty in finding words vigorous enough to stigmatise it as it deserves.

There may be times when you have to give an evasive answer. Occasions will occur when you have to say “no,”

when every reasonable man may be presumed to understand that you are not free to speak. This may happen with a priest or a professional man who has a strict obligation to keep a secret. "I really don't know" in such a case, should be taken to mean: "I don't know with knowledge which I am free to use." Sometimes a very sick person may ask a question, and you know that a plain statement of the facts is certain to give him a bad shock or bring on another attack. Here again it must be presumed that the sick person understands that your answer is framed with a view to concealing disquieting news. In such cases there is no sin because there is no lie.

Ananias and Saphira sold a piece of land and brought the money to St. Peter. They lied when asked if this was the full sum, and on the instant they fell dead at the feet of the apostle. It is worth while recalling that the easy views we sometimes take of the lying habit are by no means approved by the Author of the Eighth Commandment.

A lie is always a sin, but the same does not hold good for the next habit we want to discuss. It is not always a sin to be angry. When Our Lord in the temple sat in the midst of His enemies, He looked around them and His eyes flashed with anger for He saw the hardness of their hearts. When He found the buyers and sellers turning His Father's House into a den of thieves, He made a whip, and, filled with a great anger, He drove them in headlong confusion out of the temple. When all His efforts and miracles had failed to soften the hearts of His enemies, He was angry and proceeded to lash them with terrible invective.

Just Anger

So there are times when it is right to be angry. A mother should certainly show anger if her son or daughter is guilty of flagrant disobedience. An employer would fail in his duty if he did not let his employee understand that he would not tolerate his laziness or dishonesty, and if, in order to emphasise his lesson, he did not sometimes enforce it by a showing of anger. A priest would surely have just qualms of conscience if he permitted serious public scandal in his parish, and seemed, by his silence, to give the impression that he was not angry at the crime committed against God and the injury done to the souls committed to his care. In cases like these it would be wrong not to be angry.

Anger is like steam, most useful when kept under control, but capable of doing an incalculable amount of damage if once out of hand. Let the driver keep control at his engine and the great express speeds along at fifty or sixty miles an hour, and the passengers sit inside in peace. But leave the engine to itself and next day the newspapers will be telling the world in screaming headlines about the deaths and mangled bodies of hundreds of men and women.

The passion of anger is imprinted in our souls by God Himself, and therefore it is good in itself. But we bear it, like God's other gifts, in earthen vessels, and, unless we carefully cultivate the habit of self-control, anger will soon rush into the extreme of violent bad temper. If you have the habit of a violent bad temper, you may take it that your presence in your own home is feared, and, both inside and out, it is probably hated. This is not to be wondered at, when you recall the constant strain to which your erratic and tumultuous ways subject everyone who has to deal with you.

A bad temper will be cured only if you make consistent and continual efforts to co-operate with the workings of divine grace. Perhaps we may be permitted to formulate a rule which will help not a little towards this co-operation. Here it is: Never speak when you feel the passion beginning to rise within you. Wait, in silence, for three minutes. If possible, walk away in silence, from the person who has angered you, or escape from the sight of the accident—the pot of ink spilt on your clean tablecloth, the precious vase knocked over by the careless maid and lying in small bits on the floor, the serious blunder made by the clerk in this account-book, the insulting letter lying open before you on the desk. Get up in silence, walk away and leave it there. Easy? It is not, but definitely well worth trying. It leads to a strong habit of self—control, an indispensable factor in the formation of character.

Have a Laugh

Side by side with the habit of self-control we can place the habit of keeping cheerful. It is an enormous asset to be able to see the ridiculous and to laugh at it, especially when oneself is the principal actor. A man who develops the habit of smiling, perhaps of humming a favourite tune, just at the moment when he sees he has rather made a fool of himself—by a gauche remark or a mistake in etiquette— will save himself much useless worry. Let him sit back and recognise that he is a bit of a fool and let him try to see the humour of the situation, and he has discovered a most

wholesome tonic. If others are dull the man with the habit of self-control will be patient; if others make a mistake, even a serious one, through no fault of their own, such a man will readily make allowances.

In a speech in parliament Gladstone once quoted certain statistics which had been prepared for him by his secretary. It happened that the figures were incorrect and the error was seized upon by the opposition to turn the tables completely against Gladstone. So absolute was his confidence in that secretary of his that he had not bothered to check up on the findings, and the result was that he had to leave the House covered with confusion.

On reaching his room he sent at once for the secretary, who entered in fear and trembling. To his amazement, Gladstone welcomed him most cordially, and, motioning him to a chair, told him he understood that he must be suffering great anguish over the serious mistake. But he was to set his mind at rest. "It is the first time in these many years that you have failed me ; I am not the man to forget all your faithful service and concentrate on this mistake alone. You have done well in the past, and I am confident that this mistake will prove to be nothing more than an incentive to good service in the future." Blame would have done nothing but add to the trouble. To forgive in this magnanimous way a man must have acquired the habit of being able to smile through.

A healthy optimism can be cultivated and it helps much to bring the cheering rays of God's sunshine into life. There is not a bit of use in pulling the house down because you have a bad toothache; all the complaining in the world won't take it away. Did it ever occur to you, instead, to try to offer it for sinners, in union with the agony of Christ in His Passion? You are annoyed because the bus-conductor is adamant in refusing to let you go on board. "Two more, ONLY," he declares in stentorian tones, and you, poor you, are number three, and you have been standing there in the queue, in rain and cold and general slush, for the past twenty-five minutes! But all the self-pity in the world is not going to bring back that bus. Another rainy day, when this time you are perhaps seated comfortably inside, you smile and feel amused when you look out the window and see somebody else making vain expostulations with the same conductor. Why not try to smile yourself when you are the victim? It is largely a matter of the habit of keeping cheerful.

Long-Faced?

Without this habit, we Catholics can be very bad advertisements for our religion. There are Catholics who, unless they have a grievance to nurse, are like a restless child without a toy. Mothers of this type will tell you they have a family impossible to control. Wives of the same category will expatiate on the drunken habits and irregular ways of their husbands. Husbands who hear of Job's patience will ask feelingly how he would have fared if he had the wife who rules their homestead. Children will pout and sulk and refuse to smile unless they are coaxed back to good humour by a promise to be taken to the pictures.

Far indeed be it from us to complain of those who are asked by the heavenly Father to carry a cross that presses heavily on their bent shoulders. It is not of these we are thinking now. We have in mind, rather, the rasping, querulous person who is quite determined to be miserable, and will not be happy otherwise! It is a habit to react against with all the earnestness of one's soul. Catholics should teach the world the joyousness that is found in the service of so loving a Master. If there is any person on the face of the earth who has every right to be buoyantly happy, it is the man who realises, even in a small measure, how much he is loved by God, how good it is to have the certain knowledge of divine truth. Let him make music in his heart then, as the apostle counsels, especially when everything is at sixes and at sevens, and his smile, please God, will become contagious.

The habit of being thorough, of seeing a piece of work right through to the end, is characteristic of God's best friends. Like every other habit worthwhile, this one takes time and perseverance to acquire. A mission comes, and one of the points stressed is daily Mass. You go for a few weeks, till the cold weather sets in; then you drop off; you are not thorough. You set out to sweep the floor, but you conveniently forget that dust has the habit of accumulating underneath the bed and behind the door. You kneel down on First Friday to make the Holy Hour, but after fifty minutes you get tired, leave the church, perhaps salving your conscience with the promise to finish the hour on your way home. It is all very natural, and it betrays the lack of that valuable habit of being thorough.

A person of character will see his resolution through, right to the end. Whether it be the washing of a dish—to quote the late Archbishop Goodier in another context—or the solving of the most abstruse scientific problem, all is

done for the King and the Kingdom of Christ on earth. In order to acquire this habit we have to see life as a whole. There are Catholics who find it difficult to rid themselves of the pigeon-hole mentality. Their different occupations are arranged in different compartments. There is a space for prayer, another for work, another for rest, another for pleasure. In this scheme of things, religion finishes when a man rises from his knees or leaves the church; work ends when he closes the shop, and relaxation commences when he goes to a dance or a picture or settles down by the fireside for a peaceful read. Now the truth is that all these should dovetail one into the other.

The only reason we are in the world is to serve God and save our souls. So there is no time when I am not to be so serving, there are no "hours off." We are serving Him not merely while we are kneeling at Mass or receiving Holy Communion. We serve, too, when we prepare the dinner, wait on the customers, make a bargain at the fair, wheel out the baby into the park, or work at our desk, or polish our boots, or hang out the linen to dry on Monday morning. We serve when we enjoy ourselves in the manner already spoken of when we were dealing with taking leisure.

Our life is all of a piece, or it should be. Consequently these commonplace things should be vitalised by a supernatural motive, the motive of pleasing God in all things, of doing and accepting His Will in every event, great and small. A motive of this kind makes for perfect work, whether that work be breaking stones on the side of the road or lecturing in the University, whether it is delivering milk or writing an epic or buying potatoes for the dinner or preaching a sermon. "To those who love God, all things work together unto good." It is not so much what we do that matters in God's sight, as why we do it. Not so much what, as how.

Achievement

Not all can do works which bring applause and notice. Not all can attain to what men consider to be achievement. But there is no greater achievement in God's eyes than the sanctification of the ordinary thoughts, words, and actions of our very ordinary day. If you acquire the habit of remembering why you do this, or why you omit doing that, and train yourself to offer it, through Mary's hands, to Jesus, it seems very fair to hope that soon you will acquire the habit of performing your actions with thoroughness. You are not going to offer to Him work that is slipshod or only half-done.

This is one of the many reasons why the Apostleship of Prayer has such power to sanctify souls. Each day its thirty-five million associates all over the world, kneel and present to Jesus, through Mary, not merely their prayers, but also their works and sacrifices, all their joys and all their sorrows. In a word they offer the entire day as a unit which includes everything, and this day, in turn, is part of a larger unit embracing their entire lives. There is no pigeon-holing possible here. Let an associate make this great offering fervently each day, let him realise its implications and renew it frequently as the day goes on, and he will soon find himself developing the habit of being thorough.

An old man was sitting by the side of the road, breaking stones. "And what do you think about," asked a priest who stopped to have a word with him, "all day, as you sit there hammering away?" The reply was a glad surprise. "I learned, Father, said the old man, "when I was a lad, that we can offer up everything to God as a prayer, except sin, and I've made a pact with Him that every time I lift this hammer to smash a stone, He is to regard my action as an act of love for Him." A further question brought to light that often during the day he would repeat quietly: "All for Thee, O Lord; O my Jesus, all for Thee."

That is just what we mean by a supernatural motive. Let that flow into our daily lives, let it be brought to bear frequently on what we are doing, and the habit of being thorough is sure to follow. "Do nothing," said the Curé of Ars, "except what you can offer to God."

This motive raises trifles to the plane of the supernatural. It explains why Our Lord blessed the widow's mite and the cup of cold water given in the name of a disciple.

My Conscience

We have still a few pages left and we propose to speak in them about two more habits. The first of these is the habit of being conscientious. In every man's heart there has been placed by God a monitor called conscience. This monitor speaks his message fearlessly. In one case he warns a man in no ambiguous manner that his action is sinful, displeasing to God, jeopardising his eternal salvation. In another conscience approves of the course followed and

assures the man that he has done something calculated to bring upon him God's blessing here and hereafter. A sinner who, perhaps after years of sin, makes his peace with God, by a good confession, usually experiences a deep joy to which he has long been a stranger. The reason is that his inner monitor tells him he has done what is right. A man who, when assailed by temptation, stands loyal to God, who refuses to go into the occasion of sin, will afterwards rest with much contentedness in the truth that he has acted, as we say, "up to his conscience." A man who drinks to excess, or steals, or commits an impure act, may indeed for the time being enjoy a measure of satisfaction, but he purchases it only by drowning the voice of conscience, and that voice will surely make itself heard again, even if it be not till the day of judgment.

Conscience is like a very delicately-adjusted instrument. You can destroy its edge by misuse in much the same way as you ruin your new razor if you employ it to sharpen your pencil. Let a man go on habitually turning a deaf ear to the warnings of conscience, and the monitor after a while will cease to speak. This is easy to illustrate. The first time a boy steals sixpence he is troubled, and rightly so, in his conscience. But let him go on stealing, and little by little the habit will grow, and he finds he can lull his conscience to sleep. Let him begin to dally deliberately with evil thoughts, and when he comes to confess them he is filled with shame and confusion, because his conscience is still functioning. But if again he begins to play with this danger, a terrible pass may well be reached. He may end by caring little, or not at all, for frightful sin. Why? Because, by repeated excesses, he has now deadened or dulled his conscience.

It is a fearful responsibility to ruin such a delicate instrument in this fashion. The sinner may go on his way placidly enough for a while, even for years. But sooner or later there is bound to be a terrifying awakening. The punishment God assigns to this habitual neglect of the warnings of conscience, is, in the words of holy Scripture to give such a man over to "the desires of his heart;" to "abandon him to a reprobate sense." God, as it were, will have no more to do with him. He lets him have his way, as punishment for his perversity. Such a man may smile and snigger at his conscientious neighbour, but often this is a case where he laughs best who laughs last. He may vaunt his freedom but it is the freedom of the madman who exercises it to run his head against a stone wall. The result in both cases is stupefaction. God is not mocked, and conscience, though now lulled to sleep, is certain to wake up again and accuse the sinner, and demand of him a strict account of the contempt he has shown.

A False Conscience?

It does not therefore suffice to palliate one's sin, or one's course of action, by saying that my conscience tells me it is all right. Have I a false conscience? Have I blunted its edge by interpreting right and wrong according to my own whims, and to suit my own convenience, or to give a veneer of righteousness to my injustice? Right and wrong are to be tested and proven, not by such false standards, but on the anvil of God's immutable laws.

A scrupulous conscience differs from a delicate conscience. A person who has a scrupulous conscience, fears sin and God's anger without having sufficient motive. Such a person may imagine that it is a sin to look in a mirror, or leave a door open, or brush the teeth on the morning one is going to Holy Communion. Why this should be is difficult to understand unless a person has himself suffered from the agony caused by a scrupulous conscience.

But there is no gainsaying the fact that scrupulous people fashion sin out of the most fantastical material, as is well known to anybody with even a little experience in dealing with them.

A delicate conscience is not like this. A delicate conscience fears sin and warns about sin, where there is indeed a real occasion of sin or real danger of committing sin. In the case of fervent souls, a delicate conscience extends its healing influence even farther. It warns, not only where there is sin even venial sin, but even imperfection. It also indicates what course of action will be most pleasing to God, even though another course might be free from sin.

Often we remain in ignorance of the motives by which we are actuated. A delicate conscience here acts like a light which lets us see clearly where self-love enters in, when, for instance, we speak boastfully or arrogantly, when we act spitefully, when we push ourselves into the limelight, when we turn the laugh against another. In a thousand such ways we seek ourselves all day long. A delicate conscience lets us see how imperfect such actions are, for the person who possesses it is illuminated by the Holy Spirit Who dwells within and Whose voice is habitually listened to. A delicate conscience also shows us how to purify our motives and enhance enormously the eternal value of our ordinary actions—much on the lines indicated when we were considering the habit of being thorough.

We sometimes wonder why the saints were so exceedingly exact about “small” points of perfection. Why, for example, did the young Jesuit, St. John Berchmans, declare he would rather be ground into powder than deliberately violate the smallest Rule of his Order? The explanation is that a delicate conscience, enlightened by grace, shows a man the enormous value of the commonplace when it is lifted to the plane of the supernatural, and teaches him how to lift it thus. Once again, it is not so much what we do as why we do it; not so much what as how.

It is a habit to develop, this, of paying attention to the voice of conscience, for, the more readily we bend our ear to listen and our will to obey, the more frequent will grow its warnings and its words of encouragement, spurring us on to greater fidelity in God’s service. A saint is a man who perseveringly tries to render perfect obedience to the Will of God, and conscience is a faithful and trustworthy counsellor to tell him in what that Will consists. A conscientious man, provided he be not scrupulously conscientious, is not far from being a saintly man.

Our last section we propose to devote to the habit of thinking with the Church. What does this mean? Perhaps a few concrete instances will help us to answer.

Thinking with the Church

The lady, a Catholic, had sent her daughter, aged eighteen, to the public library to borrow a book. The book was on the Index, and the priest, hearing about the incident, called to see the lady and ask if it were true. To her credit it must be said that she affirmed with warmth that she did not know the book was condemned, and she added that, had she known, she would not have been willing to read it. But then, after this profession of loyalty to the Church’s ruling, she proceeded to explain that she had already read several books by the same author. She, for her part, could see nothing objectionable in any of them, and she failed to understand why they should be forbidden to Catholics.

Instance number two. The bishop of the diocese had made a regulation concerning certain amusements. A young man sat in the corner of the hotel discussing it with a few of his friends, and between them they strongly voiced their objections. Why should the bishop interfere, anyhow, and why should he multiply prohibitions which were not in force elsewhere? Nearly all in that company were Catholics, but still they were indignantly demanding the why and the wherefore, all of them maintaining that the ruling was ridiculous and unjust.

Private Judgement

Both these examples have at least one trait in common. In each of them one detects an impatience with lawful authority and an irritation when that authority demands the respect and obedience due to it. It is really the Protestant attitude which these Catholics have absorbed. Protestants glory, or they used to, in private judgment—the comfortable doctrine which tells you you may pick and choose as you wish from the Gospel, and interpret what you find there in the manner most accommodating to yourself. Catholics who carp at and criticise the authority of their Church or who chafe impatiently at what she orders or forbids, presume, in a somewhat similar manner, to set themselves up as arbiters. They betray a sad lack of loyalty and devotion to her.

For the true Catholic the mere fact that the Church has spoken, settles the question once and for all. He may not see the reason why, he may be inclined to think that a given representative of the Teaching Church has acted imprudently or immoderately, or even arrogantly. He may even go so far as to decide to appeal against the decision, but if he does, it will be with becoming reverence. Ordinarily, his instinct is to obey, to give unquestioning assent and to refuse all querulous discussion about the matter.

It is sometimes affirmed of us Catholics that we may not use our reason. We must close our eyes and open our mouths and swallow unquestioningly whatever food is put into them. That is far from the truth. The Church welcomes investigation and discussion as well from her own children as from those outside her pale. But she will have such questionings approached in the spirit of respect for her divine authority and docility to her teaching. In all the cases cited above, you will have noticed that we spoke about “querulous” attitudes, or ways of facing the question which show clearly that the questioner comes, not to learn or represent a real difficulty, but to argue with the divinely-constituted Teacher as though he were her equal, not to say her superior.

The Need Today

Outside the field of faith and morals mistakes may occur, as they have occurred in the past for Christ's divine Church is represented by members who are human, very human, too human, at times. When we have to do violence to our pride and submerge our own views, when we submit with a good grace in spite of the temptation to complain, it is then precisely that we show how we have cultivated the habit of thinking with the Church;—even though her representative may seem to be, in this particular case, unreasonable, or lacking in sympathy or understanding.

Nihil Obstat;

Carolus Doyle, S.J.,

Imprimi Potest;

✠Joannes Carolus,

Archiep. Dublinen.,

Hiberniae Primas.

16/6/1948
