

WHY IDEALS WILT

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Advertisements sometimes shout exaggerations, but they don't deafen us or make us even mildly indignant. The middle-aged man, painfully aware that his erstwhile jet-black hair is rapidly changing colour or that the locks are considerably less abundant than of yore, will read hopefully in his paper of a restorer. Perhaps he will even be enticed to make a furtive purchase or two, but he won't be too much disappointed or surprised if the talisman fails to work. This was more or less what he expected.

And as for the prices advertised—well, frankly, one is sometimes at a loss to understand why a man must employ so many wiles to induce you to purchase at a shilling or a half-crown an article which he claims to be worth ten times as much.

No. We don't take them too seriously, the advertising columns in our magazines and papers. Though there is one noteworthy exception. The Catholic Church has been commissioned by her divine Founder to advertise till the end of the world remedies for men's diseases which are unfailing in their healing powers, but she does not, indeed, advertise like a business concern in your magazines. She has been entrusted by Jesus Christ with the task of leading men, with unerring steps, across the valley through the darkness of night and the dreariness of exile, into the comforting warmth and light and plenteousness awaiting there in their Father's Home.

In her hands has been placed food for the journey to strengthen and encourage those who would come with her. All the super abundant merits of Christ she holds in her treasure-house, and most willingly and indeed most eagerly does she dispense them for the many needs of men's souls. Let one of her children stumble wounded by the wayside and instantly she presses forward, with all the anxiety of a loving mother, to lift him to his feet. Let him even fall into mortal sin and she is enriched with Christ's own power to raise him to life again—a power she never withholds from the truly repentant, no matter how black his record.

And, unlike your press-advertiser, she knows with absolute certainty that what she tells the world is the sheer, unadorned, unadulterated truth. Many men, especially in our day, pour ridicule on her claims, or assail her doctrines with volleys of abuse and sarcasm, and they treat her as being out of date—too ancient and old-fashioned to be able to grasp modern man's difficulties and provide him with a satisfactory answer. So she is attacked, or ignored, or disbelieved, in very much the same way as He was. And, like Him she persists in maintaining that all the time she is right, that her claims can be substantiated. She challenges. She invites argument and examination of her credentials. Indeed, so certain is she of her position, that she welcomes nothing more than men and women who come to her asking why. Why is she so keen about pushing her wares? Well, you see, her interests are in things eternal. Life, she tells you, stretches out before you. You can either scale the heights or wallow in the swamps and marshy places. You can choose to be the king's son or the hireling sitting in the misery of the pigsty. You can be a daughter of Mary Immaculate or you can shape your life and conduct by the standards of the "new morality." "The high soul climbs the high way, and the low soul gropes the low; and in-between, on the misty flats, the rest move to and fro." The Church is conscious, must ever be conscious, of her divine commission. She is always remembering that to her has been given the truth. She understands that men are stumbling in the darkness, and that in her the light is to be found. She sees that, of all the important tasks we have to perform here, none is worthy of a moment's consideration when placed in the balance against the business of one's eternal salvation. Other mistakes can be rectified. If you take a wrong turn on the road you can retrace your steps. If you lose your money in a bank crash, you can settle down to work and perhaps build up another fortune. If your house is wrecked in an air-raid you can rebuild it. If your case fails in a lawsuit you can, possibly, appeal to a higher court. But, in the work of saving my soul there is no such thing as another opportunity. Save my soul once and it is saved for ever. Lose my soul once and it is lost for ever. And there is no sort of doubt in the mind of the Church that she knows exactly how to direct men in the way that leads to success here. She is convinced, and cannot but always remain so convinced, that she understands with divine

assurance, what men should be and what they should do, what they are to believe and what to reject as false, what remedies and safeguards are required and where and how they are to be found. We are not proving her claims just now, only stating them. Our contention is, that, given those claims, it is a very simple matter to explain the earnestness and persistence with which she invites and implores men to read her advertisements, and to sift them and see for themselves whether they be truth or arrogant boast.

Catholics, sons and daughters of the Church, who believe all this, should be idealists, shouldn't they? Not mere dreamers of dreams, but men and women who set a high value on holiness, the highest ideal of all, and who are practical and consistent in their efforts to make use of the ways and means for accomplishing it. They know that they possess the truth and that Our Lord has deposited in their Church all that is necessary to live saintly lives. Doesn't it seem fair to argue that we should hasten to apply the divine remedies to the wounds of our souls? That, having secured a complete cure, we should henceforth set ourselves the ideal which will not only eject all serious sin, but will aim at something of the saint's spirit of prayer and sacrifice and hard work? That, realising that the tide is ebbing out so fast, we lay hold of this one opportunity to share with other souls the treasures of grace so generously given to ourselves?

Seems logical enough, doesn't it? Yet what do we find actually? That, while men are all agog to seize upon money and what it can buy, the eternal goods advertised by the Church leave them unmoved. That, their belief in the Real Presence notwithstanding, they can be constrained only with difficulty to visit the Tabernacle occasionally and receive Holy Communion a few times in the year. That, though they are so prone to fall into sin, they are often reluctant to avail of the sovereign remedy provided by Christ in the Sacrament of Penance. That, while they confess that life is so short, while they see the tireless activity of His enemies today, while they admit that in their Church and in their Church alone, there is the full content of divine truth—while they acknowledge all this in theory, it is very hard to energise them and make them speak out when that Church is attacked, to galvanise them into the activity required to throw themselves into works of zeal especially if, in order to do so, they must sacrifice their own free day or leave their own comfortable armchair and fireside.

Of course it is very true, and to set it down here is a joy, that there are many Catholics whose personal holiness and appreciation of supernatural values is all that can be desired. But the question is why are there not more? Why are there so many others, who pass for tolerably good Catholics, who are styled sensible men and women, and who yet undervalue holiness of life? Who are contented to jog along on the road to sanctity, when with such possibilities in their hands one would expect to see them run in that race? Catholics whom you could not convict of any serious sin and who yet are indifferent about the souls, steeped in vice, who surround them, who, were they to pass out of this world today and in their present condition, would assuredly be lost for all eternity? There are Catholics of this type, strangely indifferent to the interests of Christ, and they exist for forty or fifty or seventy years and allow innumerable chances to slip through their fingers. They believe. They will very probably save their souls at the end. But how much more they could have done, in their own souls and in the souls of others, if their ideals had not been placed too low, or if, having once been placed so high, they had not been permitted, little by little, to sink and be obscured underneath a weight of petty occupations

We want to try in these pages to get at some of the causes which bring about this disaster—for it is nothing else. Why do these ideals wilt? Why do many Catholics begin so well and end nowhere? Why do they say they are disillusioned themselves, and why are they so exasperatingly patronising towards those who are still trying? Why assume, not merely the patronising attitude, but, a positive hostility or cynicism calculated to break the spirit of another? Why be so exceedingly sparing of a well-deserved word of encouragement and so lavish with blame or fault-finding? "The high soul climbs the high way." If he does, why must others jeer and taunt until that climber turn back and take his place lower down, or content himself with a comparatively useless and uninspiring existence on the misty flats? Why are there Catholics whose ideals are lamentably low even when they live in a city seated upon a hill?

It would seem, in the first place, that such Catholics acquiesce too easily and too readily to the mood of the moment. Last week there was a retreat in the parish. The conductor spoke with earnestness and conviction and awakened a response in your soul. You saw the truth of his words, and you recognised that his teaching came to you bearing the divine

impress upon it. Sin was not only evil and base ingratitude; it was misery and folly even in this life. Christ's appeal was not only beautiful and attractive; it was sanity, it was common sense, it was eminently reasonable that you should spend the rest of your life with Him and for Him. In that retreat you prayed, you consider, better than ever in your life before—or since.

Since? Well since, it seems, another mood has descended upon your soul. You've since been dipping into that sensational or sentimental novel, or living in a lovely land of unreality in the cinema. Your mood now leads you to day-dreaming and hours of idleness, and all your piety of last week is lumped overboard. It's all very well for that retreat conductor to talk, but you are convinced now he set the tape too high.

When the retreat was in progress you made a resolution to get up early every morning and go out to Mass and Holy Communion. That was quite all right when you sat under the pulpit and heard the priest's burning words urging you to self-sacrifice and reparation. But it's a very different matter when you are tucked snug under the blankets at 6.30 a.m. on a winter's morning. Were you out of your mind, you ask yourself, when you set that alarm clock last night? Your mood now suggests another hour in bed, so, without a struggle, you turn over on the other side and hope the alarm won't repeat its warning.

Father Bernard Vaughan, S.J., wrote in one place: "If the only work I could do was to sweep a crossing, I would sweep it so thoroughly that all London would say: 'Come out and see Vaughan's crossing!' "He mightn't be in the mood for sweeping and it isn't a very exciting occupation, but if it was done at all he would see to it that his best went into it. St. Teresa speaks in more places than one of the intense repugnance she often felt towards prayer. "If a sharp penance had been laid upon me, I know of none that I would not very often have very willingly undertaken rather than prepare myself for prayer The sadness I felt on entering the oratory was so great that it required all the courage I could muster, to force myself in." St. Ignatius would have us, at times when prayer is more than usually difficult, to go to it as is our custom and give it the full time—more, even to prolong it, so as not only to resist the enemy but completely to overthrow him. All of which goes to show clearly that the saints, like ourselves, had their off days and their moods, but, unlike us, they refused to allow themselves to yield. Somebody has written well to the effect that an ounce of prayer in desolation is worth more than a ton of prayer in consolation. Certain it is that when you have to overcome yourself in order to pray or do an act of charity, your deed ordinarily is more pleasing to God than when all is plain sailing. It is a fallacy to imagine you cannot pray just because you don't feel in the mood for prayer, that your soul must necessarily be displeasing to God because you feel in the mood to commit sin, even grievous sin. On the contrary, the very fact that that wrong mood tries to force its way through and you keep it in check, proves the sincerity of your love for Our Lord.

Nobody will question that, if our ideals are to develop and get us anywhere, the first step to learn is the need of rising independent of the mood of the moment. How is this to be done? The homely lesson of self-conquest has to be opened up once more and the page coned with renewed zest. The will has to be strengthened by exercise. I have to insist with myself on saying "no" when "yes" is very much easier to say, and is not a sin. Habit follows if the programme be persevered in. Little by little I find myself with greater control over my moods. I have insisted with myself that I do not lounge back in the chair every time I feel inclined; that I keep silence when naturally I want to speak; that I refuse to look in that shop window; that I curb my curiosity to stand with the crowd at the street corner and find out what has happened. These small acts of self-control contribute not a little, if adhered to, to build up that self-mastery which will dominate my moods. But most of all is it necessary to pray, and especially to practise mental prayer. The ideal a fervent Catholic sets before him is sanctity—which means the closest imitation of Jesus growing out of intimate knowledge of Him. Hence it postulates zeal for souls, a realisation of the value of the supernatural, an untiring spirit of work for the spreading of Christ's kingdom on earth. So supernatural an ideal can be realised only if supernatural means are employed assiduously. And, foremost amongst these supernatural means is prayer, in which light is given to the soul to see and feel and understand. Prayer too is needed to feed the fire of zeal. Persevering prayer and low ideals seem to be almost a contradiction in terms. That is partly the reason why, when a young man sets out to be a priest or a girl to become a nun—surely a very high ideal—he or she is sent into novitiate or seminary. They are separated from the noise and tumult of the

world and given ample opportunity to devote themselves to serious prayer. In the light of prayer they see that their ideals must rest, not on sentiment but on conviction. Feelings of enthusiasm, such as are aroused in the retreat or mission or by the visit of a missionary to the school or college, are excellent in their way and St. Ignatius bids us ask God to give them to us. But one has to be prepared also for the days and weeks of dryness when all sentiment evaporates. It is at such periods that one's fidelity to the ideal is tested and this fidelity will be secured only if the soul has plunged into God's light in frequent and persevering prayer, and has seen there that the ideal is objectively worth striving for, quite independently of how one happens to feel about it.

But not everyone with high ideals can seek the retirement of the seminary or religious house in order to pray. Hence, for people living in the world it is imperative that they be regular in their devotions, especially to the Blessed Eucharist and to Mary. These will keep the ideal securely fixed when circumstances combine to shake it or overthrow it. Moreover, for such men and women there is often the opportunity to get out of their ordinary environment and seek to meditate deeply and pray with more than their usual fervour and intensity. What is this opportunity? It is the excellent practice of making an enclosed retreat. Perhaps there is no more effective antidote if your ideals are threatening to wilt.

Let me begin with a little parable, which may serve a useful purpose, though like most comparisons, it does not cover our case exactly. Suppose then you retire to bed tonight at half-past ten and settle yourself down to sleep the sleep of the just. The next thing you are vaguely conscious of is a charged, suffocating atmosphere. But, too drowsy as you are to bother, you turn over on the other side and try to fall asleep again. Then, like a shot, you are up out of bed; all at once you are wide-awake; you spring on to the floor and dash over to the window. For quite unmistakably you have heard the piercing cry: Fire! Fire!

It is only too true. Now you understand why the air was charged as you stand there at the window and look down at the flames surging beneath you. Tell me, would any sane man in such circumstances go back again to bed, pull the clothes about him, and tell himself that he would hope for the best? Of course the suggestion is ludicrous. No. One only idea obsesses you—how to escape. The stairs? But the fumes are stifling there and you stumble back into the room. The window? Down below men are shouting that it is the only chance. Jump at once and they will catch you in this large curtain they are holding firmly by the four corners. This will break the fall and prove your salvation. You are all alert now, though five minutes ago you were buried in slumber. Why? Simply because you are now fully awake and keenly sensible of the danger. A sleeping person cannot think. It is for want of serious thought, which an enclosed retreat provides, that many of us fall victims to our moods and permit our ideals to wilt. It isn't so easy to keep awake and think in a straight line in these times of ours. We let ourselves be carried along on the current of other peoples' ideas and theories, without sifting them and finding out for ourselves what they are worth. Result? We grow blasé towards the greatest treasure ever put into our hands, our Catholic faith. The ideal wilts.

There is nothing to surpass a spate of clear thinking to give you perspective, and there is no better way to secure the atmosphere in which such thought is stimulated than to gather yourself and your problems into solitude. What does this imply? That, for three or four days, or longer if you can manage it, or even for a week-end if only that much is possible-anyhow, that for a period you separate yourself from the routine of work and the noisy familiarity of the world that clings to you. And what then? Make your way to some religious house where retreats are given. Kneel in the full blaze of the light that will stream down upon you from the face of Jesus Christ. Here is the place in which to see the objective value of your ideal. Here you understand the worth of a life devoted to personal holiness and apostolic work. In this light it becomes clear that your moods may not be allowed to determine your course of action. The needs of the times are too pressing. The speed at which life is fleeting is too great. One has to seize upon the present opportunity or it is gone forever. All this becomes reality. You will often be astonished to find how unimportant the trifles were which so overwhelmed you and preoccupied you when you were outside. "Quid hoc ad aeternitatem?" You will see very clearly in the divine light that the madding crowds are indeed chasing shadows. Sin will be recognised for what it is—the insolent creature standing up in defiance to his all-powerful Creator; the son of God repaying infinite love with base ingratitude. Men's arbitrary decisions, selfish ambitions, and cruel actions will be judged by God's immutable laws of justice, love,

and mercy. What does God think of money, or strikes, or wars? What is His verdict on the greed and the injustice and the immorality that is so readily taken for granted by the majority of mankind? In the light of retreat you catch a glimpse of the world and men from God's angle, and the glimpse steadies you and shows you the solidity and truth of your ideal. If later on moods come upon you to tempt you to throw aside that ideal, the light gained here will be remembered and the memory will encourage you to persevere. To think long and deeply about anything at all in these times of superficial living is rare indeed. To meditate deeply upon the greatness and holiness and majesty of God, to measure the value of the finite with the standards of the infinite, is unheard of in many lands today. Yet, at this most critical moment in the world's history, what sane man but must recognise the crying need for clear thought, for prayer, for resolve? "I am just as sure today as ever I was that life is absolutely wasted if we make it a merely material thing. For this reason, when I am over-tired, and all the little details of life seem to become mountains, I go away to El Ketiro for what we call a retreat. I see nobody from outside. I do not read the newspapers. Every day I listen to short talks from one of the Fathers—talks about life and death; the shortness of life; the inevitableness of death; the right way to live so as to be always ready to die. This may sound rather gloomy, but I do not find it so. It helps me to find my sense of proportion, to realise the pettiness of the little things that trouble me. It is a sort of spiritual house-cleaning. And I come out into the world again feeling refreshed and reassured as to the essentials of life." Thus Ramon Novarro, the film-star, and, in case you didn't know, a Catholic. We Catholics do not think enough. We rely on moods and sentiment. That is part of the reason why our ideals wilt. A loving heavenly Father has endowed us with a mind to think for ourselves. We Catholics should not allow Hollywood or the penny-a-line writer to dictate to us what should be our conduct and ambitions. We have Christ's infallible Church to preserve us from error in matters of faith and morals, and we have His ideals held up before us to strive after. These are the only ideals worth having and they wilt because we don't think one quarter enough about them. "With desolation is the whole land made desolate, because there is nobody that thinketh in his heart." This is not the whole case, though. A further cause why ideals wilt is the environment in which we have to live. Catholics today breathe in an atmosphere which, for the most part, is little conducive to the flourishing of religious idealism. The spirit of the world is abroad, the spirit so vehemently and so frequently condemned by Our Lord, and it is no simple task to keep alive the flame of strong love for Christ and the Church in the midst of its chilling blasts. Unquestionably one of the most terrifying of modern evils is forgetfulness of God and the eternal life so soon to come. Signs of this you encounter on every side. "Is the poverty in your country very prevalent?" a lady was asked lately. "Yes. But there is a much greater evil than poverty—riches!" Not many nowadays think thus. A girl will determine to seize on a "job" because there is good money in it. Will she even pause to consider that good money is not the only factor by which to decide? A mere material advantage she will often clutch at, and if you were to point out that she was running a serious risk to her eternal salvation—as could easily be the case—she would look at you in amazement and wonder why that consideration should have any weight. A man will allow himself to be devoured with a passion for money-making. His business absorbs him day and night. Does he ever think of his prototype in the gospel? He too was a shrewd man of business; his friends and his servants probably regarded him as a rock of sound common sense. But God? God said the man was a fool! "Thou fool! This night do they demand thy soul of thee, and whose shall these things be for which thou hast laboured?"

It would be easy enough to go on in this strain illustrating what is meant by the spirit of the world. I might marshal for your inspection a long line of the world's agents—radio, cinema, dancing, illustrated papers, novels, holidays, wealth, poverty, unemployment. Nobody wants to maintain that all these are evil in themselves. Many of them are used to stimulate and protect our ideals and spiritual strivings. But on all of them, too, the world is ready to pounce, to exploit them in order to induce a mentality that will be at first unspiritual, and finally cynical or openly hostile to the ideals for which the Church stands.

It takes pluck to live up to your religion in such an environment. The tendency is to follow the crowd. You're not a sport if you don't drink, and drink to excess—and incidentally spend on your so-called friends the money that should buy food and clothes for your hungry children. You aren't grown up if you refuse to grin at a slimy yarn, if you haven't yet learned to swear, if you cannot trot out, pat, your own filthy story. You're behind the times if you haven't read the latest

reeking best-seller, and passed it on so that its poison may sink into the souls of others. You're old-fashioned if you keep decent hours. You're a prude if you set high value on purity. You're not being fair to yourself or your family if you don't dictate to the Almighty about the number of your children. You're just silly if you work conscientiously when your employer's back is turned. You're no good if you refuse to pocket an occasional half-pound of tea to give to your pal, or steal that screw, or piece of timber, or bag of coal or turf, which he wants badly—and you with such an opportunity! You're a killjoy if you insist on going to Mass, even on Sunday, when the rest of the crowd is all ready for a day's hiking and waiting for you to join them.

So follow the crowd! If at school everyone goes to daily Holy Communion you may as well go too. If later in life, you find yourself in an environment in which there is loose talk, where boys and girls drink freely, where the smart people adopt pagan standards in dress and pagan codes to shape their behaviour—why you may as well be dead as out of the fashion. Our ideals wilt because our environment gets us down.

But not by any means always. At a dance, not so long ago, a girl ordered herself a “mineral.” Her girl-friend, sipping a cocktail, looked across at her compassionately. “What a great pity poor Mary doesn't get herself a nice glass of milk!” And Mary's rejoinder? “If I wanted a glass of milk, Chriss, I'd have ordered it, no apology to you or to anyone else. It just happens that the mineral is my choice. Perhaps you didn't notice my Pioneer badge?” That's character. Here is a girl who won't be enslaved by her environment.

There are plenty like her, thank God. It would be deplorable to fasten your gaze on one side of the hedge only, where shadows and darkness abound, and to forget all about the glorious bright rays of sunshine which light up the other side.

Boys and girls will read this and agree with me that it is true. They will have the testimony of their own consciences to appeal to, and it will bear them witness that they are living pure, manly, useful hues, that they love Jesus and Mary, that they try to work for the interests of the Church and of souls, that if they fall into sin they are distantly seized with remorse and sorrow and know no peace until they have hastened to the fountains of Christ's Precious Blood for cleansing. But there would be many more only that their ideals are allowed to wilt in an uncongenial environment. It's the manly thing to stand up to the bully and tell him (or her), just exactly where to get off: It's the boy or girl with pluck who realises the silliness of cow-towing to a braggart whose opinion on most subjects is beneath consideration. It's the true friend of Jesus and Mary who prefers loyalty to them rather than curry favour with a companion whose friendship can be bought and preserved only by turning traitor to the ideal. And, in our heart of hearts there is deep respect for such a boy or girl of character. The bully may guffaw, the cynic may sneer, but he knows that you are right and that his own or her own ridicule is the base subterfuge of a coward. He has sacrificed his own ideals, if he ever had any, and the coward's way out now is to turn the laugh against you who refuse to sacrifice yours.

It would seem to be beyond question that many of us grow weary of pursuing our ideal because we lack a word of encouragement. It is wrong, of course, to abandon the struggle for such a reason, but at the same time it is easy to understand. A man is trying his best to keep his pledge, to receive daily Holy Communion. He is fighting hard to stand clear of a dangerous occasion of sin. For the past seven or eight weeks he has succeeded, through God's grace, in avoiding a sinful companion—though the urge to break his resolution was persistent. He tries to take his part in apostolic work of some kind—he is a member of the St. Vincent de Paul, he goes around lodging houses on Sunday mornings and gets the men out to Mass, he spends a few evenings a week visiting the poor or reclaiming sinners. In a word he is seriously trying to put into practice the ideals set forth for the Catholic layman by our Holy Father.

And all his efforts are met with a stony silence, if not with abuse and recrimination, and sometimes from the very people from whom he rightly expects support and encouragement. One wonders at times why it should be so, but there seems to be no explanation except that Our Lord wishes such a man to work for entirely spiritual motives. It is calamitous to give up in such a case. It is wrong to say you cannot stick at the ideal in face of such apathy and want of appreciation. It is foolish to tell yourself, and others, that you would be as well thanked not to bother. Why kill yourself, when others sit back and enjoy life and “get away with it?” Why? Certainly not to win the approval or applause of mere men. Your work has the seal of divine approbation if, in such circumstances, you persevere. You have an assurance now that you keep on

after your ideals only because you are actuated by spiritual motives.

And, if ever it comes your way to give a word of encouragement to another, from your own experience you will have learned its value. You will be generous in giving it, precisely because you realise how hard it is to keep going without receiving it. Hence any scheme calculated to promote God's glory, any project which you see is going to help souls to avoid sin, to grow in divine love, to educate then: or teach them how to educate others—in a word, any ideal put up before you which is likely to extend the confines of God's kingdom on earth meets instantaneously with your encouragement. At once you are ready to put your shoulder to the wheel and push on that good cause. Perhaps you wouldn't realise how much your encouragement means if you yourself had never experienced the want of it. Perhaps your generous readiness to help will have far-reaching results in urging souls Godwards years after you are dead and cold in the grave.

So don't allow your ideals to wilt because you do not meet with encouragement—even when you have a right to expect it, and the person from whom you look for it holds a position which would greatly enhance the value and influence of a few words of appreciation.

If we are to be quite honest in seeking the reasons why our ideals wilt we shall have to admit, I fear, that it is very true that there are so-called religious people who are responsible for alienating many. There are times when you come across such people and their long-faced piety makes you want to resolve never again to have anything to do with religion. But are you being quite fair? We shall see as we go along. But first it may be useful to set out a few typical examples.

Here is a girl of twenty or twenty-two, who is employed by a family who like to pass as excellent Catholics. They have indeed many claims on that proud title. Their home is consecrated to the Sacred Heart. Growing-up Sheila is an aspirant to Our Lady's Sodality and mother is a past pupil of the school. Dad sings in the choir and young Jimmy has just started to serve Mass. The whole family is regular in reception of the sacraments, and the rosary is said every night. The priest drops in occasionally and can always be sure of a welcome. The Little Sisters of the Poor come around once or twice in the year, and experience has taught them that it is well worth their while to call.

But Miss Twenty-Two, who is employed here, what has she to say about all this, from behind her counter or from out of the depths of her dingy back kitchen? She will tell you that she is on her feet from dawn till dark and that she is paid a miserably inadequate wage. She will invite you to investigate the truth of her statements, and if you do, you find she is telling you the truth. And did she ever ask for an increase of salary, or did she ever represent that she could do with a little extra free time? Of course she did, but only to be treated to a lengthy disquisition on these hard days, or to be informed that if the place didn't suit her the door was open. I'm not defending her, but I think it is easy to see her point if she tells you she has hardened against religion. It is far from being true that such a home is typical of the average Catholic family, but the cases are sufficiently common to justify mention of them in this place. Your sympathy goes out too to a person who tells you of galling injustice with which his or her case is handled; or to the decent deserving poor who are set aside or ignored, or questioned about their business with an assumption of superiority and a haughtiness which makes the honest pride surge to boiling point in their hearts. Can't you see why the poor man—illogically and unreasonably as we shall presently try to show—comes to think that religion is only skin-deep and Christ's standards relegated to the back yard? Ideals wilt because of the mistakes and imperfections of such religious people. A while ago a youngster aged fifteen came to see a priest. He had given up going to Mass and the sacraments, he had ceased to pray, he had as far as one could judge thrown aside every vestige of Catholic life and ideal. Why? "Well I got such a hammering at school every day for my catechism that I grew to hate it. I made up my mind that at my first chance I was through. That chance came a year ago and I'm happy to say I took it."

Of course his story may have been a tissue of lies. But even if it wasn't, was he right in giving up his religion? Of course he wasn't. He was utterly illogical. Just as that nurse is wrong, or that teacher, or little Miss Twenty-Two, if they tax religion with the shortcomings of its votaries. It is very easy indeed and very human, and therefore very intelligible, that men and women in such circumstances should vent their indignation against religion. But in all fairness I think you must admit that you are attaching blame where blame there is none.

You assert loudly that you have come up against those religious people who, through ignorance, or pride, or greed, or

blatant injustice, fail to rise to the standards you rightly expect from them. But is it quite fair to allow such experiences to antagonise you against religion? Or to make you cool in the practice of your faith? Or to drive you into abandoning the ideals you once cherished and lived for? As well might you rail against your own mother because you lost a football match or failed to secure a coveted position. As reasonably might you refuse to speak to your father because your marks in an exam were so low, or your height only five feet ten when full six feet were required to qualify for that post.

If your sense of justice or charity is outraged you are surely deserving of sincere sympathy. But do please recognise clearly that the source of the trouble is not religion, but religion distorted. You have the shoe on the wrong foot. The Catholic Church teaches her children what to do and how to do it. She exhorts and encourages when she finds them docile. She condemns vigorously and applies what remedies are possible when she is disobeyed by those from whom she has a right to expect obedience. But no sane man can hold her responsible if her commands are set aside or her ideals deliberately lowered. It is not the Church nor the Catholic religion that is to blame but her all-too-human and imperfect representative.

There is another consideration too in this same connection. Admittedly there are sometimes flagrant inconsistencies and oddities, not to say injustices, in some professedly religious people. St. Paul is fond of stressing the idea that there will always be wounds in the Church, Our Lord's Mystical Body. There will always be those whose evil ways, like weeds in the garden, spoil in some measure the beauty of the scene. Our Lord Himself, therefore, teaches that we are to *expect* sin and even scandals in His Church.

Hence no fair-minded Catholic may reasonably permit his ideals to wilt on the plea that he has come across religious people who are bad advertisements for their religion. "It must needs be that scandals come." Though Our Lord is careful to add the fearful warning: "Nevertheless, woe to him by whom the scandal cometh; it were better for that man that he had not been born."

But suppose that there were no such inconsistencies and shortcomings. Suppose the Catholic Church was the exclusive property of the impeccable and the saintly? Suppose every priest had to be another Cure of Ars, and every Catholic layman was expected to rival Ozanam or Matt Talbot in their striving for holiness and in their all-embracing charity? Where, I wonder, would there be room in such a Church for the poor sinner?

If every nun must be a Teresa of Avila or Catherine of Siena, if every Catholic girl in the world outside must model her ideals and life on Eve Lavalliere, (*See pamphlet-A Saint of the Stage*) I wonder how many of us would ever have the courage to take shelter under the Church's mantle. I wonder how we ever would be bold enough to hold her hand, as a weak child clings to his mother. I wonder why, when we are so ready to let off steam about the faults we find in religious people, we do not first pause to think what a sorry plight we ourselves would be in, only that these wounded and weak members receive such indulgent treatment from their mother. For she loves them still, in spite of their waywardness and obvious imperfections, in spite even of open violence or disobedience or rebellion.

In other words, we have to thank God that we have a Church which understands human frailty and knows how to deal with sinners as well as with saints. Look up and down along the lists of her glories and her sanctity. Sons and daughters of the Church you will see who spent their long lives in unbroken silence or prayer or in works of untiring zeal for the salvation of men's souls. There is holy ground drenched with the blood of martyrs. There is the history of fasts and disciplines and hair-shirts. There is the more marvellous self-conquest still, written in the lives of those who curbed a manner by nature imperious and proud, who became as fools in men's sight, who forgave grievous injuries and blessed those who persecuted them, with a readiness and completeness explicable only in the light of Calvary.

It's grand, isn't it, to view those annals of the Church, on every page of which you find those victories won for Christ and those triumphs of grace over nature and sin. But suppose there was nothing else? Do I hear you say: "Thank God there is more! Thank God she has also her children who are frail and sinful and imperfect and inconsistent. How indeed would it fare with me if there was no room for such as these?"

When you see her bleeding you know that she can have compassion on your wounds, because she has herself been taught so well in the school of suffering. Can't you detect a divine economy in the history of even her most saddening and

most grievous trials? Can't you deduce a fair argument from the foibles you complain of, and perhaps justly, in those religious people?

A bleeding sinner will draw near trustfully to a mother who has bled herself, and is bleeding. But if she had no scars to show, could he ever persuade himself that she would understand his own depravity, or that she would know how to pour oil and wine into his gaping wounds? He knows she is ready to show mercy, that she can sympathise with those who are ignorant and who err, for the simple reason that she herself is encompassed with infirmity.

You may complain about the faults, often glaring enough, of professedly religious men and women. You may try to justify the fact that you have permitted your ideals to wilt by citing the sins of others. But I make bold to suggest that you have reason to be somewhat grateful that not all Catholics measure up to the high standard you set them.

So it's unfair, you see, to argue and say: "Well, if *that's* what you mean by religion, count me out." It is illogical to slacken one's pace on the way to holiness because we do not get the word of encouragement which would spur us on in moments of dejection. It is wrong to let your ideal wilt because every Catholic doesn't live up to that ideal.

If it were reasonable to argue in this fashion it would be at least just as logical to turn the argument the other way and, from the study of the glorious examples of full Catholic life which abound, to demand a like standard from oneself. Can't you see that if you aver that you have lowered your ideal because of the imperfect Catholic, it is at least equally sensible to raise it because of the ideal Catholic? Indeed it was some such argument which weighed with Ignatius of Loyola. While lying on his sick bed he read for the first time about the saints, and the thought seized upon his mind and gave him no rest: "These were men and women like me; what they have done for Christ why can't I do also?" And he arose from his sick bed and proceeded to emulate the faithful servants of God, and finally his name was inscribed on Christ's Roll of Honour.

Here is a layman who gives up his evenings to climb the rickety stairs of tenement houses and help the sick or try to bring sinners back to God. Here is a nun bravely shouldering a crushing debt in order to build a house and teach hundreds of little sick or hungry children. She will frankly tell you why. They are God's children and on His Providence she depends to see her through. Here are the Little Sisters begging from door to door for their Old People. They have hundreds of them to look after; they love them and devote their lives to them. They serve them with their own hands and eat only what is left after their beloved Old People have finished.

Don't you find it hard to have patience with the Catholic who is eternally voicing his complaints about the shortcomings and deliberately shutting his eyes to so much that is fine and ennobling? Does such a one ever regard the magnificent response made to the Pope's appeal for Catholic Action? Does he ever count up the thousands of young people who will spend their time and their earnings on helping the foreign missions? Does he ever go into our churches and watch the fervour and the reverence and the prolonged visits to Jesus in the Tabernacle? Or does he always inveigh against those who come late for Mass, who speak during the holy sacrifice, or who lie in bed and don't come at all? Yes, there are two sides, and it is as fair to argue from one side as from the other. But it is more than fair. For if you ask about the failures complained of, you will be told, and quite truthfully that they are *not* religion. But when you look at the self-sacrifice and zeal displayed, and the spirit of prayer, and the practical love of the poor—when you question and want to know if *this is* religion, the answer is an unhesitating affirmative. To such heights does the Catholic normally attain if he refuses to allow his ideal to wilt. "By *this* shall all men know that you are My disciples By their fruits you shall know them."

It has been well said by an eminent ecclesiastic that if every Catholic lived up to his ideals the world would be won to Christ in a generation. Bad Catholics, worldly Catholics, selfish, unjust, haughty, self-opinionated and self-centred Catholics—beyond question their example does havoc in the souls of others. But our point is that to lower our own standard because of such misconduct is unfair, and often it is only a cloak to hide one's own deficiencies. Instead of airing the faults of others it would repay us, rather, to turn the searchlight in upon ourselves, and, seeing there how far we ourselves are below what we ought to be, to set about raising our own ideal. "Physician, cure thyself." I wonder why this hardened sinner, brought into hospital to die, is softened, at last, after years of evil living. Was it argument that won him? Yes, a living argument which he discovered in the unobtrusive example of unfailing self-sacrifice and charity which he

witnessed in the daily lives of the nuns and nurses around him. An ounce of example is worth a ton of precept. Instead of frowning on the bad advertisements and dragging them into the light of day, let me realise my own power for good in the apostolate, and become myself an advertisement such as will draw souls to Christ. It is far and away the more profitable mode of procedure and my chance of adopting it is growing less every day as life hastens towards its close. Let me look around and see what men and women are doing on the side of Jesus and Mary, and then let me be logical, and, understanding that this is religion, let me make use of what I see as a most cogent and moving argument; as a challenge also, to my own apathy.

It is a point to emphasise too, that works of charity when done in a truly Catholic spirit are to be distinguished clearly from mere philanthropy. Here is a long queue of men outside the convent gate, and at another gate a second queue of girls and women. You find them here every day at this hour—in all between three and four hundred of them. They each get an excellent dinner for the nominal charge of one penny.” And what keeps these dinners going?” you ask, to be told directly: “God Himself.” And it seems so. Now this is an example of Catholic action and one of the fruits by which to judge of the true spirit of Catholicism. But one has to impress well on oneself that the primary object of this, as of all such works done in this spirit, is to help, not merely the body, but first, and before all else, the souls of these poor people.

It is, of course, a work of mercy to feed the hungry, but the apostolic Catholic is ever mindful too, that every man and woman has an immortal soul which is dear to Jesus Christ. The work of feeding the hungry, or housing the destitute, or visiting the sick or those in prison—all these good works are actuated by the deeply spiritual motive of drawing the soul closer to Jesus and Mary, of converting the soul from sin, if it be in that sad state, of inflaming the soul with divine love and desire to atone to the Sacred Heart for sin. Some such motive is always kept well in the foreground, and if one realises that zealous Catholics are prepared to make many a sacrifice for men and women from this supernatural motive only, then one has an added argument for loving and revering the religion which can make such demands, and makes them with the confident assurance that they will be heeded.

There is yet another reason why ideals wilt. A Catholic goes down in the fight, badly and perhaps repeatedly, tries to rally, for a while, then loses heart and decides it is no use fighting any more. After this a reaction sometimes sets in, and you marvel to hear from the once fervent Catholic carping criticism, irreverent expressions, bitter attacks on clergy, contempt for and entire neglect of the very essentials of a Catholic life. Yet this boy of eighteen or nineteen, whose lip curls as he hisses his jibe at priests or nuns or sneers that religion is just another racket, in childhood lisped his simple acts of love for Jesus and Mary, and he meant them. That girl, left Catholic school only a year or two ago, whose heart now seems as responsive to the appeal of Christ as a block of granite, once, you know, that heart was all aflame with divine love.

What on earth has brought about such a devastating change? You remember the story of da Vinci and his wonderful painting of the Last Supper? He wanted a model to sit for his Christ and he searched for a man of noble appearance; he sought till he found a man of unalloyed purity, on whose face shone that undefinable radiance which only a keen sense of the supernatural can impart. He searched and he found, and the young man sat and posed as Christ while the artist worked on his canvas.

A few years passed and again da Vinci is seeking a model. This time he looks for a face showing greed and treachery, and from out the dank prison cell he drags into the light of day the worst and most hardened criminal he can discover. This unfortunate man must sit for Judas. And he did. And at the end he confessed that he had seen the picture and the artist already. He was none other than the very same who had sat a year or two before to take the role of the sinless Christ. What made his ideals wilt, I wonder? Sin, mortal sin, and you know it. Is there anybody on the face of the earth to be more compassionated than the sinner, despite all his “big” talk, his loud boasting, his attacks and jeers hurled against religion? “Take it from me,” said a convert from communism,” that there is no such thing as a convinced atheist—at least in the case of a lapsed Catholic. I posed as one, but I admit I was a fool. What happens to a man like me is to fall into sin, to neglect Mass and the Sacraments. Then you begin to wish there was no God, so as to be able to continue in your life of sin with an easy conscience. Next you set yourself to look out for arguments to bolster up your case, and to listen to chaps

who are ready to supply them. But a convinced atheist? no, there's no such thing.”

Here then is another reason why ideals wilt. It is a sort of comfort to a man who wants to remain in sin to talk himself into the belief that religion is a lying hypocrite. He would be glad to think that men and women who profess to be sincere Catholics are in reality whited sepulchres, outwardly fair to behold but interiorly full of dead men's bones and all manner of corruption. He likes, you see, to have companions in his guilt and if even those who are still striving towards the ideal, if even they are deceivers and deceived, how much more manly and honourable it is to be honest and admit that religion is a sham! So he argues, deliberately throwing dust in his own eyes for the simple reason that he knows he has no case for his sin.

A sick man who is anxious to be cured listens willingly to the doctor's favourable report of his progress. He likes to hear his friends telling him how well he looks, that the operation is a success, and that there is every chance of his being allowed up in a few days. A wife whose husband is out in China is overjoyed when word comes that he is on his way home. Even though there is doubt about the truth of the rumour she willingly hears everything that can be said in its favour and she doesn't want to be told anything that suggests the contrary. A man who makes an application for a pension will listen eagerly to those who dilate on the likelihood of his securing it, and he is inclined to turn the deaf ear if anybody points out the difficulties.

The sick man wants to believe his cure is near, and thence he passes readily enough into actual belief. The wife wants to believe that her husband is safe and on the way home from China, and there is little difficulty in working her into the state when she is almost convinced. The applicant for that pension or that position wants to cling to every vestige of hope, and the transition thence to actual belief that it is guaranteed is easily and willingly made.

And the poor man who is buried in impurity or a slave to drink, or the unfortunate girl who has wandered far from God—such as these too want to believe that there is no God, no hereafter, no supernatural life. It would thus be easier to carry on their sinful life. And the passage from such wishful thinking and wishful willing to actual disbelief in the truths of our faith is not difficult to make or to imagine.

When Our Lord was seated at the table of the Last Supper He outlined for His disciples the sad program by which the sinner allows his ideals to wilt and finally settles down to a life of sin. This He does by enumerating five effects which follow in the wake of sin. In St. John's sixteenth chapter He compares the man who separates himself from Jesus by mortal sin to a branch broken off from the parent stem. Such a branch is, first of all, “cast forth,” and then “withers.” Next it is “caught up,” “thrown into the fire,” and “it burneth.” A most accurate description of the many misfortunes awaiting the unrepentant sinner in eternity, but it has its application also to the steps in his downward grade even here.

Even in this world it is true that the sinner is “cast forth.” He cuts himself off from the intimacy of Christ and stifles all zeal for anything that concerns His interests. In the days before he permitted his ideals to wilt what graces he received in prayer and what fervour he put into his devotions! But all that is gone now. He is like Cain, a wanderer on the face of the earth, a stranger to God, a branch cut off from the parent stem. He is cast forth, like the traitor Judas who rushed away from the friends who sat with Jesus at the Supper Table, no longer able to endure the companionship of men whose interests and ideals were now so different from his own. The sinner has fled from that lighted hall and plunged into exterior darkness. Judas, “having received the morsel, went out. And it was night.” Terse description indeed, of the darkness that settled down on the soul that is cast forth, separated from Christ, its former love for Him now only a bitter memory.

In the old days what high ideals that poor sinner used to have! How anxious he was to bring others to the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ! How keen was his holy desire to work as a member of Sodality or Legion or Society of St. Vincent de Paul! But all is changed. You have now a cynic, a man who tells you he has learned sense when he would have to admit, if he were honest, that this devastating change has been effected by his sin.

And next, says Our Lord, the branch separated thus, begins to “wither away.” So too the soul in mortal sin. Ennui soon sets in. Haven't you often witnessed the boredom that consumes the heart of the sinner? There are moments, to be sure, of hilarious excitement and thrill, but aren't they dearly bought, too dearly indeed? Urged by passion the poor dupe of sin

imagines that this unlawful gratification is sure to satisfy his or her longings, only to experience remorse afterwards, and shame and disappointment.

And even if the sinner does not give himself time to taste this bitterness, caught up in a whirlpool of pleasure, he may certainly expect it to follow swiftly. Youth speeds past with a rush that is proverbial, and is there any person more to be pitied than the old or the ageing heart which is still cloyed with desires for sin and worldliness? And the bitterness to feel you aren't wanted any longer, and the sourness to realise that you are no longer young! This discontent and jealousy of others and loss of peace—all these come, as a rule, early in the sinner's career. But even if he succeeds in beating them off for a time, they return to the charge and rush into his soul and so fill it with their chagrin that ultimately it “withers.”

What a contrast when you meet the old and the ageing who have preserved themselves from serious sin! They are so tractable, so easy to satisfy. And why? Because they are drawing near to Christ and Mary as each day passes. All through life they have loved these and served them. The result is that with the approach of death they are gladdened at the thought that so soon they are to be safe with them. But the poor sinner has never learned this holy intimacy, or if he did he lost it. Instead, all through the years he has reached out for sin and sinful satisfactions. These he now can have no longer, and God he has long since forgotten. The result is that he has nothing—neither Creator nor creature—and so he “withers away” in discontent and futile misgivings. And what next happens to him? “They gather him up,” says Our Lord. A thousand trifles now begin to absorb his mind and attention. The mind that should be concentrated upon God and eternal life is caught up in an insatiable craving for the news of the day, for accounts of the trivialities upon which he used to dissipate his time and energy and can have now no longer. Instead of learning from his bitterness that he ought, even now, to turn to God in order to have his heart filled, you find that he has so long grown accustomed to satisfy his whims and to entangle himself in petty interests that he hasn't even the wish now to extricate himself. Life ends and finds him still entangled thus. One is amazed sometimes at the consuming interest one sees in the aged concerning trivial questions from which they are so soon to be parted. And so it comes about that the sinner, having squandered his one opportunity of doing anything worthwhile, stands before God with empty hands. It may even be that grievously sinful vices formed these entanglements. These have “gathered him up”; these have absorbed him day and night; they have deceived him into the belief that they could be a substitute for the life and the love of God which he renounced in their favour—to discover, too late, the calamitous mistake he has made. One has only to look around to see how true all this is at the present moment. Stand in a public street and watch these hurrying multitudes. Count up all the hours of idle gossip. Reckon all the loss of peace of soul caused by the hunt for news, the prying into the affairs of others, the silly novels which fill people's heads with nonsense or worse, the restlessness which makes a man a complete stranger to the peace of God which He designs to pour into the soul. All these entangle the sinner; by these he is “gathered up,” his relish for the things of God destroyed, his ideals of generous service of God and souls utterly ruined. He cannot serve God and Mammon. “He that gathereth not with Me, scattereth.” Sin, and especially mortal sin, is thus the most devastating of all the causes which make our ideals wilt.

So we have touched upon (i) our moods; (ii) our environment; (iii) lack of encouragement; (iv) the shortcomings which we encounter in professedly religious people; (v) and lastly sin, and in particular mortal sin. All these contribute towards destroying the high ideal with which many Catholics set out on the road of God's service. They turn back and walk no more with Him, but we have tried to show that their defection is unreasonable. And remedies have been suggested by means of which to combat and win back the old enthusiasm and fervour in doing what we can to follow in the footsteps of the saints. For we have been concerned throughout with one specific ideal—the ideal which beckons to the heights of great holiness. There are other ideals which could have been discussed—the ideal of the young man who wants to see the world, to excel as a doctor or lawyer; the ideal of the boy and girl who look forward soon to making a home and rearing a family; the ideal of the man of business, of the historian, of the mechanic or scientist or poet or craftsman. All these need the stimulus of an ideal to keep them alert. Let them lose interest and zeal and at once you have indifference and apathy. Success in any walk of life is largely secured by perseveringly pursuing one's ideal. But the ideal discussed in these pages is the most stimulating of all, at the same time that it is the most comprehensive. For a Catholic does not confine his

efforts to be holy to those periods when he is kneeling in church or receiving the sacraments. The Catholic who has read aright the advertisements placed before him in his Church knows that his life is all of a piece. His work and prayer and innocent enjoyment must all interpenetrate, "To those who love God all things work together unto good."

Two men were walking dejectedly along a country road. They had had great hopes but all their ideals had come crashing down about their ears. It was the first Easter Sunday and, it seemed, Jesus was dead and buried and His name would soon be forgotten. Presently, they were joined by a Stranger and there was something in this Man which drew them and almost compelled them to tell Him all their woes. On arriving at their little house they pressed this Man to stay with them for the night, and, when thus constrained, He went in with them. And lo, their eyes were opened and they recognised Him in the breaking of bread.

The root reason why our ideals wilt is that we don't recognise or know Jesus Christ. He is not to us the reality He designs to be. We think of Him as being afar off when He is walking by our side. The sovereign remedy for our ideals, if they are in danger of tottering, is to steep our minds in knowledge of Christ and fill our hearts with personal love of Him. "Was not our heart burning within us while He spoke to us on the way?" The ideal had sprung up again, more vigorous than ever before. Love conquers all difficulties, love is strong as death, and stronger, and it is this personal love that will carry the soul steadfastly towards the heights when the climb is stiff and the path long and the clouds are gathering overhead.

Without this personal attachment to Christ you may have regularity, an almost mathematical fidelity to certain fixed religious practices, a care to avoid sin, at least such as is mortal. But much of this is colourless and cold; it lacks the glow of enthusiasm and the warmth of love, and these can be supplied only by that intimacy with a living person with Jesus Christ Who is yesterday, today and for ever the same.

For thirty-eight years a man was languishing by the pool of Bethsaida. At certain times an angel used to descend and move the waters, and the first person into the water after the visit of the angel was healed of whatever disease he possessed. And Jesus passed by and did more for the man in a single flash than he could do unaided in thirty-eight years. Many Catholics are languishing and there is need of an angel to come and stir up the stagnant waters; most of all, though, there is required contact with Jesus Christ—a personal contact which will set the blood tingling in the veins, and the heart burning within.

The following passage, from the pen of a saintly priest, applies in its entirety only to a limited group but any Catholic who aims at more than mediocrity should find inspiration in its perusal. "The ideal calls for men advanced to the highest spirituality, devoted in no ordinary way to prayer, and perfected in those still more desirable virtues of *utter* self-denial, *complete* mortification, and *tireless* zeal; men of heroic spirit, bent on crushing every prompting of the flesh and the senses; men ceaselessly warring against self-love and the spirit of the world; men whose thoughts and affections are centred upon Christ; men formed to imitate and follow their Master as closely as may be, even at the cost of insults, afflictions, and a thousand deaths.

Everywhere we are taught to resist and overcome the opposition made by our reluctant nature. *If we do this with sincere and persistent determination*, we will duly regulate the course of our lives, mount with ease to the highest virtue, and fit ourselves, with the help of grace, for the highest and closest union with God"

If there is need of the angel to move the waters the need is not less of men and women anxious to walk in the new-found energy occasioned by his coming.

Nihil obstat:

Carolus Doyle, S.J., Censor Theol. Deput.

Imprimi Potest:

✠ Joannes Carolus,
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