

WHY WORRY!

The Christian's Privilege and Duty of Trust in God

By WILLIAM LAWSON, S.J.

Attitude to Life

Human beings, in their attitude to life, are either optimists or pessimists. There are innumerable shades of optimism, from the 'incurable' sort to the cautious and occasional: and pessimists range similarly from dwellers in unrelieved gloom to those who vary from light to shade like a landscape mottled with cloud-shadows.

Character

It is, you may think, a matter of temperament. Your attitude to life depends on the character with which God endowed you. Perhaps He made you, fortunately for you, of the cheerful sort, enjoying the character that used to be called sanguine, full of the joy of living, much in demand for parties and picnics, brightening the lives of others by the freshness and joy of your manner and appearance. Without much effort, you bring happiness to yourself and others. Small credit to you. It is a gift of God.

And small blame to you, surely, if you are a burden to yourself, and no help to others. Is it your fault if, by character and temperament, almost by nature, you look on the dark side of things? You don't like being depressed. You would much rather be cheerful. You are depressed, and discouraged, and disconsolate because you can't help it.

I should like to convince you that you *can* help it. No matter what your character may be, there is never any need to be oppressed by life and unequal to it. More than that, it is *wrong* to be afraid of life, to lose courage, to think that life is too much for you. Being a Christian, you have a privilege and a duty of constant happiness and steady courage. A Christian is, by profession, cheerful, confident, peaceful, serene and courageous.

Our Lord's Words

Does that statement need proof? The proof is in the word of our Lord in His Sermon on the Mount. Notice that they are addressed, not just to the Apostles as a summary of the ideal of their high vocation, but also to an everyday crowd as an account of their elementary Christian duty. Listen to our Lord's words:

'Do not be anxious.' Mt 6: 25-34

'Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin;

Yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O men of little faith?

Therefore do not be anxious.

But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.

Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself.'

There you have a downright statement that you must not worry, and then a few easy questions, to underline the statement, about how you compare in value with birds and flowers which are so clearly provided for by God. Finally there is a promise that, when you make the kingdom of God the first object

of your concern, then God's Providence cares for you.

The Birds of the Air

It is worth your while to consider the examples given by our Lord. The birds of the air and the flowers of the field are looked after by the Providence of God. They sing and grow in today's rain and sunshine: or they struggle to find warmth in frost or moisture in drought. They take the good and the bad in life as it comes: and, having enjoyed a good day or survived a bad day, they spend the night in peace. The birds of the air, when they have tucked their heads under their wings, do not untuck them and remark to their neighbour or to their own mind that last year's famine was severe, and that the chances are there will be a worse famine this year. They don't add the frosts and famines of yesterday, still less those of tomorrow, to the hardships of today.

You

You are to learn a lesson from those lesser creatures of God. Imitation of their carefree neglect of past and future must not be carried too far. Since God has given you memory and foresight, you must use them, recalling experience and making it guide you in the future. It is your duty, not only to look ahead and provide as best you can for the future, but even to imagine possible misfortunes so as to avoid them.

But, having used your God-given faculties in that sensible way, having done all that lies in your power, you are then, so our Lord says, to be perfectly content, knowing that you have done your best and that God will look after you. You may not, being a Christian, be solicitous. In other words, you may not worry. What you can do, that you have done. What you can't do is taken care of by the Providence of God.

Worry is Waste

Is that the way you practise Christianity? Or do you, when you have arrived at the limit of your powers of mind and body, settle down to worry about what you can't do? Do you distract and disturb yourself with excess of anxiety? Do you let yourself slump into depression and melancholy? Do you lose your courage, and tremble at the thought of what the future has, or may have, in store for you?

If you do that, then you are wasting your time and your energies. Is it the slightest use to puzzle your brain and nag at your mind over a problem that, by definition, you can't solve? You are troubling yourself about something which is beyond your power to change or remove: and that is not sensible. In that same Sermon on the Mount, Our Lord asks a question which you can easily answer:

'Which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life?'

Will you, by worry, lengthen your life, improve your work, achieve professional or business success? Will you find money by worrying? Will you win security in body or soul, now or in the future, for yourself or for those you love? Worrying is so much time and so much strength thrown away. It is as useless as

*. . . the toil
of dropping buckets into empty wells.
And growing old in drawing nothing up.'*

Worry Does Harm

Not only do you gain nothing by that excess of concern which we call worry: you also lose by it. As the Book of Sirach says: '*Sorrow has destroyed many, and there is no profit in it.*'

Sadness, or depression, or discouragement may make you ill and shorten your life: but it pays no dividends. When you give your mind to the intense consideration of what is not your concern, when you go in fear of the future, when you add, to the reasonable labour of doing what you can do, the unreasonable toil of worrying about what you can't do, then you use, in beating the air, strength which

you might have used to good purpose. And that strength is missing when you call upon it.

'What has a man from all the toil and strain with which he toils beneath the sun?

For all his days are full of pain.....Even in the night his mind does not rest. This also is vanity.'
Eccles 2:22—23

Isn't it folly to fray your mind during the day with over-anxiety, and then to lose your sleep in the same vain questionings? Yesterday's problems are no nearer solution: and you have no heart and no energy for even the ordinary problems of today.

Worry Rejects God's Help

There is yet a greater loss from worry. It loses you the special protection of God. You employ your powers to the full in an effort to provide for the present and the future of yourself and those who depend on you. When you have done what you can, to distress yourself because of what you can't do is to poach on God's preserves, as though you could not trust Him to do His part. That is a kind of rejection, more or less deliberate, of His help. And He does not force His help on those unwilling to receive it.

'Woe to the faint heart, for it has no trust! Therefore [notice that word "therefore"] it will not be sheltered.' (Sir 2:13)

But to rest tranquil and confident after you have done your insufficient best is to appeal for God's aid: and it will not be denied.

'Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord.

He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.' Jer 17:7—8

Worry is un-Christian

So far, the argument for trust in God instead of worry has been that confidence is the best policy. It pays. Confidence, moreover, is virtue: and worry is vice. There is no place for worry in a Christian life. Worry is un-Catholic. It results from trying to bear the hardships of life without the support of Christian principles. I am far from saying that if only you will trust in God you will escape tribulation. No human being can go through life without sorrow and suffering.

'Through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God.' Acts 14:21

It is part of the penalty of sin, and we can avoid it no more than we can avoid death. But there are two ways of taking those afflictions of body or mind or heart or soul. The bad way is to carry them alone, thinking that it is by your unaided efforts that you are to bear the burden which you cannot escape.

Sorrow Without Sadness

To do that is both unreasonable and un-Christian. And it makes you a prey to sadness. A Christian is not allowed to be sad — that is, to let his sorrow turn sour and bitter. Sorrowful you will certainly be if you have any human feeling: but you must have a 'godly grief', in St Paul's phrase.

'For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death.' 2 Cor 7:10

Our Lady is honoured by her title of Mother of Sorrows. But she was never sad, because she could not be selfish in her sorrow, nor could she let it turn her thoughts and her will from trust in God. That is the Christian ideal: and it should be yours. No matter what your anxiety, your fear, even your tragedy may be, you must face it, or bear it, in that Christian spirit. There is no exception to the rule requiring confidence in God.

'No ill befalls the righteous.' Prov 12:21

To be sad, or discouraged, or afraid, is to forget the first principle of Christian life, that you are never alone and defenceless, that you are essentially and all the time dependent on God, and that He supports

you. To act as though you depended entirely on yourself is to be ignorant of elementary Christianity or to have obscured that elementary truth by your inflated notion of your own power and importance. To worry is a sign of ignorance or else of conceit and even of pride.

Never Out of Your Depth

You know very well that you can't manage life on your own. You don't run your life. Life is a kind of partnership between yourself and God. When you have done your best, you leave what remains to be done to your partner. Live your life in that sensible and Christian way, and you can't be beaten. Nothing can take the heart out of you. You never get out of your depth.

Imagine someone swimming in the sea. While the surface is fairly smooth, he swims serenely enough. But when the waves begin to mount, swimming is not so easy. The swimmer grows agitated, and splashes desperately, increasing the size of the waves and draining his strength. He opens his mouth in fear to cry out, and swallows part of the sea. Perhaps he sinks and stays under. At the best, he makes no progress in rough water: and, when the calm follows, he is too weary and blown to do more than float exhausted. He is no help to himself, and he is a burden to others. That is a picture of the man who worries.

But the Christian, finding the waves too much for him, at once gets his feet down, and stands, head and shoulders above the waves, on the unchanging truth that he is in the care of God, and that, when he has God's help, nothing is too much for him. His troubles remain, but they are in proportion. They cease to loom over him, darkening his life. He stands above them, and can look across them at the goodness and the power of God.

Which Providence?

I do not say that trust in God lays bare to the Christian all the designs of God's Providence.

'We can hardly guess at what is on earth, and what is at hand we find with labour; but who has traced out what is in the heavens?' Wis 9:16

Inevitably, the Providence of God is too much for our understanding. The human mind has a limited capacity. It can hold just so much, and no more. How then could it possibly contain the plans of an infinite Providence? You must resign yourself to living by faith and not by sight. Once again, it would be a sign of ignorance or of pride to expect God's plans to coincide with yours. That truth you know, however much you may play with the idea of being your own Providence. Given a free hand, you could remove the hardship from your life, and from the lives of those you love. To all for whom you are concerned, you would give a sufficiency of material things, gifts of body and mind, success and security in their careers, and the real treasures of life — the riches of love and affection among family and friends. And, of course, you would provide for their spiritual welfare, ensueing their salvation. It would be comforting and satisfying to play Providence like that. But supposing you had to choose between that Providence of yours, which you understand so well just because it is the fruit of limited knowledge and limited goodness, and the Providence of God, founded on an exact and complete knowledge of every one of His creatures planned with infinite wisdom and directed by a love for you and for all whom you love, which is at the same time personal to you and infinite, which one would you choose? Well, you have no need to make a choice. You are living now in that Providence of God, known perfectly to God as a person, cared for personally from moment to moment by the endless wisdom and endless love of God. So why worry!

'The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?' Ps 27:1

Power is Made Perfect in Infirmary

With that foundation, you can live always in serenity and peace, with your essential happiness out of

reach of the trials and sorrows of life. You can even welcome evidence of your own weakness and insufficiency. By all human standards, you would say that the time to be confident, to be sure of your future, was when you had all the means necessary for success — all the material goods, all the strength of body and mind, all the support of human affection of which you felt in need. By Christian standards, which take account of the fact that you have a divine partner in life, you are confident not only *when* you are weak but *because* you are weak: for then there is more room in your life for your partner's work. That is what St Paul says: 'But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness". I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.....

For when I am weak, then I am strong.' 2 Cor 12::9, 10

That disposes, doesn't it, of your feeling that at least sometimes you might be justified in losing courage? When everything has gone wrong, when not the thinnest ray of hope can cut through the clouds massed over your future, then surely you are allowed to droop and be sad. On the contrary, that is the time for rejoicing. That is the time for the power of God to be made perfect in your infirmity. You can't suppose that the power of God will be embarrassed by the difficulties which are too much for you. God's power is always infinite: and He uses that power out of endless love for you. Why worry!

Prayer and Serenity

St Paul summarises the Christian attitude to life, in a sentence of the Epistle to the Philippians 4:6,7.

'Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.'

Remember that your life is a partnership with God, and that you have the duty and the right to call on His power and His love in all your needs. Do what you can, using the gifts of God, to provide for yourself and for those who depend on you: and then leave the rest, confidently, to God.

'And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'

That is the essential—to establish yourself firmly in the peace which belongs to the Christian soul, and to let nothing disturb your peace.

Courage in Fear

And if God chooses you for a hard Providence, remember that there are no exceptions to the command to be rooted in the peace of God. Your sorrows will come upon you; your character will keep its tendency to discouragement and depression; you will be afraid of the present and the future: but amid the uncertainties of life, you will possess that certainty of the love of God on which your life is built, and your weakness will give place to the perfection of the power of God. Any coward can be brave when he is aflame with courage. The Christian is courageous when he is frightened to death: and his courage is real, because it flows from the certainty of God's Providence.

Cast All Your Care Upon God

You will never fully understand the Providence of God, not even when your trust in God is perfect. God's choice of ways of life and times of death may not coincide with yours. Don't lose your peace and serenity and courage in puzzling over what you cannot understand. Recall your mind constantly, until it is fixed in them, to the truths that you do know — the omnipotence and the infinite wisdom of God, and God's infinite love, personal to you, which uses wisdom and power to care for you and yours. Accept humbly what you cannot understand.

'Humble yourself therefore under the mighty hand of God.'

But find, in your knowledge of God's goodness, the unshakeable peace and the endless courage which ensure your happiness now and forever.

*'Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God
Cast all your anxieties on Him, for He cares about you.'*
1 Pet 5:6,7
