

SIMPLICITY—PRELUDE TO JOY

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"Tall men were these, the shepherds come from flocks
And wearing sheephides with the dew still wet
Upon the wool, with gourds and staffs, and one
With torches in his hands, and there was that
Upon each face that he might recognize.
And he no longer feared."

A Woman Wrapped in Silence.¹

IT IS A MISTAKE to think of the shepherds as ignorant men; simple-minded in the worst sense of the word. They were not simpletons. Perhaps St. Paul's phrase, "a fool for Christ," might be a more apt description of them. Thus, when they were told by the angel the joyous news of the first Christmas: "they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger." Their promptness in response to the angel's message should prompt us to cultivate the virtue of simplicity in our approach to the Infant Christ.

THROUGH A CHILD'S EYES

Christian simplicity permits one to accept "the unspeakable gift of God." All embracing as it is, it unifies every speck of love in a man and fashions him into a faint image of the Simplicity that is God. Characteristic traits of the simple Christian soul are purity of intention, humility, a strong faith and confidence in God, and an enlightened love for the Holy Eucharist. Thirty-three years ago, a Carmelite nun was inscribed in the canon of the saints because she possessed these qualities. She lived what she called the way of Spiritual Childhood, a "little way, all my own, which will be a direct shortcut to heaven."² Although known as the "little way," it was not an easy way. It was the gospel message put into practice, a way devoid of faint-heartedness, softness, or fear of effort, that made St. Therese of Lisieux one of the greatest personifications of Christian simplicity the world has ever known. "Amen I say to you, unless you turn and become like little children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."

An ordinary child not warped by spoiling or bad treatment possesses simplicity in the true sense of the word. He has a capacity for total joy and complete surrender. He realizes well his dependence on his parents for almost everything, and his trust knows no bounds. Untouched by the desire for the goods of this world, he often discards a more costly gift in favor of a poorer, but more personal toy. It was this child-like outlook which St. Therese brought to the spiritual life. She was child-like as contrasted with childish—that derogatory term that describes the mistakes of adults who act as if they knew no better. Therese knew what she was doing. She orientated her life in Christian simplicity and became a child in grace. Pope Pius XI, in his homily at the Mass of Canonization, describes St. Therese's life and doctrine in this way:

"This virgin became a *child according to grace* but a childhood which, *inseparable as it is from real strength of soul*, fully deserves, according to the very promise of Jesus Christ, to be exalted and glorified in the heavenly Jerusalem and in the Church militant.
 . . . For just as little children, who are blinded by no shadow of sin, drawn away by no allurements of the passions, rejoice in the tranquil possession of their innocence, and, wholly ignorant of malice and dissimulation, speak and act as they think, and reveal themselves outwardly as they really are; so Therese appeared angelic rather than human, and gifted with *the simplicity of a child in the practice of truth and justice.*"

Caryll Houselander has some meditative thoughts on another aspect of the "little way." Redemptive Childhood she calls it; those "small sacrifices" made through love. In *The Passion of the Infant Christ*, she stresses that the child that we are urged to become is none other than the Christ Child Himself. When Therese constantly made an effort to check her self-will, keep back an impatient word, and to practice small acts of charity for those around her without them knowing it, it was the Christ Child suffering in her and thus redeeming through her. The same thought is echoed by Fr. Vann, O.P., and it is nothing new in Christian simplicity:

" . . . if we take the hard and the sad things, the troubles and worries and sorrows and loneliness that come to us, and if we add to them perhaps some self-denials of our own, then we are not forsaking but befriending Christ in His Passion, and with Him we are bringing comfort, here and now, to a sad and troubled world."³

We can never forget that the sign of the cross is always above the crib. Our Redemption by Christ, although culminated at Calvary, was

begun with the first cry of a Babe in a cave. Perhaps it was this thought which enabled St. Therese to always keep the joy of Christmas in her heart, despite the daily and heroic suffering she endured.

Finally, there was the Holy Eucharist and the Blessed Mother in Therese's simple life. Holy Communion was for her a communion—a union with God through Christ. The small wafer of bread, which appears worthless and insignificant to worldly minds, was her fondest treasure. There is reason to believe that by her prayers and sufferings St. Therese helped to obtain for the Church that sanction for the practice of daily communion which was granted by St. Pius X. "After all, our Lord doesn't come down from heaven every day just to wait there in a gold ciborium," she says; "he has found a much better heaven for his resting-place; a Christian soul, made in his own image, the living temple of the Blessed Trinity."⁴ Through a fervent Eucharistic life, Therese was intimately instructed in "the simplicity of Christ" from the Divine Master Himself.

And the Christ Child's Mother, what part did she assume in Therese's "little way"? We can easily guess that it was the relationship of a little child to her mother. How amusing it sometimes is to see a child in the process of imitating his mother, trying to sweep the floor and dust the furniture. Spiritual Childhood incorporates this imitation. St. Therese's sound advice to preachers should be taken to heart by every child of Mary. "Instead of showing the Blessed Virgin as all but inaccessible," she pleads, "we should hold her up as possible of imitation, practicing the hidden virtues, and living by faith just like us."⁵

Mary was the Morning Star. Therese never took her eyes from her Mother. She followed her Star along the way to simplicity and purity of heart, for Therese knew that when Mary appears in the darkness, her Son is close at hand.

IN THE EYES OF MEN

David was called by God out of the sheepfold into a palace. Centuries later, the same event occurred in the lives of other shepherds. This time they came as courtiers to royalty, rather than as kings like David was. The palace they went to was not the magnificent dwelling in Jerusalem, but an obscure cave in the small village of Bethlehem. With their child-like simplicity these rustic men became the first from the outside world to worship at the throne of the Infant Messiah.

Jewish religious practices had been changed during those years between the advent of David and the advent of Christ: Not by God,

of course, but by the leaders, the Scribes and Pharisees whose duty it was to know the Law of Moses and to present it faithfully to the people. Gradually during the centuries, adherence to the true spirit of the Law, and worship from the heart had given way to a mere formalism. The stress was placed on externals. Every rubric was carried out to the minutest detail in the temple, while the hearts of many remained cold in their affection toward God. Such were the conditions prevalent at the time of Christ's birth. Are they radically different today?

Toward the end of each November, the spangled facades of department stores glitter with a foretaste of approaching pleasures. Throngs fill these temples of commercialism to sacrifice to a variety of "golden calves." But all that glitters in the display windows during these pre-Christmas rituals is not gold, and the happiness so eagerly anticipated, quickly vanishes. No sooner are the lights on the Christmas tree turned off, than Santa and his sleigh full of trinkets are forgotten. The world's concept of Christmas joy goes out each year on the second of January together with empty boxes, crumpled wrapping paper, and matted tinsel. These external trappings have not brought the lasting warmth of love to hungry hearts.

For the true Christian, the end of November does indeed bring with it a foretaste of an approaching joy. It annually introduces the season of Advent with its hopeful message, "the Lord is nigh." He is "nigh" to those who wait for Him; prepare for Him. His coming on Christmas eve consoles the faithful soul with joy and peace amid the trials and aggravations of everyday life. The Eucharist and the influx of grace that accompanies it is His Christmas gift to those who have made Him welcome. How far removed it is from today's candy-caned idea of "happy holidays." Even some who profess the Faith of Christ have become infatuated by this false notion of Christmas. Vanity and superficial desires for material goods have superseded any preparation in the spirit of the Advent season. The result is that the Lord is not near for them, because His birthday has been almost completely forgotten. "No man can serve two masters," and "the double-minded man is inconstant in all his ways." It is either God or self.

LIKE TO GOD

In the world, where perfection is measured in terms of results, the more complex a man's life becomes the more perfect he is considered to be. The bank manager is the envy of many a young accountant, and the industrious stenographer looks ahead to the position

of office superintendent. It would be rather naive, of course, to ask a new bride if she would prefer a new "washer-dryer" combination, or a replica of grandma's wooden scrub board for a Christmas present. When we are dealing with the realm of matter, the simple thing is imperfect and not desirable.

In spiritual matters, however, it is just the opposite. The more perfect a thing is, the more simple it is. The difference between a skilled draftsman and an amateur is one of simplicity or clearness of mind. The former has perfected his knowledge and simplified his work. He can tell by a single glance at the blueprint how many lots there are in a certain piece of property, a conclusion which the latter could arrive at only after tedious manipulation and study. The amateur's imperfect grasp of his subject stands in contrast to that of his experienced friend. Complexity vs. simplicity. The same is true in all types of knowledge. The more learned the mind, the clearer, the simpler the perception.

Now God is not hampered by a body nor limited by the restrictions of matter. Rather, He is pure act, a pure Spirit Who is Intelligence and Truth itself. The simplicity of His intellect embraces all being in one sweep. By a single act of His divine will, He orders all things to Himself. The essence of Goodness and Love, He is the sole end capable of satisfying the desires of every human being. It is this Simplicity—that prime attribute of God which is the synthesis, the sum, and the union of all the divine perfections—which most clearly manifests the creator-creature relationship. Man, a dependent being, is nothing by himself, and attains his perfection only in God. The Simplicity that is Divine Truth is faintly reflected in the creature by the virtue of simplicity which St. Thomas defines quite succinctly:

“. . . the virtue of simplicity is the same as the virtue of truth.”⁶

If all the clocks in a canning company are set according to the large clock at the entrance, there is a good chance that the plant will run smoothly. But, if a couple are off, either too fast or too slow, the results could be disastrous. We may picture the virtue of simplicity as the careful timekeeper whose only job is to make sure that all the sentiments of the appetite and will are perfectly coordinated with eternal Truth, and not "running too fast or too slow." Simplicity's role is to make us appear what we really are, which excludes all duplicity, all falsehood, all hypocrisy. When the ambitious employee gives the boss a new briefcase for Christmas, his co-workers might be inclined to think him a bit of a fraud. The simple man, on the

other hand, keeps himself free from all deception. He is neither deceitful in his actions nor cunning in his speech. That is why simplicity is akin to veracity and annexed to the virtue of justice. We are bound to tell the truth and to bring truth into our lives. Simple souls understand this. They seek the truth in everything. Those who possess this virtue see themselves in the whole scheme of creation as depending entirely upon God for everything they have. "The double-minded man is inconstant in all his ways," but the simple man, his "whole body shall be lightsome." He is on the threshold of seeing God.

This vision of God, however, is not attained without effort. We must remember that simplicity is a moral virtue, a *habit* of choosing the truth. It comes with practice. Just as a facility in tying shoes comes only after much patient determination on the part of a child, so a man can become simple only after a successful process of de-complication. This is a difficult job, indeed, since the standard of the world is complication. But the grace of Christ is with those who seek to follow Him: "My grace is sufficient for thee." The search for simplicity, however, must be marked by purity of intention. We must *seek* union with God.

When we speak of the beatitude "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God," we are inclined, I think, to believe that only moral purity is implied. True, impure thoughts and actions concerning carnal pleasure do kill grace in the soul, and if death comes at that moment, the Beatific Vision is lost forever. However, more than Christian chastity is required for the attainment of complete joy. One doesn't immediately think of simplicity as being intimately connected with the sixth beatitude, but the latter pre-supposes the former. To strive for perfect purity of heart is the same as to strive to become simple. If a man desires simplicity, he must orientate his whole being with all its affections and activities in the direction of God. This is what is meant by purity of intention, and it is on the bottom rung of the ladder which leads to the realization of purity of heart in one's life. It begins the prelude to joy.

STEPS IN SIMPLICITY

Fr. Perrin, O.P., in *The Gospel of Joy*, enumerates most concisely the next three steps up the ladder to God. In the ascending scale of purity of heart he lists: 1) nothing against God, 2) nothing apart from God, and 3) God for God. This is clearly a steady progression in the way of truth; a process of soul simplification.

When we look at it more closely, we can see that "nothing against God" implies not only mortal and serious sin, but every willful fault

committed intentionally. Deliberate faults make sincere contact with God impossible. Here is where the virtue of humility plays such an important role. Humility is the foundation virtue. If a man hasn't humility, he will never ask for the grace of simplicity. Yet, without God's help, who could hope to practice temperance, fortitude, and the other virtues, which achieve the work of simplification in the soul. Our Advent meditations should awaken in us a sense of our weakness, our sinfulness, our unworthiness, since the feast that it prepares us for comes clothed in the humility of a Babe. The season of Advent offers a golden opportunity to "make ready the way of the Lord." "Make straight his paths," and see to it that the heart, this Advent, harbors nothing against God.

Perfect faith and confidence in God are signs of the next step to joy, "nothing apart from God." The soul thus purified from self-love now seeks all things for the love of God. A generous portion of the gift of understanding is given to the soul. This fructifies all the merit from struggles overcome on the ladder of simplicity, and perfects the mind so that it may proceed without confusion and error. Lifted above his own superficial views and mediocrity, the simple man sees that all affections, friendships, and activities, not related to God, must be avoided. They still have a tinge of complexity about them and are not what one would call completely "pure." "No man can serve two masters." This doesn't mean that simple men love only God; rather, they love all that God loves, but in God. A man who truly cherishes his wife and family, and earnestly works for their sanctification, is prompted by the love of God. God's love keeps his own ego down and enriches his capacity for solid affection and devotion. Armed with a lively faith and trust in God's mercy and goodness, the soul begins to see everything as in someway related to Him. All the small, insignificant, every-day happenings are accepted as God's will, and returned to Him with love and thanksgiving.

On the top rung of this ladder which is simplicity, there is only one sentiment left in the soul—"God for God." Under the divine light of the gift of understanding, the simple soul takes its delight especially in the Holy Eucharist. He sees the Eucharist as St. Thomas did, as the surest "pledge of future glory," as well as a loving invitation to the greatest possible joy in this life. "If thou didst know the gift of God." In the eyes of the world, Christmas is a time for gifts. Sometimes we are so distracted by the baubles from the department store, that we fail to see the only worthwhile Christmas present there is—the eternal Father's daily gift of His Eucharistic Son.

Real and lasting joy demands singleness of mind and simplicity

of heart. When the shepherds heard the angel's message, we read that "they went with haste" to Bethlehem. These were upright and God-fearing men, nursed in the solitude of the Palestinian nights. They had the faith and promptitude of simplicity. St. Thomas says that it was most fitting that the glad tidings of Christ's birth be announced to the shepherds because they were single-minded like the patriarchs and Moses in their way of life.⁷ It was this virtue of simplicity which Joseph clearly recognized "upon each face." "And he no longer feared," but happily revealed to them his treasure—the unforgettable joy of the vision of a Mother and Child.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Lynch, *A Woman Wrapped in Silence*, (The Macmillan Company, New York, 1941) p. 46. This quotation is used with the kind permission of The Macmillan Company.

² St. Therese of Lisieux, *Autobiography of a Saint*, the complete and authorized text translated by Ronald Knox. (The Harvill Press, London, 1958) p. 248.

³ Vann, O.P., *The Two Trees*, (Collins, London, 1948) p. 23.

⁴ St. Therese of Lisieux, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

⁵ St. Therese of Lisieux, *Novissima Verba*, (P. J. Kenedy and Sons, New York, 1952) p. 110.

⁶ *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 111. A. 3, Ad 2; q. 109, A. 2, Ad 4.

⁷ *ibid*, q. 36, A. 3, Ad 4.



See how the Scriptures weigh carefully the meaning of each word. For when the Flesh of the Lord is seen, the Word is seen which is the Son. Do not let it seem to you but an indifferent proof of your faith, this that the persons of the shepherds are lowly. Simplicity is aimed at here, grandeur is not desired (Ambrose, in Luke Ch. 2).