

LETTERS, AND A LETTER

P. M. SULLIVAN, O.P.



ESTERDAY'S newspaper might be ancient history this morning, but yesterday's letter grows more absorbingly interesting with the passing days. If this is true, then a book completely devoted to yesterday's letters should provide material for many pleasurable hours. Such a volume¹ has made its appearance. Browsing among these letters is like taking a trip back-stage in the making of history. In the dim light one might fall over a prop or bump up against some shadowy figure standing behind the scenes. One can almost hear the "wolves of the North" howling about Rome as St. Jerome describes the approaching sack of the city to a friend. Here one meets famous figures of history's pages. One sees their hopes (Michelangelo to the Pope's Architect: ". . . for I am persuaded that it will be a work without equal in all the world if it be carried out."); their love (Elizabeth Barrett to Robert Browning: "Sympathy is dear—very dear to me: but the sympathy of a poet, and of such a poet, is the quintessence of sympathy of me!"). Letters show people in dignity and simplicity. Who can read the letter of Dickens to his wife telling her of the death of their little Dora without being touched with pity? Or the letter of Lincoln to Mrs. Bixby without feeling the greatness of the man? Side by side with sorrow and love, too, business and humor go along. Letters never seem to lose their interest. How true this is when one does not have to go to the trouble of steaming them open, nor steal off to some hidden corner to read them.

It would seem that any book of letters not containing one or more of the letters of St. Paul would be incomplete. The Apostle of the Gentiles has no peer among letter-writers for style or subject matter. All other letters take on the pale hue of insignificance in comparison to this "gold mine of theology." So, then, it is no surprise to find a letter of St. Paul in the collection of letters mentioned above. Of the fourteen letters written by this "Christ-intoxicated man," the editor has chosen the masterpiece on Charity penned to the members of the Church at Corinth. Indeed, this is an important letter. The need of Charity at that time and at all times can never be overlooked. However, there is another letter of St. Paul which is of equal or greater import. It is the letter to the Galatians in which

¹ *A Treasury of the World's Great Letters.* Simon & Schuster, N. Y.

he reminds them and all Christians of their lofty heritage. "But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent His Son, made of a woman, made under the law: that He might redeem them who were made under the law: that we might receive the adoption of sons."²

The full meaning of those words "the adoption of sons" is stupendous and overwhelming. Puny creatures, who have not thought it unseemly to rebel against their Creator, have, through the merits of Christ, been lifted up to the status of sons. As such they have become the heirs of heaven; God can be called Father and Christ, Brother. The grace Christ won for all men on the blood-stained slope of Calvary has given them a taste of the sweetness of the life of the spirit. Through Baptism men are introduced to this life and by using the other Sacraments its beauty grows in their souls. By the "adoption of sons" undreamed of associations are offered and unbelievable glory may be achieved.

The first of these associations is the new relationship of the creature to God. As creatures, all men must acknowledge their total dependence upon their Creator. So, to be permitted to call the Creator by the familiar name "Father" is a step which staggers the mind. This is no mythological god of the Greeks or Romans allowing such familiarity, but the God of mercy, justice, the Lord of all, the Alpha and Omega, Who has willed this to be so. In all the litany of names applied to God, none could bring men more close, nor be more intimate, nor more personal. It is difficult for men to imagine God, the pure spirit, God, the infinite, God, the unchangeable, in the homely role of "Father." But by calling Him "Father" men cause no change in Him, nor is any new perfection added to Him. The delightful change, the wonderful addition has happened on the side of men. His Son taught men to pray "Our Father," and praying in this way undoubtedly brings home to men the closeness of God to their souls. St. Paul stressed this point in the letter to the Galatians where he writes: "And because you are sons, God hath sent the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying: Abba, Father"³ There is something more appealing to the ordinary person in the idea of God, as Father, than in the notion of God, as the Judge of all men.

Added to this glorious relationship with God, as Father, there is also the bond with His Son, Christ, as Brother. He is the true Son of God from all eternity; all men, by the grace of Christ, are the sons of God by adoption. As a Brother men can find in Him a protector, counsellor, guide. He is the "first born among many breth-

² Gal. 4:4-5.

³ Gal. 4:6.

ren." By His life He has set an example for His younger brothers to follow. From Bethlehem to Calvary His life was a well-planned campaign against the "father of lies." There was kindness unequalled, charity unlimited, forgiveness unbounded. His life was a model of how life should be lived that the life that never ends might be attained. This noble Figure, this heroic Personage, all of us are privileged to address as "Brother."

Through Christ all men approach Mary, and because He called her "Mother," they might call her the same. Our Mother is a Queen, the Queen of angels and men. Around her crowd the saints, and men can call them "brothers," because they, too, call Mary "Mother." By the grace of Christ men walk in an exalted atmosphere among a blessed company. In such a family close harmony and good fellowship certainly exist. The desire to help is always springing up in these sainted brethren. Those brothers, not yet blessed and often in dire need of such help, appreciate this kinship. Such co-operation can be found in no other family. Such real help is discovered only in the household where God is the Father, Christ is the Son, Mary is the Mother and the rest of men are children by adoption.

An important item of this heritage of men is the interior peace brought about by grace. All the cares, burdens and woes of this existence of ours are made more bearable, when men are able to look upon this day-to-day grind not as the whole of life, but as the prelude to another life, a life untroubled, interminable. Another consolation for men is the knowledge that their actions are watched with interest not only by the eyes of a kind Father, but also by the saints who have been buffeted by the same strong winds of temptation and have shrunk from the same drenching torrents of soul-torture. This life becomes liveable because of grace. Grace is the seed of glory, is "glory in exile." This peaceful reward of earth is a mere trifle compared to the reward to come beyond the grave. Here the companionship with God, Christ, Mary, and the saints is felt only in a hazy, almost unreal way. There, in the courts of Heaven, it shall be known perfectly, clearly. Eternal life is begun here; it never ends hereafter. Heaven, men's heritage as sons by adoption, is the palm of victory, "the uncorruptible crown." It is the state where the sons of God shall enjoy the vision of their Father eternally. St. Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, writes, quoting Isaias, "That eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man, what things God hath prepared for them that love him."⁴

⁴ I Cor. 2, ix.

A pale parallel to the "adoption of sons" might be seen in a case of this sort: A wealthy man, who has lived alone in a great mansion, takes a liking to a poor, orphaned lad. He brings the boy into his home, treats him as a son. He offers him the finest of everything; schools him, clothes him, feeds him. When the lad grows up, he introduces him to the elite of society. All this is done under one condition: the boy must obey him in all things. One misstep and everything is lost; the boy will find himself back on the streets, a pauper once more. Because men live no ivory-towered existence and "this too solid flesh" is ever ready to assert itself, the sons of God by adoption are liable to take this false step. The only difference is that where the benefactor of the orphan probably would not be prepared to offer forgiveness, along with the other things of life, to the boy, God is ready to receive a repentant son with open arms. God's grace stands poised above the confessional. Sin is man's chief bugaboo. When it rears its ugly head, all peace of heart and mind flees.

St. Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians at a time of trial. Bad influences had been working to undermine his missionary activity among them. He, himself, had been openly attacked. So his letter was written with fervor and a desire to make those people see what he was giving them. It was something no one but an Apostle of God could bring them. Our day, troubled by the clouds of war and the breakdown of belief, might approximate the position of the Galatians. If there was ever a time when people needed to be reminded of the "adoption of sons," it is now. If men were to read all the letters of yesterday, as they appear in *A Treasury of the World's Letters*, there is no doubt that they would be moved, informed, even inspired, but they would never discover the fact that they are the adopted sons of God. Only by reading St. Paul's letter shall they discover this. Furthermore this letter does not have to be steamed open, nor does the reader have to steal off to some hidden corner to read it.