

THE PASSIONS—A GIFT FROM GOD

Few are the things of this world which are not liable to abuse in the hands of man; fewer still, the things which afford no vantage-ground for misrepresentation. Thus in the course of the ages many ideas, either good in themselves, or at least indifferent, have come to assume a sinister aspect, owing to the fact that they have been repeatedly garbled and distorted by such men as feign to be the legitimate teachers of the race. These perverted notions have gradually seeped into society at large, with the result that the original character of these things has been lost sight of and they are now known and considered only as something repulsive. Take for instance the idea of "passions." To the ordinary man, be he pagan or Christian, cultured or otherwise, this term stands for all that is depraved and inordinate in human nature. Almost instinctively he will associate it with the notion of violence, or excess: if he be the usual Christian, he will undoubtedly place it in the category of the obstacles to salvation—a thing which he must sedulously avoid. Strange to say, even moralists are wont to attach this unfavorable meaning to passion, and, without qualification, make it the butt of their many anathemas. As Catholics we cannot entertain such falsified notions; but must inquire into the true nature and significance of passion as set forth in the philosophy of the Church. Therein they stand forth as priceless gifts bestowed on us by the Creator,—instruments, which if used in accordance with reason, may be wielded to our eternal advantage.

What, then, are we to understand by the term "passion"? In common parlance it is looked upon as an overpowering feeling swaying the mind; a violent emotion or impulse tending to physical indulgence. We shall not stop to consider these definitions since their inadequacy will become apparent as we proceed. What we now seek is the signification of the term as it is accepted among scholastic philosophers, whose teachings are stamped with the seal of the Catholic Church. In certain sense faculties of the soul we discern a certain inclination or tendency, by virtue of which we are led to seek an object which is presented to our senses as a good. In every such inclination, whether strong or weak, various changes or movements are set up in our organism; changes, for example, in our breathing, or in the beating of the heart. These motions of the sensitive ap-

petite in man, by which we tend to the attainment of some good or the avoidance of some evil, are called the "passions," or, as they are more popularly known nowadays, the "emotions." All of this may appear very bewildering and complicated but the underlying idea is really quite simple. Briefly stated from a practical point of view the passions are those pleasurable or displeasing movements which accompanied by "bodily resonance" take their rise in the sensitive region of the soul, thus bringing us spontaneously into touch with the good which can be perceived by the senses, or deterring us therefrom.

In the attempt to classify and catalogue the passions, philosophers have departed one from the other, adding, rejecting and distinguishing according to their individual whims. Perhaps the most logical enumeration is that of the schoolmen, who after long and searching examination of the emotions, came to recognize eleven chief forms, which they divided into two large groups. One of these groups has to do with objects which are directly sought after as agreeable, or shunned as abhorrent. These are the concupiscible passions. The other group is concerned with objects which are presented to us not simply as good, but as arduous good,—difficult to acquire or avoid. These latter are known as the irascible passions. There are six concupiscible passions: love, desire and joy or delight, with their opposites, hatred, abhorrence and sorrow. The irascible passions, whose objects are apprehended as difficult, are five: hope and daring, or courage, with the opposite emotions, despair and fear; and, finally, anger, which has no opposite. Love, hatred, desire, abhorrence, delight, sadness, hope, despair, daring, fear and anger—these comprise the whole gamut of the passions. What they are we all know, for we have experienced them time and again. It is worthy of note that all these passions which result from sense-impressions are, in a greater or less degree, shared with us by the lower animals. We shall now proceed to examine them more particularly and in their relation to one another.

A trite adage has it that "love makes the world go around," and like most adages it is founded on truth. For in the world of the emotions the motive power is generated by love, the fundamental basis of them all. From love flows a never-ceasing stream, nourishing all the other passions. By this emotion we are inclined to an agreeable object regarded absolutely, without

reference to its absence or presence. In some way or other all the other passions have their source in love. Bossuet tells us, "The hatred that one experiences in regard to an object arises from the love felt for some contrary object. We have aversion for some person merely because he stands in the way of our possessing that which we love. Love for the absent good gives rise to a desire of attaining it. Joy is the love which we entertain for the good thing already in our possession. Abhorrence and sorrow are, respectively, the love shrinking from and mourning the evil whereby good is banished. Daring is a love which attempts what seems impossible in order to frustrate the loss of the beloved object; and fear is a love despairing the imminent loss of its good. Anger is a love irritated by a wrong done and desirous of avenging itself on the guilty. In short, take away love and there are no passions: let love stand, and it begets them all."¹ As for hope and despair, these arise when the beloved object is judged to be difficult of acquisition, but in the one case possible to attain, and in the other impossible. Thus it is easy to see that love is at the bottom of them all, the very substratum upon which the whole superstructure is erected.

At this point in our discussion the error of the popular conception of passion will be evident to all. Surely, even the most simple-minded will concede that in such passions as love, desire, joy and courage, there can be elements of good; and deeper probing into the matter will reveal the fact that each and every passion may be productive of good, just as its excessive and inordinate use may be productive of evil.

This questions whether the passions are morally bad, and must therefore be eradicated from nature before we can hope to make any progress in sanctity; or whether they are morally good, a foundation upon which we can build up a life of holiness, has been answered in many ways. The following are but a few of the solutions which have been forthcoming, and which are, in a measure, representative of the lot.

The Stoics of old, and their modern followers in different guise, held that the passions were fundamentally bad, and that the whole purpose of man's life was to tear them out by the roots. In this there can be no half-way overtures, no peaceful measures. They must be dealt with in the manner of a tyrant,

¹ Bossuet. "De la Connaissance de Dieu et de Soi-meme." Chap. VI.

who after bringing his subjects into subjection, hews them down without mercy. The great model of Stoicism was Marcus Aurelius, whose attitude towards the emotions has been well set forth by Père Janvier.

"Before the frivolity of his people, the debauchery and treason of his captains, the desertion of his soldiers, the misdeeds of his wife, the death of his children, the villainy of his son Commodus, . . . the decay of valour, the public apathy, the growth of superstition; in a word, in the face of the destruction and disgrace of his army, his family, and his Empire, Marcus Aurelius withheld himself from anger and grief alike; it was a source of pride to him that, like some unshakable promontory, against which the tempests beat in vain, he was able to live 'exempt from pain, insensible to the blow which strikes at him today, inaccessible to the fear of that which threatens him tomorrow.'"²

Thus did the Stoics seek to solve the problem of the passions, but so utterly out of joint with human nature were their teachings that men shrank from them and sought elsewhere. Inevitably the pendulum swung to the other extreme. Came the Epicureans whose followers thrive even in our own times, maintaining that pleasure is the chief good; that the passions, even in their excessive use, are totally good. "The passions were elevated by the pagans into gods, and had their temples, and their feast-days. Their allotted function was not only to offer unto men the spectacle of scandalous vice, but, as well, to propagate licentiousness as personified in themselves. As though corrupt nature were not of itself sufficiently prone to overstepping the limits, there was spread out before them, in the form of Bacchanalian and Saturnalian festivals, a vast horizon of debauchery; the immortals, for their own greater honour, coming down from the heavens to incite revolted consciences to orgies, whereof they were the actual promoters."³

It seems that truth is ever to be found in the golden mean, and Catholic philosophers, acting on this principle, have hit upon the key to the problem of the passions. The truth of the matter is that the passions in themselves, that is, considered simply as movements of the irrational appetite, are neither morally good nor morally bad. But if we regard them in their relation

² Janvier. "Les Passions." 3e Conference.

³ Janvier, *ibidem*.

to reason and will, then they are either morally good or morally bad, according as they conform to, or deviate from the principles or right reason.⁴ We must not strive to stifle the passions and thus become mere impassive machines; nor must we allow them to gain the mastery over us—to make us their abject slaves. Rather are we to direct them into their proper channels wherein they are capable of carrying us to our desired goal. They are, as it were, a fire which God has kindled in us. This fire we are not to extinguish, but, rather, we should stir it into flame, that by its power we may be directed to our destiny. Yet it is urgent that we keep the flame ever within our control, lest escaping its set limits, it work havoc in our lives.

Every great man who has accomplished works of lasting renown has been urged on by the goad of passion. It was passion that stimulated saints and martyrs to lead such austere and heroic lives; passion which impelled the heroes of history to perform their deeds of bravery. What is it that causes us to cling so tenaciously to the gift of life, but the passion of self-love? Passion gives courage to the most cowardly, brings to life the most insensible. Yet at the same time, the inordinate use of these same passions has been the cause of untold suffering and evil in the world. It is evident, then, that passions are powerful factors for good or evil according as they are rightly or wrongly employed. To hold them in contempt is to spurn God's bounty, for they, even as reason and free-will, are gifts from Him; and just as we may abuse our reason and liberty, so, too, may we employ our emotions to our own destruction.

The Stoical conception of the nature of the passions was exemplified in the life of Marcus Aurelius. In Epicurus were embodied the ideas of his school. In Jesus Christ, the Teacher of teachers, we possess a wonderful model of the Christian ideal. The God-Man, in whom there could not be the slightest shadow of imperfection, utilized the passions to their utmost. Love for souls and hatred of sin were the mainspring of His whole life. He ardently desired to partake of the Easter repast with His disciples, and how He abhorred the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. He was sorrowful even unto death in the Garden of Olives, and he wept over the faithless Jerusalem. His courage shone forth in the Passion, yet great was His fear during His terrible Agony.

⁴St. Thomas. *Summa Theol.* I-II, Q. 24, art. I.

And, finally, with righteous anger He drove the sellers from the Temple. It is this human note in the life of Jesus that makes so strong an appeal, even to those who cannot believe in His Divinity. His life was lived in accordance with nature, our own human nature, and He distorted it not a whit. Christ did not pluck out the passions and cast them aside as useless or worse, but appraising them at their true value, employed them as worthy instruments in the accomplishment of His Divine Mission. The example of Christ and of the countless saints who have gone before us proves beyond doubt, the feasibility of attaining to perfection by the right use of the passions. It behooves us, then, to follow in the beaten path, rugged and tortuous as it may seem, rather than risk all by a rash leap in the dark on our own initiative.

The stigma which has been fastened on to the term "passion" is not wholly justified. Yet there must be some warrant for this well-nigh universal misconception; and such is indeed the case. Throughout the centuries men have neglected to build levees, as it were, to restrain the passions in their natural channels. They have allowed them to overflow their beds, sweep into the domains of human life, leaving in their train disaster and ruin. So often has this occurred that they have come to be regarded as inimical torrents rather than as friendly streams. But as Christians we cannot accept this view, we know that they have been bestowed upon us by Almighty God, the Giver of all good gifts, Who works nothing in vain. Their serviceableness and their value depend upon the use we make of them.

—Bro. Leonard Callahan, O. P.

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