

Alfonso Gálvez

THE
IMPORTUNATE
FRIEND

Translated from the Spanish by
Michael Adams

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INTRODUCTION

This book consists of three different meditations apparently unconnected with one another.

The first —“The Importunate Friend”— from which the book takes its title, has to do with the well-known Gospel parable, and is a talk on the subject of prayer.

It is a positive, hope-filled commentary which uses details of the Gospel story to emphasize some aspects of prayer. If prayer is a loving dialogue with God, it must have the qualities proper to people who are in love with one another. One of those qualities is daring, which in turn is born of the conviction that comes from knowing one is loved “to the end” (Jn 13:1); sometimes prayer can become so audacious that it may even seem to be importunate. However, this daring (even importunity) is as necessary to prayer as passion (even importunate passion) is to love relationships. In fact, that is what our Lord is telling us in the parable.

Naturally this daring takes the form of the lover’s asking for and expecting everything from the person he loves, for the very

simple reason that he knows that she is ready to give everything and, even more, desires to do so. In view of the reciprocity, which is a feature of love, this means, in turn, that the person who is doing the asking is also ready to give everything he has to the one he loves. Hence it follows that a prayer which has no daring, no importunity, is like a love—relationship devoid of passion and warmth.

As it is said in it, the second meditation —“Love for the Truth”— is a kind of unburdening of feelings. Given that we are living in a world where farce abounds, where it is quite the norm for minds to be manipulated, and where it even seems that the spirit of falsehood has wormed its way into certain corners and by—ways of the Church itself, there cannot be anything wrong with someone (echoing what many Christians think) giving voice to his nostalgia and his love for the truth. A truth that is all the more missed nowadays as people feel less and less free and more manipulated than ever before (“The truth will set you free”). And a truth that many would like to see the Church standing up for and protecting; without, of course, being opportunistic or compromising or courting the System.

The last meditation —“The Poor Widow”— is a reflection on the Christian virtue of poverty, using the Gospel episode about the poor widow who gave everything she had as alms to the Temple treasury.

That concluding part of the book tries to convey that Christian poverty is a much more important virtue than it might seem. And, above all, something much more serious than that caricature of a virtue made of it by “horizontalist” Christians who argue for a gospel which does not go beyond the confines of this world. This meditation tries to show that, to be poor in the Christian sense,

it is not enough to go and live without two pennies to rub together and become a news item so that everyone knows about it (one does not even have the excuse of "bearing witness"). Truly poor people rarely hit the headlines; they pass unnoticed, and their suffering is, usually, something only God sees. Moreover, true Christian poverty is grounded on true love (as every virtue is), and is more than just giving up money or a comfortable house: "If I gave away all I had to feed the poor. . ."

In situations like this, one usually feels urged to refer to some connecting thread that runs right through all three meditations, given that they deal with such distinct themes. However, we will not do that here; we will leave it up to the reader. But, the point might be made, apropos of "The Importunate Friend," that there seems to be more need than ever, nowadays, for prayer that is daring, prayer in which love and passion combine to such a degree that it seems to become inopportune. There seems to be that need just now, when so many people have given up praying and seem to have forgotten that a relationship with God is, over and above everything else, a relationship of love. The Church today has devoted so much time and energy to organizing our relationships with "others," that one gets the impression it has forgotten about the no less important task of encouraging people to develop their relationship with the "Other."

But if prayer is a relationship and a dialogue of love with God, poverty (after charity) is the virtue that has most connexion with that love. Lovers give each other "everything," precisely because they are in love with one another. In this sense, true Christian poverty is the most patent (and only) proof that one truly loves.

And, finally, as far as "Love for the Truth" is concerned, it may be enough to recall that the Truth is the exclusive patrimony

of people in love. For human beings can claim to possess the Truth only when they sincerely love it. And, even though they are quite often, these days, deceived and manipulated, in the last analysis this is due to the fact that they have voluntarily expelled love for the truth from their hearts. For truth is given only to those who lovingly open themselves to it and embrace it.

And so, for those who like such things, maybe that is the "thread running through" these meditations: none other than love. For he who truly loves will manage to engage in loving conversations with God, conversations which have all the features of dialogues and relationships of love (passion, daring, imprudence, importunity. . .). And, on the other hand, he will desire to become poor by giving away everything he has (leaving himself with nothing, therefore) out of love for the loved one. None of which can happen without love for the truth, which is, when all is said and done, a route which, as our Lord pointed out, we must take if we are to attain true holiness: "Father sanctify them in the Truth."

THE
IMPORTUNATE
FRIEND

And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him,' and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything'? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

(Lk 11: 5-13)

I

The first thing one notices in the parable of the *importunate friend* is the story itself. Even if one is familiar with the customs of the ancient world, the figure of this character coming to his friend at midnight looking for the loan of three loaves always seems a bit odd. A guest has just arrived, and the man has no food to offer him. Though his other friend, and his whole family, is already in bed at this late hour, he still helps him; but his reason for doing so, seemingly, is more to get rid of a nuisance than to meet the demands of friendship.

But the whole thing is even more odd when one considers that the story has to do with prayer. And also, of course, with the qualities prayer should have. For it is clear that the parable of the *importunate friend* is a parable about prayer and about how to pray properly. And it is quite intriguing that it proposes as a model the behaviour of our importunate friend, indeed a very importunate one.

Anyway, having got over our initial surprise, and once we have understood and defined the scope of the parable, we can immediately see what might be called the first condition for prayer.

The parable tells about a man who goes to a friend asking for help. The importunity of the various concurring circumstances—and we should not dismiss them as colourful decorations on the parable—also has its own importance, as we shall see, though it might be better to begin by looking at the friendship between these two men. Here we see one friend going to another to get help because he is in real need of it. This is something absolutely normal, it is a feature of friendship that friends *need one another* and therefore help one another. Hence the parable's emphasis on the word *friend* in the opening verses (5–8). Nor is it surprising that everyone should agree on describing it as the parable of the *importunate friend*.

Friendship lies at the very base of the parable. Someone goes to a friend insisting that he help him, on the grounds of friendship. The circumstance of the importunity only serves to bring out that friendship here, for the very reason that it puts friendship to the test. The importuned friend ends up by serving the other because he is his friend. Contrary to what one might think at first glance, the parable does not say that the man's request was acceded to because his friend wanted *to get rid of the importunity*; no, it rather seems to suggest that the request would have been met anyway. To put it another way: the man's demand was listened to, *if not out of friendship*, at least in order to put an end to his importunity. There is no doubt, therefore, that in our Lord's mind friendship is the primary reason why the man got what he wanted: *I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him whatever he needs*. So, we can already see that the importunity is an important element and plays an important role in the whole story. We shall discuss it later, but it is good to notice this at the outset. Because the real clinching factor here is friendship.

Friendship is the basis, the underlying reason for the request. In our case it is the basis or ground for prayer, in addition to being the object and goal of prayer. For, if on the one hand prayer is something that necessarily derives from the very nature of friendship, its purpose also is to intensify friendship. Since prayer is a form of loving communication between people who love one another—in this case God and man—it makes no sense unless friendship exists. And that is why any kind of importunity that might mask the situation simply disappears, because love justifies all demands made of the loved one, no matter how preposterous they may seem. In fact, the demands made can be all the wilder, the greater the love that the friends profess for one another is.

When love is present, no demands can ever be excessive. Given that it is proper to love to want to receive *everything*, its demands can never be called excessive: *Love hopes all things*.¹ In fact a love moderate in what it expects to receive would not be true love. Nor can one ever say that love is expecting to get *too much*, in the sense that its appetites are exaggerated. For it is part of the very nature of love that it never asks for little, much or too much: it simply asks for *the lot*, and that is precisely what it expects to be given.

This is in no sense at odds with the absolutely disinterested nature of love. Although it is true that love *does not insist on its own way*,² clearly one needs to understand what that means. It does not seek its own interest, but up to a certain extent. . . . because the only thing that *interests* love is the loved one and *the interest of the loved one*. A person who loves hopes for *the lot*, for the very reason that he does not expect to get anything from himself or for himself. He only expects and desires the loved one, but he expects and desires all of him.

¹1 Cor 13:7.

²1 Cor 13:5.

What man seeks in prayer, what he fixes his love on, is God himself, infinite Being. And because God is Everything, one can never say that man goes too far in the demands he makes in prayer. Quite the contrary: given that his prayer is addressed to Totality itself, by their very nature the demands he makes must be over the top: *Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than those will he do, because I go to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in my name, I will do it.*³ So, there is nothing special in our Lord's ending his exhortation with an insistent call to ask for things in prayer. One should ask for lots of things: *Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; everyone who searches finds; everyone who knocks will have the door opened.* Moreover, one should ask for big things, as big as one's imagination can devise, or even beyond our imagination. . . : *How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!*

We said earlier that it is normal for friends *to need one another*, and that that is the whole purpose of friendship.⁴ And, although it might seem to be at odds with the basically loving—and therefore disinterested— nature of friendship, it is only an apparent contra-

³Jn 14: 12–14; cf. also 15:7; Mt 21:22; 1 Jn 3:22.

⁴This need unavoidably arises out of the very nature of beings, as it happens in the case of creatures, or out of the very nature of love. In the latter sense, God has made use of his sovereign freedom and has chosen *to need* man. The nature of love is metaphysically opposed to solipsism, and that is why there is a plurality of Persons in God, who is substantial Love. Of course, just as it would make no sense to speak of the three divine Persons needing one another, it does fully make sense in the case of created beings: they need each other, and they need God. Love is the most conclusive proof against Idealism.

diction. While it is true that friends need one another, and that that need is the purpose of friendship, it must however be pointed out that friends freely desire and seek that *need* and that *dependency*. That does not make the need and the dependency any less real or true. The *importunate* friend who arrives at midnight to ask for some loaves of bread, precisely grounded in his condition as friend, is simply acting out of a logic that derives from the laws of friendship. The other man, even though he is already in bed, like the rest of the family, has no reason to be surprised by what is happening. If, in giving the loaves, his motivation had more to do with getting rid of the importunity than with friendship, then the blame would be more his than that of his importunate petitioner. The person at fault as far as friendship is concerned would be the one who acted out of lower motives, not the one who made demands based on the strength of a friendship that expected everything from the friend. The proof that that is the way things are lies in the fact that our Lord, in this parable, exhorts people to ask so insistently, not worrying too much about being importunate.

Friends need one another because friendship is one of the forms love takes. And an essential part of love is the mutual dependence of those who love one another. Now, given that everything is voluntary and free in love (by its very nature), then that dependence is entirely free too. A person who loves wants to be dependent on the loved one, and rightly so, because he has given him his life in such a way that one could rightly say that he has exchanged his own life for that of the other: *As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me.*⁵ That is why the Apostle also said: *And yet I am alive; it is no longer I who live, but*

⁵Jn 6:57.

*Christ who lives in me.*⁶ But once a person has freely decided, his need of and dependence on the person loved are fundamental, for they belong to the essence of love; and because, having renounced his own life for that of the loved one, the lover now needs that loved person *in order to stay alive*. That is why our Lord said that *he who eats me will live because of me. . . . He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.*⁷

So, prayer is based on friendship. In fact, prayer is the practice of a friendship which perforce increases the more it goes on. Since prayer is a loving dialogue, and indeed a genuine love–relationship, it is unthinkable unless it has friendship underpinning it.⁸ The essence of prayer is not petition, but friendship. One has recourse to one’s friend *because one has a relationship of love with him*. The central point of the parable of the importunate friend, contrary to how it may seem at first sight, is not the petition. The truly important thing, imbuing the entire parable with its aroma, is the sweet smell of friendship. Friendship which dares to be so very importunate because it is aware of its own intensity and its tremendous greatness. Importunity on this scale is simply proof of a huge, audacious trust. . . which comes, in turn, from an immense, huge love. One needs to remember that, for our Lord, the ultimate proof of friend-

⁶Gal 2:20; cf. also Mt 10:39: *He who loses his life for my sake will find it*.

⁷Jn 6: 56–57. And so it happens that in love, and therefore also in friendship, everything is reciprocity. This leads to the conclusion that God, too, needs man. His is a genuine need, but a need *secundum quid*. Having freely and out of love chosen this to be so, God has changed the tone of his relationship with man: from one of Creator to creature it has now become, by a generous and ineffable divine decision, a relationship of love and friendship: *No longer do I call you servants, but friends* (Jn 15:15).

⁸The sinner can and should pray. But the prayer of the sinner who turns sincerely to God to ask him for help or forgiveness already contains in itself a beginning of love, it even is love, for otherwise it would not exist.

ship is total self-giving, as to the point of giving up one's very life: *Greater love has no man than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friends.*⁹

⁹ Jn 15:13.

II

The second condition necessary for good prayer has to do with silence and stillness on the one hand and the *nights* of the soul on the other. It is *at midnight*, according to the parable, that the importunate friend arrives: *Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him...* Why exactly at midnight? The reason why our Lord specifies this late hour must be because he wants to stress the confidence and audacity of the man who goes to his friend for help. But there is no reason why we should not also see this as indicating that that is the best time to have recourse to a friend... or perhaps to do prayer, which amounts to the same thing.

There is nothing arbitrary about the hour that is mentioned. True friendship always seeks out the best time; it wants the meeting with the friend to be as sweet and pleasant as possible; so it tries to avoid anything which might get in the way of that. Unless it is just one of those unimportant meetings in daily life, stemming from social relations which scarcely merit the name of friendship.

The truth is that the importunate fellow in the parable seeks out his friend at this untimely hour *because it is at that moment that he most needs him*. The text expressly says so: *For a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him*. It is not easy for someone to have the ability of choosing the best time to feel need. Just as it is impossible to make the heart work according to a fixed timetable. Besides, it is when we are at our most helpless that we have a pressing need to seek out our friend, we are given the possibility to choose the opportunity for doing so. Really most painful circumstances normally arise at the darkest and thickest moments of the night of life —*at midnight*—, and that is the very time when man feels a pressing need to go to his friend. In the case of prayer there is no doubt but that it is in the moments of maximum inner darkness, or the nights of the soul, that man most needs to have recourse to God. Moreover, the stillness and silence of the night make for dialogue in intimacy. So, quiet and external tranquillity on the one hand and darkness and the night of the soul on the other. Two features which help prayer, or which make prayer necessary, and which are contained in the parable when it specifies the circumstance of midnight.

For it is at midnight that the importunate man goes in search of his friend to ask for his help. The very time when all is silent and still. And without a doubt the best time to seek the Lord in prayer. So, here we have something which initially seemed very inopportune because of the lateness of the hour, and now it turns out to be the best time. The same thing happens in prayer as in true friendship: one looks for one's friend first and foremost because he is a friend, one is eager to ensure that nothing interferes with the meeting or gets in its way. That is why the Bridegroom in the *Song of Songs* so emphatically says:

*I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
by the gazelles or the hinds of the field,
that you stir not up nor awaken love
until it pleases.¹*

And for this reason too, the bride in the *Song* tells the bridegroom:

*Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the fields,
and lodge in the villages.²*

Referring to our Lord, the Gospel expressly says that *in these days he went out into the hills to pray; and all night he continued in prayer to God. . .*³ *After he had dismissed the crowds he went up into the hills by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.*⁴ And He himself recommends solitude to his disciples: *When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.*⁵ Why does He always choose the silence of the night or the early morning for praying?: *In the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed.*⁶ It must be because man's duties towards God come first, before the duties he also has towards his brethren.

God deserves pride of place and priority, and therefore he has to be sought by man in solitude, at that very time when other things

¹Sg 3:5.

²Sg 7:12.

³Lk 6:12.

⁴Mt 14:23.

⁵Mt 6:6.

⁶Mk 1:35.

cannot get in the way. For one thing must become clear: God is above all things and has to be loved above all things. There is a further reason: the dialogue of love takes place in a very intimate setting and therefore it delights in solitude.

Therefore God must be sought *in solitude* —which is why Saint John of the Cross says:

*In solitude she lived,
and in solitude she has built her nest,
and in solitude now her beloved guides her
alone, who likewise
in solitude was wounded by love.⁷*

This does not mean that created things are to be despised. Nor is it a matter of not loving them *for a time*, as if we were dealing here with a delayed love, for nothing or nobody ceases to be loved for a while, since love toward things or for persons does not admit of discontinuity. The truth is that things are never loved as much as when man finds himself in the presence of Infinite Love. The reason for this is quite simple: this is the moment of truth. The moment of absolute Truth —that is, God himself— whose reality is such that all other truths become in some way relative. One needs to bear in mind that this consciousness of relativity does not in any sense

⁷In the original:

*En soledad vivía,
y en soledad ha puesto ya su nido,
y en soledad la guía
a solas su querido,
también en soledad de amor herido.*

mean that the reality of things becomes blurred; no, they become known for what they are and in their relationship to God, who is their beginning and their end. When man tries to encounter God, and in doing so seeks solitude and tries to get away from things, he does not cease to love them. He is simply obeying the laws and requirements of love. For the Christian does love things with *all* his heart. But he does so with a heart that is always searching anxiously, always yearning, for an *All*. When he at last finds that *All*, all his *cares* for other things can be, *as it were, forgotten*, cast among the lilies, as Saint John of the Cross put it:

*Lost to myself I stayed,
my face reclining on the Beloved,
everything ceased and I abandoned myself,
throwing my cares
among the lilies to lie forgotten.*⁸

This does not mean that these cares are really forgotten. It is just that, as we said earlier, they are *as it were forgotten*, because the forgetfulness is only apparent. And it does not apply to persons and things one loves, because these are never forgotten insofar as they never cease to be loved, it refers to the person concerned, the lover. What is going to be missed now is the presence of the lover,

⁸In the original:

*Quedéme y olvidéme,
el rostro recliné sobre el amado,
cesó todo y dejéme,
dejando mi cuidado
entre las azucenas olvidado.*

not his love of things so dear to him. This means that if someone finds himself in danger of forgetting, it is not the person who goes away, but the one who stays. For he who goes away is making for the *All* and therefore his presence will from now on be less obvious to those who have not yet reached the end of the road: *You will seek me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'where I am going you cannot come.'*⁹

Man is never more present to his brethren than when he leaves them and goes off to meet with God in solitude. Besides, only when a person drinks of God (Jn 7: 37–39), who is the fountain of all love, can he love his brethren and all things. Then and only then: *I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away for if I do not go away, the counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.*¹⁰

It sometimes happens that Love comes only when a person takes himself off. Besides, there are many things man can understand only if he remains in solitude, for it is Love alone that can enable him to acquire this understanding: *I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. . .*¹¹ *These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you, but the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.*¹²

Man does not distance himself from things, or forget them, when he goes off to meet with God in solitude. It is when he is in the presence of God that things are more patent, more present, and even more loved than ever. Perhaps things are left to one side;

⁹Jn 13:33.

¹⁰Jn 16:7.

¹¹Jn 16:4.

¹²Jn 14: 25–26.

but, if so, that is done in order that they may be loved more and may themselves be able to love more. Someone has to love, even to give up his own life, so that others may live and may learn to love. And someone has to go away, leaving others in solitude, so that the momentary separation leads finally to a definitive encounter which no one and nothing can break: *You have heard me say to you: I go away, and I will come to you. . .*¹³ *When I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. . .*¹⁴ *Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I meant by saying: A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me. Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.*¹⁵ Perfect joy, definitive consummate joy, is something that belongs to Heaven; for now, we must needs contend with the sadness and sorrow of the paths that lead in that direction.

A person who seeks solitude in order to find God will never be alone. He ends up possessing All, whereas people who opt for the ephemeral and participated being of things end up with nothing but solitude. And it is not true that a person who seeks solitude for the love of God turns his back on things; rather, things turn their back on him, whether they like it or not: *Jesus turning to them said: Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.*¹⁶

A person who seeks solitude in order to find God in prayer is not trying to annihilate his senses, what he is looking for is the peace

¹³Jn 14:28.

¹⁴Jn 14:3.

¹⁵Jn 16: 19–20.

¹⁶Lk 23:28.

and tranquillity necessary for giving himself up *totally* to God at that moment. A person who prays seeks solitude as an indispensable means of becoming intimate with God:

*The king has brought me into his chambers.*¹⁷

Clearly what spiritual writers mean is simply that the senses *are not at that moment focused on other things*. Now, given that man is never more intensely alive than when he is at prayer, it is clear that his senses are also operating at that moment at their maximum capacity; but of course they are *turned completely towards God*. Besides, man needs his senses in order to be able to love and be loved in the manner befitting his nature. The bride says as much, for example, about the Bridegroom in the *Song*:

*O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth.*¹⁸

And elsewhere also:

*O that his left hand were under my head,
and that his right hand embraced me!*¹⁹

In another place the bride joyfully refers to the senses of sight and hearing, the main senses to do with the perception of beauty. And she proudly exhorts her companions to look at the Bridegroom and listen to Him:

¹⁷Sg 1:4.

¹⁸Sg 1:2.

¹⁹Sg 2:6.

*My beloved is like a gazelle, or a young stag.
Behold, there he stands behind our wall,
gazing in at the windows,
looking through the lattice.
My beloved speaks and says to me:
“Arise, my love,
my fair one, and come away.”*²⁰

The Bridegroom, for his part, tells the bride in the *Song*:

*Let me see your face, let me hear your voice,
for your voice is sweet, and your face is comely.*²¹

Or, in another place:

*Turn away your eyes from me,
for they take me by storm.*²²

It is plain to see that the senses are not *annihilated* in prayer. They need to be active in this intimate divine–human relationship, as it always happens with any loving relationship man is involved in. Each of the lovers wants to contemplate the other and be contemplated by him (or her); to say loving things, and to hear them said also to him; to put his arms around the loved one, and to feel himself embraced. The human being elevated by grace loves with a divinized love, but without ceasing to be human. With elevated, supernatural

²⁰Sg 2: 9–10.

²¹Sg 2:14.

²²Sg 6:5.

love, with all its senses and powers transformed by grace. . . , which nevertheless continue to be those of a human being.

The *stillness* of the senses has nothing to do with their being passive or ineffective. It simply means that the senses are at their highest degree of activity *but entirely focused on God*.

It is at midnight that the Bridegroom of the parable of the virgins arrives.²³ The reason for this is that the lovers always try to meet when things are quiet, in silence and solitude. As Saint John of the Cross said:

*On the happy Night,
all in secret, since none saw me,
nor I beheld aught,
without light or guide,
save that which burned within my heart.*

*It guided me
more certain than the midday light,
to where one waited for me
whom I knew well,
there where none else intruded.²⁴*

²³Mt 25: 1–13.

²⁴In the original:

*En la noche dichosa,
en secreto, que nadie me veía,
ni yo miraba cosa,
sin otra luz ni guía,
sino la que en el corazón ardía.
Aquésta me guiaba
más cierto que la luz del mediodía,
a donde me esperaba
quien yo bien me sabía,
en parte donde nadie parecía.*

*Let us rejoice, my Beloved,
and let us go to see ourselves in your beauty
to the mountain or to the hill,
where the pure water runs;
let us enter deeper into the forest.²⁵*

Lovers seek solitude because they wish to devote themselves *totally* to one another, admitting no distractions. Besides, we should also point out that love can never be fully understood outside of love: the words or gestures which the lovers exchange are so eminently *personal* that, even where they can be understood by an outsider in their superficial sense, they really have no meaning for him. Love, of its nature, is so *personal* and intimate that it can only be grasped by a loved *thou* whose life is identified with that of the loving *I*.

But flight from everybody and everything does not mean forgetfulness of everybody and everything. Both lovers have the *all* so present that it constitutes the content of the loving gift which each makes to the other: each gives all. And as far as *others* are concerned, they too form an essential part of the divine-human love-relationship; in the sense at least that it is impossible to love the Loved One without at the same time loving what He loves and spreading the fire of Love to everything that is open to receiving it.

²⁵In the original:

*Gocémonos, Amado,
y vámonos a ver en tu hermosura
al monte o al collado
do mana el agua pura,
entremos más adentro en la espesura.*

III

It is important to realize that the friend's concern, what moves him to ask so insistently and importunately, is not a personal problem, but *that of another*. As he himself says: *A friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him.*

In prayer concern for *others* prevails over other things because here the interests of the Loved One are always given priority. Now, these *others* are also of concern to the Loved One; he has given his life for them also and made them the object of his love. And the lover loves what the loved one loves, because they both love with the same love and with the same heart:

*My beloved is mine and I am his.*¹

The perfect community of interests that exists between the lovers, as an essential requirement of love, renders it impossible for the bride to put herself before the interests of the Loved One. Besides, she no longer has any interests of her own, her only interests are those of

¹Sg 2:16.

the Loved One. For, from the moment when there comes to be only one heart and one soul, no longer are there in love such things as the interests of the *one* and of the *other*; there are only interests in common. This even happens in the case of human love when it is supernaturalized by grace: *There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call by God. . .*² *The company of those who believed were of one heart and soul. . .*³ *That they may be one, Father, even as we are one.*⁴ In the intimate relationship of divine–human love this commonalty of interest is even greater, if that be possible, because the Bridegroom and the bride belong totally to one another:

*My beloved is mine and I am his.*⁵

*I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.*⁶

.....

*I am my beloved's,
and his desire is for me.*⁷

Concern for *others* is of the essence of prayer, even though it is true that perfect prayer presupposes that the bride forgets everything other than the Bridegroom. For, *others*, as has been said, is what interests the Bridegroom. And the Bridegroom's interests, like his feelings (Phil 2:5), are those of the bride, too. Moreover, if she has been brought into the vast richness of the royal chambers:

²Eph 4:4.

³Acts 4:32.

⁴Jn 17:22.

⁵Sg 2:16.

⁶Sg 6:3.

⁷Sg 7:11.

*The king has brought me into his chambers,*⁸

and into his banqueting hall (Sg 2:4), it is not surprising that the bride should want that the others share her riches. Despite the yearnings for solitude, and for the oblivion of everything, which always go with the intimate *one on one* (tú a tú) of the divine–human dialogue. True love cannot ever give up the search for intimacy and solitude. To do so would mean setting aside the indispensable conditions that make possible the ineffable and secret dialogue of love. Saint John of the Cross said this in many different ways, though never more beautifully than in this unforgettable stanza:

*Lost to myself I stayed,
my face reclining on the Beloved,
everything ceased, and I abandoned myself,
throwing my cares
among the lilies to lie forgotten.*⁹

That is how it is, and it cannot be otherwise. But here it refers to the mystery of Perfect Love. What we know about Love through its participated forms, which are always imperfect in all kinds of ways, should not cause us to lose the right perspective or forget the other

⁸Sg 1:4.

⁹In the original:

*Quedéme y olvidéme,
el rostro recliné sobre el Amado,
cesó todo, y dejéme,
dejando mi cuidado
entre las azucenas olvidado.*

side of the question: *The master said to the servant: "Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled."*¹⁰ Search for solitude and oblivion toward everything else, or concern for others? Aporias like this disappear when one goes deeper into the content and meaning of the mysteries which, because one understands them imperfectly and in a very limited way, have given rise to those very difficulties. In perfect love the bride loves others because the Bridegroom loves them, and so it is that true love of God leads inexorably to true love of one's fellow man. Nor should we forget that the bride's love for others is not merely the fulfillment of a *commandment* —the first commandment—, given the sovereign liberty that is proper to love. There is of course a commandment which underpins and further strengthens that love (Jn 13:34). But the very fact of accepting that precept *out of love*, which is the only way it could be accepted, makes it absolutely voluntary and free.

But the main reason why the bride loves others is because love by its very nature tends to diffuse itself; it knows no limits. One would be perfectly right to say that the bride loves others and that is all there is to it: she loves them because she *loves*. As the Apostle said: *For God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given us.*¹¹ For, since Love is infinite and, therefore, cannot be confined within limits of any kind, and cannot be measured or weighed in any sense, it tends to *pour out*, to *overflow* and to *spread*, in the sort of way water overflows from a bowl into which it is constantly being poured. Human love, or divine-human love, which has been supernaturalized by grace, is still participated love. But since we are discussing love, true love, it has to *participate*, therefore, in the essential conditions of love. Now, true Love, which

¹⁰Lk 14:23.

¹¹Rom 5:5: *Caritas Dei diffusa est in cordibus nostris...*

by its very nature is infinite —God is Love— has no beginning and no end; nor are there any rules which *channel* it, limiting the sovereign freedom of its action: *The Spirit blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes.*¹²

The best attitude to adopt, therefore, towards Perfect Love is to listen to its voice and be ready to receive it; listen to its voice in order to understand, as far as possible, its words of love. Since it is Infinite Love, it is never given to man to know deeply *whence it comes and whither it goes*. Not only in the sense that it is impossible to plumb its true origin, or comprehend the limits of its full scope; man can never know the *outlets* and the *paths* that love can take (Is 55:8). Popular language puts it very convincingly: *it can go anywhere, or it can end up anywhere*. It is beyond doubt that grasping what Love, *qua* Love, can do absolutely surpasses the capacity of any creature.

The importunate friend hastened to stress that it was not a personal problem he wanted solved; perhaps he did so to justify somehow his importunity —*A friend has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him*. However, an intelligent, valid explanation like this cannot be taken here as a mere excuse or as a simple tactic. In the context of prayer there is a key point here. When it is granted to man to practise a more perfect prayer, a stage arrives when he forgets himself completely, even if he does pray for the resolution of his own problems.

When Saint John of the Cross wrote his famous stanza: *Lost to myself, I stayed. . .*, probably *the cares*, which he said he left behind, refer not so much to the world of things, or to the Bridegroom's interests, as to the world *of his own concerns or his own person*. A universe made up of the thousand cares, big or small, more or less

¹²Jn 3:8.

justified, which so frequently cause the human heart concern and uneasiness:

*Catch us the foxes,
the little foxes,
that spoil the vineyards,
for our vineyards are in blossom.*¹³

What we have here is the sorry, lonely world of his *I* which man eventually discovers, perhaps in his mature years, as the object about which he has worried so excessively that he has got even his reality and own existence out of focus. A person who spends too much time contemplating himself, thinking that he is fulfilling his most important duty or accomplishing the only thing necessary, will eventually discover his mistake. One may think he is constructing, and living, his own life; and then the point comes when he realizes how wrong he is and what a failure he is:

*They made me keeper of the vineyards;
but, my own vineyard I have not kept.*¹⁴

The long history of Christian spirituality has seen certain terms being used in a sometimes very unhappy way. It would be impossible to claim, for example, that *being forgetful of everything* has to be interpreted as lack of interest in the world and in created things. Quite the contrary, no one should be more interested than the Christian in the world, in his fellow human beings, and in the entire created universe. He knows that the universe has come from God's hands —*the*

¹³Sg 2:15.

¹⁴Sg 1:6.

work of his hands—, that all things subsist in Christ, and that they have been made by Him and for Him. That is why the Christian feels impelled to love all things. Which is the same as saying that, if he loves them *with his whole heart*, he must inevitably interest himself in them *with his whole heart, and his whole soul*. All things were created by God and approved by Him as good.¹⁵

Now and then in the life of every man there are moments of happiness. And the most important of these moments is when certain basic things, which previously he believed *by faith*, are now believed or grasped by *vision*. This is what happens, for example, in a person's striving for holiness. A point comes when he realizes that the mercy of God is the only thing he can rely on and that on his own he can do nothing. As Bernanos' *Country Priest* said when he was dying: *All is Grace*. A great truth. And given that all is grace and that man is useless on his own and can do nothing for himself, there is no point in his becoming the centre and object of his personal preoccupations. It is much better, in any event, to be concerned about others: *He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it*.¹⁶

However, that is no reason why anyone should be allowed to give up making the effort. That would be utterly foolish, a great crime;

¹⁵ *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength, and above all things*. But it is simply a matter of putting everything in its proper place. God before all and in the first place, and then things through God. Genuine love always implies order and hierarchy. That is why Franciscan spirituality regarded things as *other creatures* and called them *brothers* and *sisters*: brother sun, brother fire, sister ants and even brother body. A spirituality which regards even *inanimate* beings as brethren is a spirituality which truly loves things, and in a way that has nothing to do with literary metaphors. There can be no doubt but that a spirituality like that is rooted in the deepest and most genuine truths of the gospel.

¹⁶ Mt 10:39.

for human life is destined always to be a hard and titanic struggle: *In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.*¹⁷ In fact it is a struggle against sin and against everything, for man's life on earth is a difficult, strenuous armed service.

True, human effort, on its own, does not amount to very much: *Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little thing, I will set you over much. . .*; though it acquires grandeur and a new meaning when it is seen as a loving act responding to love. That is why the servant is told: *Enter into the joy of your master.*¹⁸ It is not a matter of doing lots of different things, but only one thing, which is the greatest of all: giving one's own life, complete self-surrender. It does not matter whether one gives a little or a lot as long as one gives *everything one possesses*. Love—which is perfect reciprocity and mutual requital—can work in no other way, particularly if it is a matter of perfect love, like divine-human love. For one cannot respond to God with reciprocity by measuring out a quantity, one can only answer with *the lot*. The infinite abyss that lies between the Creator and the creature must be bridged if there is to be an intimate relationship between the two, and only love can make that possible. Through love a person is able to love another *totally* and to be requited to by that other person *totally, too*. Thanks to love, a person can address another as *thou* and hear her, in turn, pronounce the same *thou*. This happens in an absolute way in divine-human love. As far as love between human beings is concerned, there is no better nexus, no more effective source of dialogue, no better approach, no other way to do anything that can be seriously called mutual respect or recognition of the rights of the

¹⁷Heb 12:4.

¹⁸Mt 25:23.

other. Anything other than that is merely cheap rhetoric, playing with words, empty talk that serves no purpose.

It is better for man to forget himself and devote his efforts to worry himself about the others. And the importunate friend's shrewdness is to be praised; if he had not been astute enough to begin by pointing out that it was not a personal problem of his own that he was trying to solve, many people would have thought his request crazy, given the circumstances. Although clearly man has to begin his prayer with himself in mind, he needs to remember how the *Our Father* goes: none of the petitions to do with man refer to an individual; they are all couched in the plural: *our* daily bread; *our* trespasses which we want forgiven; the evil from which *we want to be delivered*... A Christian who prayed without bearing this in mind would end up in total failure: *Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, "it will remain alone"; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*¹⁹ From this it can be seen that one needs to die in order not to be alone; and one must not be alone if one is to bear much fruit. For being on one's own leads to fruitlessness, or vice versa; and the one way not to be left on one's own is to die to one's self. In the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Lk 18: 9–14), the Pharisee thought that he was better than the publican and others of his sort; whereas the publican thought that he truly was an evildoer and deserved to be shunned by others. Perhaps the Christian may not see his own life in terms of dignity, and instead sees it as something which is not worth much when one takes God and others into account. In the heel of the hunt, what does it matter? *No one is good but God alone*, and no one surely can think he is better than others. Man attains his salvation when he channels his concerns towards others and puts his trust in the mercy and goodness of God.

¹⁹Jn 12:24.

IV

The audacity and shamelessness of the importunate friend proved decisive in getting him what he wanted: *I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell you. . .*

There is no doubt about it: friendship was the reason why his request was successful. But it is no less certain that if he had not been bold and daring his friendship would not have worked, and the importunate friend would not have got the three loaves. And because the parable is about prayer and, in general, man's relationship with God, one cannot fail to conclude that, in situations like this, audacity must play a part; even an audacity that borders on shamelessness.

Daring and importunity have to do with the object and content of prayer, and particularly with the trust one has in Him to whom it is addressed. One needs to remember that the prideful audacity of the Pharisee praying in the temple (Lk 18: 9–14) is quite different from the shameless, bold confidence of the centurion (Mt 8: 5–13); of Bartimeus the blind man (Mk 10: 46–52); of the leper (Mt 8: 1–4); of

those who brought the paralytic on his stretcher (Mk 2: 1–12); of the repentant sinner who poured her tears over Jesus' feet (Lk 7: 36–50); or of the many other people who appear in the Gospel.¹

Moreover, this approach, which can really be described as daring impertinence, and which produced the happy result referred to, seems to be possible only when the person who adopts it is completely convinced that God is a Being who loves, because He is infinitely good, and that He is rich and munificent without limits.

If this is so, if God is infinitely good, and loves in the way he does, how could he not give man everything? *What father among you, if his son asks for a fish will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil. . .*

To the man who prays in this way God will give *whatever he needs*, as the parable literally states. But the consequences go beyond what is merely said. It is evident that love will endeavour to give the beloved person *all she needs*; although that on its own may not perhaps say very much. To make this assertion meaningful one needs to establish first *what precisely does the loved one need*: when will she feel so content that she can be said to have *whatever she needs*? It is not, of course, a matter of material needs or needs of any other order, even if it were possible to meet each and every such need as it arises. For man is never satisfied, he never thinks that now he has *whatever he needs*. Therefore, if a son asks his father for a fish

¹The Pharisee's boldness and pride cause him to place his confidence in himself, and that is why he thinks that God is in his debt; whereas the love others have is the reason why they bravely put their trust in the Lord. As can be seen, we have here two opposed kinds of audacity: one of pride and the other of love. The first trusts in itself absolutely *and in no other*, because it does not love; whereas the second trusts absolutely *in the other* and not in itself, because it loves.

he will be given a fish and not a serpent; and if he asks him for an egg he will be given an egg and not a scorpion. There is no question of that. But that is not the lesson the parable is teaching, and it is not until the end that one discovers the wonderful revelation of what infinite Love can do. It is not talking about Love's readiness to give the loved one simply *what she needs*; as we have seen, that phrase does not mean very much. What love or the lover really desires is *to give her everything*: and that is precisely what the loved one wants. Only the Bridegroom possesses this everything, and this everything is *nothing other than the Bridegroom's very self*:

*Draw me after you, let us make haste.
The king has brought me into his chambers.
We will exult and rejoice in you;
we will extol your love more than wine;
rightly do they love you.*

.....

*As an apple tree among the trees of the wood,
so is my beloved among young men.
With great delight I sat in his shadow,
and his fruit was sweet to my taste.*

.....

*Sustain me with raisins,
refresh me with apples;
for I am sick with love.*

.....

*Make haste, my beloved,
and be like a gazelle or a young stag
upon the mountains of spices.²*

²Sg 1:4; 2:3; 2:5; 8:14.

Purely human love, suffering from an imperfection which is made even worse by the evil of men, gives those it loves *good things* and *whatever they need*, though it simply interprets that phrase according to its own lights: *If you then, who are evil, know how to give good things to your children...* Divine love, on the other hand, gives *everything*, since it is perfect love; that is why Jesus ends the parable by saying: *How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!*

This brings us to what may be the key to the parable, its main lesson. This key, this lesson, is based on the most sublime and profound dimensions of the doctrine of love. For, if someone is *madly* in love and knows that Infinite Love³ responds in like manner, he knows that he can therefore ask for the *moon*,⁴ and he will get it.

Perfect prayer is bold, audacious and importunate, and it makes absolutely wild demands. It asks for whatever it likes, if that is its desire, and it desires the most unattainable things. The bride knows that she can expect *everything* from the Bridegroom so she does just that. Albeit in her own way, she realizes that a desire that limits itself to expecting only *whatever is necessary* has nothing to do with real love. *Whatever is necessary* would always mean a certain number of things —many, or even few—; whereas the truth is

³The loved person knows, then, that she is loved in an infinite way, for her Lover and his Love are infinite, which is the same as saying infinitely rich and munificent. Infinite Love is by definition infinitely liberal and generous. This means that he *can* give everything and then he *wants* to give everything. As we know, Love is Gift and It desires nothing but to give Itself. But It is infinite; and therefore It gives the infinite in an infinite way.

⁴On the lips of purely human love this is simply metaphor and hyperbole. However, in divine love the phrase would be perfectly factual; even almost insignificant, because it does not say everything: divine love gives much more than the moon.

that the bride desires *only one thing*. Our Lord very insightfully makes this point in one of the most disturbing and one of the deepest episodes in the Gospel: *Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful.*⁵ So it is true to say that perfect prayer is the most outlandish, audacious and inopportune thing imaginable: because true prayer *wants the lot*; it wants absolutely everything. This All, we can be sure, is for her nothing other than the Bridegroom, whose infinite Love is the only thing that can satisfy her desires which are equally infinite: *How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!* Because of this, and given that it is the only thing she desires, it is not surprising that the bride hastens anxiously to say:

*O that you would kiss me with
the kisses of your mouth!
For your love is better than wine.*⁶

Abbot William of Saint-Thierry, a great friend of Saint Bernard and someone very expert in these matters, gave the following gloss on the bride's words in his commentary on the *Song of Songs*: "I have seen his bright face upon me, I have seen the joy of his face and felt the grace flowing from his lips. Let there be no messengers, let nothing be put between us! *May he kiss me with a kiss of his mouth!* For, no longer can I bear, can I desire to receive the breath of a stranger's kiss. All other kisses leave an unpleasant taste, whereas the Bridegroom's kiss exhales something divine." As we can see, it

⁵Lk 10: 41-42.

⁶Sg 1:2.

is the Bridegroom, and the Bridegroom alone, that the bride desires with all her heart.⁷

The importunate friend's attitude and the requests he makes, despite being bold and indiscreet, are as far removed from perfect prayer as imperfect love is from perfect love; and the same can be said of his generous, though grumbling, friend. The importunate friend asked for three loaves at a very unsuitable time; and his friend eventually agreed to his request, though not very enthusiastically. But the prayer of someone in love is much bolder and much more demanding than that because it dares to ask for nothing less than total Love, the Holy Spirit, the All of everything. . . , and it obtains it: *How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!* Imperfect love has low expectations, and it receives as little as it expects; whereas genuine love expects everything, and therefore it receives everything. And so our Lord says: *Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you. For, everyone who asks receives; everyone who searches finds; everyone who knocks will have the door opened.* Which leads to the conclusion that if there is anything the importunate and impertinent friend should be reproached for it is . . . his meagre impertinence, his limited importunity.

It is permissible to think that our Lord's exhortation in the parable to practise boldness and audacity in prayer is also an exhortation to love with perfect love. For when love seeks the person it loves, it is capable of being bold, audacious and even impertinent,

⁷ *Vidi inquit super me faciem ejus illuminatam, concepi vultus ejus lætitiā, sensi diffusam gratiam in labiis ejus. Nemo interveniat, nihil intercurrat, "ipse me osculetur osculo oris sui"; quia jam ultra non sustineo, non suscipio spiritum osculi alieni. Cætera mihi omnia pravum quid olet; Sponsi vero osculum divinum quid redolet.* William of Saint-Thierry, "Exposé sur le Cantique des Cantiques," in *Sources Chrétiennes*, p. 113.

because it allows nothing to restrain it. William of Saint-Thierry said apropos of the bride: “Like the Egyptian woman, who once came into Solomon’s presence, the sinful and converted soul comes to Christ. She is welcomed in all solemnity as a spouse, with a generous dowry, and brought into chambers filled with royal treasures. Suckled there at the breasts of the Bridegroom, and smothered in perfumed ointments, the name of the Bridegroom is revealed to her, and the mystery of that name.”⁸ He says “suckled at the breasts of the Bridegroom,” following the text of the Vulgate which goes on to comment: *Quia meliora sunt ubera tua vino*,⁹ which is precisely what Saint Bernard would say later. And in line with them is the whole Medieval Age and a tradition which includes all the Fathers and goes back to Origen and even further, to the very origins of Christianity.

The parable of the importunate friend is a rather strange and intriguing one. It begins by describing the impertinent behaviour of a man in difficulties, and it ends up by revealing the deepest mysteries of true love. Here we can see how the sublime language of our Lord—who is able to use in his teaching all the vicissitudes,

⁸*Sicut Ægyptia illa venit aliquando ad Salomonem, sic animam peccatricem conversam venisse ad Christum; et in Sponsam solemniter exceptam, liberaliter dotatam, et in cellaria introductam, ubi regiae divitiæ continebantur, ibique uberibus Sponsi lactatam, et perfusam odore unguentorum, revelatum ei nomen Sponsi, et mysterium nominis.* William of Saint-Thierry, op. cit. p. 114.

⁹Sg 1:1. The Neo-Vulgate text gives a variant reading here, one found also in modern critical editions: *Nam meliores sunt amores tui vino*. Thus, the (Spanish) Cantera-Iglesias edition says: *Cierto, mejor que el vino son tus amores*. And the (French) *Bible de Jérusalem* (the Paris 1973 edition) says: *Tes amours sont plus délicieuses que le vin*. The *New Jerusalem Bible* (New York, 1985) has *for your love-making is sweeter than wine*, where love-making can mean wooing or sexual relations. Anyway, it clearly has to do with caresses or a love-relationship, in the strictest sense, between people who love one another.

great and small, of the human heart and trivial events of daily life—turns *importunity* and *impertinence* into something that can lead to the discovery of the only truly *pertinent* thing: real Love, and the incredible secret that that Love desires to give itself to human beings and to be requited by them.

When read attentively, the parable of the importunate friend gives one a feeling of nostalgia for times and events gone by. The parable speaks about perfect love; about a prayer imbued with love and therefore a bold, audacious prayer; about demanding friendship that asks for everything because it gives everything. . . In the last analysis it speaks about the incredible mystery of the Love God has offered man; or, if you wish, about the ineffable truths of the Gospel. Ineffable because they are *supernatural*, which is the same as saying that they are beyond anything man could have hoped for or attained.

The content of the parable, like that of the entire Gospel, is eminently *supernatural*. Which means that we are far, far away from any purely natural ethic; sound though a natural ethic may be, it is surpassed and transcended by the ethic of the Gospel. The Gospel ethic, which targets the very depths of man's heart and of the heart of God, does not make the main objects of its exposition such themes as human rights, social justice, peaceful coexistence, democracy or ecology. It makes no effort to jettison the supernatural content of Revelation so as to limit its reference to things that modern man is

predisposed to accept. It is common knowledge that modern Christianity prefers to project itself to the world boasting that its main inspiration comes from merely natural ethics, even if they be as venerable as the Aristotelian version. Of course, it would never occur to anyone to think that Jesus Christ was in any way opposed to any kind of justice: legal, commutative, distributive or even social, even though the last-mentioned might seem to have acquired its credentials only much later. Social justice deserves every respect; it would be wrong to argue here that Christ refused to adopt the role of a dispenser of justice according to the Synoptics account: *One of the multitude said to him, "Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Man, who has made me a judge or divider over you?"*¹ Any exegete would explain that our Lord's point here is simply that he does not want to be distracted from his principal task of bringing salvation. No less a one than Saint Ambrose, for example, said in this connexion that *he who descended for divine reasons is perfectly right to reject earthly ones.*² It is true that Saint Ambrose is too far back in time, and completely out of touch with the enormous complexity of modern Social Teaching, which has so many things to say and has said so many already, that would never have even entered the saint's mind. Alas the indisputable advantages of the progress brought about in the knowledge of Revelation, a progress much facilitated by the contribution of experts in the social sciences.

And yet, in those dark and less fortunate centuries when there was no such thing as progress, people simply thought that New Testament revelation had exposed the very root of things and the very core of the human heart; surpassing, transcending, and making pos-

¹Lk 12: 13–14.

²St. Ambrose, *Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam*, n. 122.

sible, at last, all that was good in pre–evangelical naturalistic ethics. Rather like what happened to Saint Paul in his controversies with those who thought that the Old Law still applied. As the Apostle saw it, the Law had been relatively good—it was really more necessary than good—, until the fullness of Revelation came and it had to be set aside, in the same sort of way as a child ceases to be under the charge of a servant or a tutor when he reaches his majority. There are still some people today who think that Saint Paul was right. But, as regards what we are discussing here, no one will deny that the situations are different, and even less, as we have already said, the progress made over twenty centuries of history which has inevitably influenced our more complete knowledge of Revelation. Maybe there is still some convinced extremist who will go so far as to argue that the two situations are not different: the earlier one was simply a doctrinal controversy among believers who had a difference of opinion; whereas nowadays what we have is a crisis of faith which has led people *to kneel down before the world*, as Maritain, now forgotten, put it. There is always going to be someone who has unusual ideas. Fortunately the world today is not inclined to listen to extremists of any kind, never mind those with convictions, who are leading opponents of the modern philosophical discovery that it is better to have no convictions about anything.

The profound changes that have come about in modern times have opened the way for things which, in other eras, would have been unthinkable. To give a few examples: ecclesiastics getting involved in politics and collective Pastoral Letters on political matters; debate among the Hierarchy on whether the use of contraceptives is licit to avoid the spread of disease;³ numerous addresses by Pastors on

³A moral theology *casus* whose solution, unfortunately, can no longer count on the contribution of the now much reviled Saint Alphonsus Mary de Liguori.

the subject of human rights; and a flood of ecclesiastical documents which *officially* declare that the disease of AIDS is not a punishment from God.⁴ Some will say that it is going too far to put things like political Pastorals and AIDS in the same category. That may well be, in fact they are probably right. And yet one could also object that physical illnesses are logged in clinics and hospitals, whereas the harm done to souls is something that cannot be assessed by statistics: it is known only to God. As for the Church intruding into purely political matters, one can easily see that we are not talking seriously here. One does not need to be an expert in History to know, for example, that even in his day Pope Saint Leo the Great went out to the gates of Rome to meet Attila, and a very successful meeting it was. And there is no need to point out that that was not a matter of politics but of sheer survival: the instinct of self-preservation was at work; although it is true that many lives were at risk, including the Pope's own life, that does not mean the Pope did not set an honorable precedent. One could apply to the Church what Saint Augustine declared about truth: always old and always new. And

⁴Some have dared to say that it is impossible to claim to know, especially when there has been an *official* statement on the matter, whether something is or is not the result of a divine design to punish unless there be some type of revelation, even if it be a private one. But public, official Revelation is definitively closed; and, as far as private revelations are concerned, it would be an abuse and of no avail to try to impose them on others. People who take such a view say that the very most that can be done here is to propose theories and to try to arrive at a judgment by looking at effects and results. But if that approach is taken, they say, the only hypothesis that one can confidently reject here is that which says that AIDS is a blessing from God.

Clearly those who argue along those lines are sadly unaware of the findings of modern *theologies of goodness*: God is good, everyone is good, hell is merely a real possibility, and everyone is a Christian even though he may not be aware of it (or even if he has no desire to know it), etc.

just as the saint complained about his discovering the Truth too late in life, one must also bemoan the fact that Christians today are equally slow to bear the weight of their own Church's problems; and what is even worse: slow to familiarize themselves with the, happily, very considerable body of doctrine now available for solving each and every social problem.

Yet, despite so much progress, the time may come when it will be useful to read again, carefully, the parable of the importunate friend. And even, while one is about it, the entire New Testament. This may bring people to speak once again about prayer, love of the cross, evangelical poverty, the perfect joy of the beatitudes, love for others. . . and love for God. When all is said and done, one can rest assured that the Church—which has always managed to get through, animated by the Holy Spirit—will continue to tell the world what it has to be told, without being overly concerned whether it is to its liking or not, free at last from any concern over what is said about her by the powerful mass media that the System controls.

Once again, as ever, it will be the little people, the humble, those who suffer and those with a clean heart who will rescue the Church. Not career ecclesiastics, or Pastors steeped in politics, or experts on pastoral policy. She is not going to carry out her mission by political mediation, by promoting pacifism, or by desperate efforts to try at all costs to put her up to date. In the last analysis, only prayer and holiness can prevent the ship of Peter from utter wreckage.

And who knows. . . ? Although it may sound crazy, perhaps Pastors would get somewhere if, instead of insisting so much on the defence of human rights and democracy, they were to concentrate their efforts on explaining to the Christian people the parable of the importunate friend. True, a Christian will always have to fight to protect sound values, including, therefore, human rights. And it

will always be pleasant to re-read Aristotelian ethics. Though it would be equally nice to know whether Thomas More really thought his *Utopia* possible, or Plato his *Republic*.⁵ This leaves unanswered the question of the values contained in naturalistic ethics: can they really work in a world which has ditched the values of the supernatural Christian ethic? Up to now experience shows that they cannot. However, modern Idealistic philosophies (particularly Marxism) look to a future in which man manages to stop being alienated so as to become *by his own efforts* what he is and *nothing less than what he is*. Is this a dawn nowhere to be seen, or even something that is receding into the distance? Perhaps. It is interesting to note, however, that it is philosophies which claim to be *realist*, and bitter enemies of all *Idealism*, that prefer to live in the *tomorrow* instead of in the *here and now*. Something to bear in mind.

But the madness of paganism looks like common sense when one considers the abyss into which so many Christians have fallen today. They have renounced every last trace of supernatural life in order to return to the world, and have made Saint Peter's terrible verdict a reality: *For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overpowered, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. It*

⁵What exactly *Utopia* meant for Thomas More himself, a Christian writer and a saint recognized by the Church, is a matter of historical curiosity. The key may lie in the origin and meaning of the very word *utopos*: nowhere. By giving that title to his work, Thomas More may have meant that the famous island and its inhabitants not only never existed anywhere outside his imagination, but also that it could not even have existed otherwise.

*has happened to them according to the true proverb: "The dog turns back to his own vomit, and the sow is washed only to wallow in the mire."*⁶

But let us return again to the importunate friend and conclude these reflections. It is interesting to note that, according to the parable, the friend who arrived very late at night and needed to eat *had come on a journey*, which is the same as saying that he was passing through. This is another of those enchanting details which causes us to sigh with relief and comfort. Those who are wending their way along the hazardous path of life need the company and help of friends, who are also their brothers. It is reassuring to know that, all along this path, whether on the halts and stops one may have to make in the middle of the night, or at any point in the day, one can always count on the help of a *friend* who is making the same journey. Until we all eventually meet our Lord to enjoy the great feast of the Kingdom:

*If you make for the hillock,
allow me to accompany you, pilgrim,
let us see if he whom I love
give us of his wine to drink
as we reach the end of the road together.*⁷

⁶2 Pet 2: 20-22.

⁷In the original:

*Si vas hacia el otero,
deja que te acompañe, peregrino,
a ver si el que yo quiero
nos da a beber su vino
en acabando juntos el camino.*

LOVE
FOR THE TRUTH

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths.

(2 Tim 4: 3-4)

I

What I am going to say here is not meant to be disgruntled criticism of the Church. It does not make sense to criticize a mother, much less a mother one loves. And I love the Church. I was born into the Church and grew up in the faith; in the Church I came to know God, and in her my life has found its happiness and its meaning. Besides, given that I belong to the Church, her glories and her misfortunes are mine too. Bearing in mind also that I have consecrated my entire life to her, then I must throw in my lot with what happens in the Church —the good and the bad. On the other hand I am not a theologian or a philosopher, not a historian or a writer; which means that any criticism I level could not even pretend to leave a dent if it took issue with the brilliant teachings of fashionable theologians.

The only thing I want to do is express the pain I feel at certain things which are happening in the Church. Due perhaps to the fact that I do not understand them, these things cause me great suffering, and therefore I do not want to end my life without putting my feelings on record. Moreover, I do not think that I am the only

one to have these feelings: I think they are shared by many Christians. I would call them *anonymous Christians*, but giving the term a very different meaning from that used by fashionable theology; I call them anonymous Christians simply because it is quite likely that no one will listen to their complaints, any more than they listen to mine. And, of course, a person who sheds tears of true sorrow is not concerned about whether people are listening to him: he simply weeps.

The sentiments of pain expressed here do not claim to be a list of the evils the Church is suffering from at the present time. Apart from the fact that a complete list would be too long, and probably would serve no purpose, I am not equipped to tackle such a task. Therefore I will confine myself to saying what I think about a limited number of evils, my only intention being to bear personal witness to faith. And I will not try to convince anyone because it would be a vain attempt. The true anonymous Christians referred to earlier agree with me already and do not need to be convinced. As regards the others, it is not going to be I who gets them to change their minds. So, what I will go on to say is simply a *protestation of faith* I make before God, before my conscience, and before men of good will who may perhaps see eye to eye with me.

I wish to state at the outset that I fully subscribe to the Church. This means that, even though my views are sincerely held, I am ready to commit them to oblivion should the Church think that I am mistaken. I am referring here, of course, to the Church, to that body which is infallible and has the right and the duty to govern and teach; I am not referring to particular ecclesiastics and theologians whose well-known ideology and shameless subservience to the System lead me to think that they are not going to share my opinions. Let it be said that it fills me with joy to think that the true Church will

agree with what I say here... or at least with almost everything. She, after all, is the first to be aware of her need for permanent conversion, as the ancient and admitted doctrine of *Ecclesia semper reformanda* attests.

II

According to Saint John's Gospel, when Jesus saw Nathanael coming to meet Him, He said to the people around him, referring to Nathanael: *Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile.*¹ This suggests that our Lord regards the truth more as *something tangible* than as a mere *moral quality*. He does not simply say that Nathanael is a sincere Israelite (the very opposite of a liar), he goes further: Here is an Israelite in whom there *is* no trace of guile; in whom the truth *dwells*.

So, it seems that the New Testament gives the truth an entity higher than a mere moral quality would have. Our Lord said of himself: *I am the Truth.*² And New Testament revelation quite normally uses the expression *doing the truth.*³ And our Lord spoke about *the complete truth,*⁴ to which the Advocate whom he would send us from the Father would lead us by the hand, as it were. An

¹Jn 1:47.

²Jn 14:6.

³Jn 3:21; Eph 4:15; 1 Jn 1:6.

⁴Jn 16:13.

Advocate who is none other than the Holy Spirit, whom our Lord also called the *Spirit of Truth*.⁵ From this we can deduce that, for the New Testament, truth is not so much a quality as a thing —*res*— which has also the nature of a person, of whom one can therefore even bear witness (Jn 5:33; 18:37). This leads us to the conclusion that, for the New Testament, more than telling the truth it is a matter of doing the truth and being in the truth: ontological truth, not just logical or moral truth.⁶

When the truth is viewed in this light, as a gift that Christ obtained for us, we immediately discover that it needs to be accompanied by another element: man's freedom, which is the condition that must operate if the gifts of God are to be received. For love-gifts —like everything that proceeds from Love— have to be received in that condition of absolute freedom proper to love. God's loving respect for man's freedom is translated into the fact that the divine gifts can only happen when they are freely accepted.⁷ Therefore, the Truth is given to man only when he sincerely seeks and desires it.

And that is not all. For, since truth is identical with God who is infinite Truth, it must be loved in a special way; this means that opening oneself to truth is not simply opening oneself to one of love's gifts, but to Love itself. For the truth is not something which is simply accepted and received out of love; it is, rather, self-opening and a self-giving to Love itself. It is not just a matter of a moral deci-

⁵Jn16:13.

⁶The division of the concept of truth into ontological, logical and ethical or moral truth has become classical. Ontological truth is a property of being, or transcendental: *Ens et verum convertuntur*.

⁷Strictly speaking, this has to do not so much with absolute respect for man's freedom as with being an exigency of love itself. Love-gifts only make sense in the context of the reciprocity of love.

sion whereby one accepts or does not accept, does or does not do the truth; it is something that *one can only do in love* (Eph 4:15); and therefore one can live in the truth only when one loves it. Therefore, when the truth is not loved—not just done or not done, but *loved*—one immediately falls into deceit and perdition (2 Thess 2:10).

Turning one's back on the truth is therefore nothing less than turning one's back on God, and vice versa. This explains the fact that when men reject God they no longer recognize *the truth*, but only *their truth*, which is the one each makes for himself. Really, if there is no God other than man, it logically follows that every man can make up his own truth. This leads to the moral subjectivism of today, according to which the only truth there is is that which each person decides by himself. Taking this one step further, because human thought cannot escape the laws of pure logic, one arrives at a most distressing conclusion: that not even this can be a truth for all, *it can only be a truth for him who so decides it*. Which is the same as saying there is really no such thing as truth, and no one can claim to have it; this is the dead-end street our world has gone down.

Now, if one can do the truth and be in the truth only for love's sake, any kind of rejection of truth is a lack of love. If the Truth is God, and God is Love, rejection of the Truth is rejection of Love. So, no matter what anyone may say, contempt for the truth is not so much a matter of the understanding as something to do with the option of the will. Truth is not rejected because one fails to see it, but rather because one does not want it. And the so-called intellectual option is simply a path that the understanding takes, but it only takes it once it has been chosen and determined by the

will.⁸ This brings us to the conclusion that opting for falsehood is never an indifferent action; it is a voluntary choice of lack of love or even of hatred. It is impossible to reject Love by taking a neutral stance, and that is why it is not possible to say that contempt for the truth is simply an intellectual position a person takes: *The light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light.*⁹ It follows that the devil (the father of lies and the father of all liars) according to our Lord is a murderer *from the beginning*;¹⁰ so that lying is put on the same level as hatred and even homicide.¹¹

It is not surprising therefore that man becomes a liar as soon as he turns his back on God. And, given that nowadays the world

⁸And often it has more to do with *option* than with *intellectual*. Without trying to get into philosophical questions which are out of place here, it is undeniable that the human understanding finds itself before two roads —having to choose the path of truth or that of error— none of which is determinant or coercive. Certainly the path of truth is not; its acceptance is, as we have said, a matter of love. That is why all possible apologetical proofs are of no avail if the person is not humbly and lovingly open to believing. Following Saint Augustine on this point, I am more in favour of *Crede ut intelligas* (suitably nuanced) than of *Intellige ut credas*. It is not that there is a lack of evidence for the truth to impose itself on reason (I am not questioning here either the possibility of proving the existence of God by reason, or the possibility of natural religion, or the motives of credibility of faith, which are truths that cannot be doubted), but the pride of the human heart is such that it is capable of rejecting any evidence provided to it (Rom 1: 19–22).

⁹Jn 3: 19–21.

¹⁰Jn 8:44.

¹¹Here one can see clearly that falsehood is a consequence of a lack of love. For, just as the lover is not afraid to face death to prove his love (Jn 15:13), a person who is unloving does not hesitate to go so far as to cause the death of the other. Hence falsehood, or rejection of God, is a form of murder; and our Lord goes so far as to say that clearly.

has gone away from God as never before, this means that it is living in lies and living on lies as never before. Never has man been as deceived and as seduced as he is today. True, it must be said that a big element in this deceit is the fact that the people who experience it accept it. Techniques for manipulating the masses have been brought to such perfection that it is almost impossible for people not to be influenced by them. People do suspect, to some degree or other, that these techniques are being used on them, or they try not to think about it; but they accept them anyway and end up thinking the way the System wants them to think; or, more accurately, they end up thinking nothing, because the System takes it upon itself to give them guidelines on everything, after doing its level best to make sure no one thinks for himself. Television and radio, which are as firmly under the control of the System as the press is, are operating twenty-four hours a day. Teaching is programmed right from the start at the school so that the child never learns to study or investigate on his own; as can be seen, for example, in the fact that “homework” is banned, not to mention the whole business of manipulated books and “selected” reading that the children have to do.¹² And all of this is nothing compared to the enormous apparatus of lies set up by *language terrorism*, or the modern technique of manipulating language so as to automatically disqualify or alternatively give credence to persons and concepts, without any need of proofs or explanations. The logical use of concepts has been forced to give way to the bogeyman of fear of words which modern terrorists cleverly brandish to cause forceful effects over masses who are already used to not thinking. When a child is growing up, a point comes when

¹²Which is the only kind of reading material they are allowed to know. In Spain the material is selected within parameters of leftist ideology and sex; so much so that, as Socialist Secretaries of education see it, if a writer or a poet does not fit within those parameters, he or she is not given any consideration.

he ceases to be afraid of certain things because he realizes they are empty words which mean nothing, like witches and fairies...; but this is not true of man in the mass: he never realizes that he is being frightened by words which are just figments of the imagination.¹³

Within Catholicism there are many, ecclesiastics included, who have allowed themselves to be led astray by lies. It would make a long list. Lay catechists, priests and religious, theologians, Faculties and Universities of theology, bishops and even cardinals —all teaching doctrines which are often at odds with perennial dogma or morals taught by the Church. There is no denying that contemporary Catholicism gives the impression that doctrine has changed, or at least the teaching of doctrine has changed. But the Church cannot deceive or be deceived; so what needs to be done is to ex-

¹³And, so, to give one example, it is interesting to look at the way the word *conservative* is treated. In a political context, and even more so in a religious or ecclesiastical one, if someone is termed a conservative it is enough for him to be disqualified outright. It is beside the point that no one knows exactly what the word means, or bothers when using it to indicate which of its various meanings and applications he is using. This prejudiced approach rejects any nuances; it offers no proofs to justify itself; but it is devastatingly effective. Everyone accepts it without question and it also has the additional virtue of putting its victims into a fright. If Saint Vincent of Lerins were to appear today and offer his *Commonitorium* and his famous *nihil innovetur nisi quod traditum est*, he would be rejected out of hand.

The same sort of thing happens with the terms *progressive* and *reactionary*, or with *ultra-right* and its equivalent *extreme right*. In this connexion the System would seem to hold that all right-wing is almost always indefectibly ultra-right, whereas it hardly ever talks about the contrary term, *ultra-left*. Perhaps because it takes it for granted that all extremisms have to do with the right-wing, which the System always regards as extremist by nature and in whatever form it comes in. As for the so-called *centre right* position, which seems to be an exception to the above rule, in Spain at least its content is rather leftist, very little centrist, and has practically nothing rightist about it; perhaps that is why it is tolerated.

plain the nature of that infallibility, which cannot be denied.¹⁴ Too many Catholics who have received and practised a Catholic faith which they regarded always as the one true faith are now pained to see that quite different things are taught and practised; many of them have lost the faith or have ceased to practise it, because they simply cannot cope with what is going on. Dogma, morality and liturgy are being rocked by an ideological earthquake and a very widespread anarchy. Meanwhile the official Church scarcely has had time to erect a dyke to contain the raging waters, preoccupied as she is with protecting human rights, acting as peace arbitrator between nations, trying to bring about the unity of Europe, making sure that the demands of ethnic minorities are met, or being the spokesman for the cause of ecology. Now more than ever we Catholics need to pray to God, asking him to grant us a great love for truth and a profound sense of faith. We must keep in mind, at the same time, that faith in the Church is also one of the articles of the Creed. As someone rather ironically put it: some mysteries of salvation, such as the Trinity, have to be believed in absolutely *because they cannot be seen*; whereas others, like the Church, have to be held just as firmly *because they are seen too much*.

Perhaps the core of the problem lies in the fact that the modern world has chosen to ignore the Philosophy of realism or common sense. Man is no longer ready to recognize his dependence on the *reality* of things, just as he is no longer ready to recognize his condi-

¹⁴These assertions are true. Besides, History seems to be repeating itself. Saint Jerome, even in his time, apropos of Arianism, lamented that *the whole world groaned and to its surprise it found it was Arian*. And Saint Vincent of Lerins confirmed this: *This occurred when the poison of the Arian heresy contaminated, not just some small region, but the whole world, to the point that almost all the Latin bishops gave way in the face of the heresy; some through being forced to do so, and other priests being cowed and deceived*.

tion as a creature regarding a transcendent God. All this underlies the approach adopted by Idealist philosophy and its derivatives. It should not be forgotten that the devil, *the father of lies and a murderer from the beginning*, also refused to recognize that he was a creature and pretended to be like God. That is precisely what the Big Lie was; all other lies stem from it, as does the whole apparatus of manipulation that nowadays distorts reality.

One of the most powerful forms of this manipulation is that of language, as we said before. Used to undermine faith, it employs ideas drawn from all kinds of sources and couches them in special terminology which is apparently harmless and even good. We know well that falsehood has always been ready to disguise itself as truth; by its very nature it seems it must do that. It has been said that one of the devil's favourite disguises is that of the angel of light. That is how falsehood, which wears the appearances of truth and goodness, easily manages to worm its way into the hearts of those who let themselves be deceived. And I say those who let themselves be deceived because —and here I repeat myself— people who are deceived are never entirely blameless. God never lets anyone fall into error unless there is some acceptance by that person of the lie involved: *The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are to perish, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends upon them a strong delusion, to make them believe what is false, so that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.*¹⁵

Our Lord himself warned us that there are false prophets, well disguised in sheep's clothing, who are in fact ravenous wolves

¹⁵2 Thess 2: 9–12.

(Mt 7:15). We know very well that falsehood normally dresses itself in a semblance of goodness which sometimes can even be dazzling. We see this, for example, in the language of Rahner —brilliant, though esoteric, unintelligible and self-important—, a theologian whose writings empty revelation of its content, replacing it with an overpouring of historicist, idealist and rationalist ideas which have destroyed the faith of countless Christians.¹⁶ It is amazing to see how easily people have forgotten Saint Paul's warning to the Colossians: *See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.*¹⁷ Deceit has no qualms about using biblical language or the language specific to the Christian message. For example, it is now so common that not an eyebrow is raised when the Gospel is used to promote Marxism. There is nothing surprising about that if one considers that Marxist ideology underlies many theological texts and treatises, a good deal of catechesis, and even the language of official documents produced by certain Curiae. It is a great pity that the little world of *progressive* Catholics does not realize that Marxism is an antinatural and reactionary ideology, which carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction in a more or less near future. As always, it is very clear that the loss of faith leads to intellectual blindness and stupidity.

¹⁶To my mind Rahner makes very good use of a technique which, all things considered, is quite an old one. Instead of speaking clearly he makes insinuations, and instead of outright denial he prefers to call into question important issues and leave the matter in the air; besides, dogmas that he more or less clearly denies in one place, he accepts in others. And then the old ploy: by allowing everyone to draw his own conclusion he avoids, on the one hand, the danger of possible official censure of his teaching, while, on the other, he attracts to his side those who are more at home with the speculative frivolity of modern philosophies and with compromises with the world —people ill at ease with the truths of faith.

¹⁷Col 2:8.

This situation reminds me of what is said in Chapter 13 of the Book of Revelation. In the last days the Beast will put his number on men's foreheads, and there will be very few who avoid being marked and kneeling to adore it. Independently of when the end of History will actually come, we Christians clearly need to have urgent recourse to the authentic Magisterium of the Church and to the most genuine teachings of Saint Thomas Aquinas. As regards Thomism in particular, which has for centuries been recommended by the Church —recommended only, but repeatedly—, I for my part feel that recourse to Saint Thomas has become a matter of sheer survival.

As I have already said, modern thought puts a question mark against everything. It does not accept that there is such a thing as absolute truth. No one is allowed to claim that he has metaphysical or religious certainties. The only certainty that is permitted is the certainty that everything is doubtful, uncertain, unreliable and, at most, probable. Therefore the Gospel is put into question, and our Lord's words are examined under the microscope in exegetical laboratories, with lamentable results. Of course, I am not referring here to the achievements of good scholarly exegesis, which has done so much to deepen the knowledge of the Word of God; I refer to certain kinds of exegesis of laboratory which, inspired more by scientific enthusiasm than by faith, treat the Bible as if it were something purely human, with results which would not be so disastrous were it not that so many foolish people are inclined to believe them.

This problem arises when people forget that the Bible is a living organism, a book inspired by the Holy Spirit which contains the authentic Word of God addressed to man. It is quite crazy to try to dissect it with a scalpel, as if it were bits of a cadaver. A cadaver is not a man, and one can find anything in it except *life*, which means

that it is no longer useful for trying to understand the true nature of the man whose body it was. The Bible should be studied with the help of as much scholarly equipment as possible, provided one approaches it *with faith* and not forgetting that it is the Word of God, which is alive and active (Heb 4:12). It is very interesting, for example, to see what happens with what have come to be called the *ipsa verba* of our Lord. What could have been a legitimate scholarly exercise has become a ridiculous mania, a neurotic hang-up. Bent on reaching the innermost lode of authentic words of our Lord (original language, literalness, and if possible the physical sounds, with their tones and timbre), the point arrives when sheer logic dictates that the *ipsa verba* are no longer enough. One has to go further, one now has to seek the *ipsissima verba*, in a desperate “scientific” attempt to satisfy both those who are ever eager for the most rarefied scholarship and those concerned about the most genuine piety. And, as one might expect, these people can never get enough of new discoveries, thus compelling the unfortunate exegetes to keep on desperately plumbing the sources to find the ultimate quintessence of authenticity. It all becomes a matter of piling superlatives on top of one another: “*ipsa*,” “*ipsissima*,” “even more *ipsissima*” . . . , which is rather reminiscent of the old joke about the genuine coffee which is proffered as very, very good coffee, although it is not very, very, very good coffee.

So, the only way we Christians can steer clear of all this is not to get involved in the game at all. The moment we let vacillation or uncertainty enter our soul, we are succumbing to lies. If we allow the Bible to be questioned, by accepting—for example—that the Gospel does not really contain our Lord’s true words but at best his thought, as interpreted by Saint John, which is different in turn from that same thought as interpreted by Saint Paul, who believed

that the Second Coming was imminent, while our Lord, for another thing, was not very convinced of his divinity... etc. etc., one heads down the road which will lead to lose either one's mind or one's faith. Everyone knows that if one agrees to fight on ground chosen by the enemy, using weapons of his choice and conditions that he lays down, one is admitting defeat in advance.

And yet it is common practice today to accept, from the onset, one's enemy's points of view. For example: the Document on Liberation Theology¹⁸ begins by saying that the Church is on the side of the oppressed and that it recognizes the existence of social classes.¹⁹ Even allowing that my interpretation may be too alarmist, I think that everyone will agree that if we accept not just Marxist language but even Marxist ideology—which is, radically, Manichean—we might as well consider ourselves defeated in advance. The Church was founded to save all men, given that Christ redeemed all: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is*

¹⁸Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on certain aspects of the Theology of Liberation*, 6 April 1984.

¹⁹It is interesting to note that the Church's "recognition" of the existence of social classes is a sort of sociological equivalent to the recognition of the existence of the *carica papaya* by the botanist. Particularly since what is at issue here is a social fact which is morally neutral. Even if it were not neutral, it has to do anyway with the mere recognition of a fact (rather as the Church recognizes that prostitution exists, as a social fact), in which case the assertion is the kind of statement that really says nothing: social classes exist just as sporting events and street demonstrations exist, which are other social facts. Harmless assertions of this type, which are very much in fashion these days, do not compromise those who make them, of course. But if it is not simply a matter of recognizing a social fact but rather of making a value judgment, then we have to say that what we have here is recognition of the existence of the class struggle. That could open the way for someone to think that the Marxist interpretation of History and society is being accepted as valid.

*neither male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*²⁰ In this sense at least no classes exist for the Church. And even if a sharp distinction ever did need to be drawn between good men and bad men, the Church cannot not exclude the latter—who in this case would be the bourgeoisie—, as our Lord said: *I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.*²¹

I for my part am resolved to keep on reading the Gospel as I have always done: with simplicity of heart. I live by faith and I am not going to question it, just as I am not going to question my life. Each person has to be responsible for how he reads the Gospel and for the use he makes of it. I accept completely all the books the Church accepts as canonical, and I try to comment on the texts in a straightforward way, taking them in their obvious content. I try to take them on board with all the richness of their meaning and in line with the way the Church has interpreted them over the course of twenty centuries, that is to say: without omissions, timidity, fear, horizontalist approaches, or complexes; and of course not worrying about *their having to be acceptable to the world of today*. A good prayer session, I find, helps me to understand the Gospel better than a hundred hours spent on reading fashionable theologians and exegetes. Of course, I am ready to respect the tolerant smiles of any intellectuals who happen to read this, although I also reserve the right to laugh at the appropriate time. But I do not accept that the mysteries of salvation need to be structured according to the pattern of modern man, nor that God and Revelation should submit to the judgment and limitations of the human understanding. The

²⁰Gal 3:28.

²¹Mt 9:13.

human understanding, left to its mere potentialities, can only effect doctrines which have purely human scope.²²

Not so long ago there came into my hands one of those manuals of theology written —seemingly to punish us for our sins— by certain important fashionable theologians, of the sort who pontificate when they speak and write, having arrogated to themselves the position of the one and supreme Magisterium. Almost no one dares to take issue with them, because it is well known that imbeciles and proud people meet no opposition when they lord it over the world of fools.²³ But when it does happen that some timid, isolated, voice is raised in opposition, it is immediately suppressed, using against it the weapon of ridicule —lamprooning by the use of manipulated language— or

²²This is quite different from the need to address the man of today, or any other time, in his own language. On the one hand, catechesis and preaching need to speak the same language as the person they address; on the other hand, they should try to show him that *his problems* are already recognized in the sacred text, and their *pertinent solutions* are also given there. As I see it, neither of these two things happens very much in the Church today. Leftist preachers, or *progressive* preachers, preach in a language and pose problems that are as esoteric and utopian as the Marxist ideology on which they feed; quite often they even tend to create conflict where none exists, and to foment class struggle where there is none, in line with the well-known policy and theses of the main ideologists of Marxist tendency. As for rightist or *conservative* preachers, they tend to useedulcorated bland language, concentrating on pious topics and insipid or irrelevant “problems” which have nothing to do with the real life and the real concerns of man. The latter tendency has become the sole trait of an “episcopal language” which is fairly widespread today.

²³A fairly populous world, unfortunately. There are many these days who respond in enthusiastic admiration when a current fashionable theologian is invoked, without worrying very much about the fact that that particular idol may not be faithful to sound doctrine or to the elementary demands of common sense. Such is the power of the *Magister dixit* that there is no need to exercise one's powers of discernment.

by the conspiracy of silence.²⁴ Among many other inconsistencies these texts said, for example in the chapter on the eucharist, that, because the concepts of substance and accident are contradictory, it is no longer possible to retain the concept of the real presence as it has always been understood. No explanations were given for this supposed contradiction, assuredly because the manual considered them unnecessary, given that they were self-evident: *Magister dixit et bene dixit*. To my mind this system of destroying the dogma by undermining its philosophical foundations, without any good reason or proof, is not very honest. Although Millán Puelles says²⁵ that the supposed contradiction between the concepts of substance and

²⁴There are some who argue that the magisterial role of the Church today has taken two clearly distinct directions. On the one hand, there are dogma and morals, which have always been specific areas in which the Magisterium operates but which now seem to be the preserve of *vedettes* theologians, who are the only ones to take doctrinal positions on these matters. On the other hand, there is a wide field of doctrine —on subjects where it is very questionable whether the Church has any competence at all— which the more or less official Magisterium seems to have taken over: questions to do with pacifism, with unity among nations, democracy, human rights, racism, minorities, economics, ecology, etc., etc., where it is not always very easy to see what these have to do with the supernatural function of the Church. The problem is that what is involved here is not so much moral judgments as statements exclusively concerned with these matters as such. For example, in the Document on racism issued by the Pontifical Commission “Iustitia et Pax” in February 1989, statements are made which have purely to do with history, statements which are also very debatable because they belong to the exclusive competence of historians (as the President of the Commission himself admitted at a press conference) and therefore are open to criticism from any well informed specialist. Be that as it may, one certainly feels the need for a more forceful Magisterium —forceful in both the negative and positive sense: negatively to channel the unruly *vedettes* theologians; positively to nourish the faithful with the bread of good supernatural doctrine, which is the only kind of teaching that can nourish souls.

²⁵Millán Puelles, *Léxico Filosófico*, Rialp, Madrid, 1984.

accident has yet to be proved, I am not sure that that or any other argument will make any inroad against the new Masters of thought.

Sometimes one comes across blunders so colossal that they seem quite comic or even ridiculous. The Fathers of Trent, for example, who spoke—as we now know—using the categories of their time, felt obliged to avail themselves of the terms substance and accident. Concepts which modern man finds unacceptable and they must therefore be discarded, and a different explanation of the real eucharistic presence must be formulated. Let us suppose we accept that as a hypothesis. Yet, if we do, and if logic retains any meaning, it means that the Trent Fathers' understanding of the Eucharist was *something very different* from how we understand it.²⁶ Hence the question: Was the Church of Trent mistaken, or is it we who have got it wrong? The answer, of course, no longer matters very much, for it is all the same: if one accepts that the Church has fallen into error, then one must necessarily accept that the Church is not true. There is no room for compromise here, as Pemán said many years ago apropos of the real presence, in connexion with the Anglican–Catholic Commissions and their bizarre conclusions. Conclusions which left me puzzled, as they did Pemán. For, as he put it at the time with his Andalucian irony in the pages of *ABC*: either Jesus Christ is present in the Eucharist, or he is not. It is very difficult to accept a *middle way* which opens the way to being able to please,

²⁶For, as we are clearly seeing, it is not a matter of expounding *the same thing* using other philosophical terms, but of formulating a very different teaching using different terms. It is not for me to get involved in the debate on the possibility of expounding the eucharistic mystery without using the philosophical concepts of substance and accident. As I see it, those concepts are pretty accurate and reliable for formulating the dogmatic truth as it has always been believed; and I think it would be difficult to dispense with them and still maintain the same truth. For what is at stake here is the attempt to replace the dogma of the real presence with another *truth* more in line with the modern outlook.

presuming that they are right, both those who believe in the real presence and those who do not. The Commission's document²⁷ is a maximum gathering of ambiguities, as Sayés says: "It leads to an inevitable ambiguity which allows anyone to read radically different things into the documents referred to. So it is no longer a question of terminology but of content."²⁸ For my part, I continue to be of the view that playing with words should be kept for jokes, puzzles, riddles and crosswords, and should not be used in serious matters. Besides, I am not aware that anyone has yet discovered a way to arrive at a right conclusion which is at the same time, a middle ground of two contradictory propositions. Here we find, on the one hand, those who say that Jesus is really present in the Eucharist and, on the other, those who say he is not; and then we are provided with a conciliatory conclusion, which is strangely like squaring the circle, and which allows for the possibility of thinking both: Jesus is present and he is not. The Mixed Commission failed to produce the desired miracle of the union of Catholics and Anglicans; yet it said that both sides were in the right, which meant that it achieved an even greater miracle. Nowadays everyone has forgotten about that well-intentioned Mixed Commission, which is not surprising if one looks at the practical side of its results, not to speak about the rather unconvincing and illogical nature of its conclusions. The oblivion is nothing but the cloak of charity that always covers affairs like this,

²⁷7 September 1971.

²⁸José A. Sayés, *La presencia real de Cristo en la Eucaristía*, B.A.C. (Madrid, 1976), p. 150. The procedure of the Commission does not seem complicated: If agreement as to content cannot be achieved, then the best thing to do is to use words to which each can give the meaning that suits him. This is nothing less than playing with the faith. Flirtation of this sort leads to very obvious results within Catholicism: A noticeable decrease among the faithful in their belief in the real presence and their devotion to the Eucharist.

and therefore there are those who say that milk in coffee is quite all right, but only at breakfast.

The Committee of Doctors in *El rey que rabió*, Chapí's old Zarzuela, had better luck. Undoubtedly because its conclusions were so very convincing and logical, even to excess. As the chorus of doctors put it, more or less, apropos of the possible illness of the king, an illness transmitted by the probably ill dog:

*Learned doctors who have studied the matter carefully,
who know all kind of matters. . .
No one can change our mind on this:
he may be suffering from rabies, or he may not be.*²⁹

And although someone may think it naive to draw the conclusion, after such long and patient study, that the dog might have been rabid or might not have been, one must admit it would have been more outlandish to reach the conclusion that he was and was not rabid at one and the same time. For my part, though I go along with the Committee of doctors —no one would dare to say they were wrong—, I solemnly state that I absolutely fail to understand the conclusion drawn by the famous Mixed Commission.

Sometimes it looks as if we are living in a world where everyone is quite mad and therefore even the most bizarre statements no longer raise an eyebrow. Anyone could have seen this in connexion with one of the most recent scandals that have afflicted the little world of the Christian churches. I refer to the consecration of a woman

²⁹In the original:

*Doctores sapientísimos que han estudiado bien,
y saben de lo otro y de esto también. . .
Pues de esta consecuencia nadie nos sacará:
Que puede estar hidrófobo y puede no lo estar.*

“Bishop” by the Episcopalian Church of the United States. In the usual sort of poll conducted among representatives of the various Christian confessions³⁰ all kinds of opinions were expressed, most of them favourable to the lady Bishop, but none of them more surprising than that of the Catholic representative. Our Protestant brethren were as radical and anti-catholic in their replies as one might expect, although one must recognize that there was continuity in their thinking; this did not apply in the case of the Catholic representative, who took it upon himself, it seems, to pose in his reply a doctrinal and practical problem which was much more serious than that on the table. According to our distinguished expert, “in questions of such grave importance no Church should act unilaterally; the other Churches should be consulted first, and in fact their agreement should be sought.” That shows us clearly how to go about solving the problem. If, on the subject of the ordination of women as bishops, Protestants say yes and Catholics say no, all that needs to be done is to arrive at a consensus. The only difficulty is that, once again, the serious problem arises of reconciling the yes and the no at the same time; and particularly in a matter of such “grave importance.” Well then, even though the way out is clear to see —consensus— there remains the difficulty of applying it, given that there is a whole range of matters (for example, the inescapable personal actions each individual has to perform on his or her own, as well as many others) in which there is no possibility of consensus. Despite all this, I personally think that there still could have been a way out of the problem, although not one our good ecumenist would countenance. Given that some people say that men, and others that women, should receive episcopal ordination, the consensual solution can only be to bestow ordination on sexually ambiguous people, who

³⁰ *ABC* (Madrid), 14 February 1989.

are neither men nor women, and who, moreover, as CELAM asserted in a well-known Declaration, enjoy a special sensitivity in religious matters.

III

It goes without saying that the cases I have referred to are just samples. I have already said that I have no intention of making a list of the Church's maladies because that would serve no purpose and, besides, it would be beyond me. I have selected some anecdotes which are particularly tragicomical and have the virtue of making us laugh and cry at the same time; but it is no secret that I could have discussed much graver matters. As I see it, the malady from which the Church is suffering has to do with the fact that it is afraid of the modern world. This is a malady which derives in turn from another deeper evil: the crisis of faith, which has also caused charity to grow cold. I think that there has been, on the part of the Church, an overvaluation of the world of technology, of the power of ideologies, and of the strength of totalitarian systems. Parallel with this, and as a consequence of it, the Church has fallen into the simplistic attitude of undervaluing its own treasures: having lost faith in the supernatural content of its message of salvation, it is now trying to fall in behind the world, begging to be understood. And it is not that I underestimate the power of the System; far be it from me to

do so. I concur with what Revel says¹ about falsehood having made itself master of the world because the System needs it in order to survive. But the Church had no need to be afraid or to let itself be influenced by the powers which the Kingdom of lies possesses. What it ought to have done was continue to believe in its own supernatural values because, in the last analysis, good will prevail over evil, and the Church knows that. But, as I already said, when love grows cold it leads inexorably to falsehood. Not in the sense that the Church became a liar —it cannot do so—, but in the sense that many of its children have either moved away from the truth or else silenced it or in their cowardice hidden it, allowing error full rein. And here one must also include many Pastors, however sad it makes one to say so. For my part I admit that I do not understand those who openly tell lies, but perhaps I understand mere cowards even less. Some of the latter, assuredly with the best of intentions, have adopted the policy of not denouncing error, fearing, as they themselves say, that it would only make things worse. They argue that it is much more positive and practical *to teach the doctrine* because the truth will thereby prevail by itself. Perhaps they are right although I doubt it. Falsehood has such an ability to permeate, given the present state of human nature, that it needs to be denounced and attacked.

¹Jean-François Revel, *La connaissance inutile* (Paris, 1988). Revel speaks of *totalitarian systems*, which is more or less what I mean here by *the System*. However, I am not identifying the concept of *totalitarian systems* with that of the *non-existence of Western democracy*. In Western Europe (at least in Spain, which is the case I know best) democracies exist, which are officially recognized as such, but which in many cases are similar to totalitarian systems. Revel's book is really the best proof available that Western regimes which are generally accepted as being democratic are far from what they claim to be, as regards respect for freedom, human rights and human dignity in general. But this is just one of many aspects of the huge mechanism of manipulation and falsehood which is at work in the world.

The good shepherd has a duty, not only to lead his sheep to good pastures, but also to protect them from the wolf. At least that is how the New Testament seems to think; which is why it is full of instructions to pastors to guard their sheep and to keep them away from error (we can read, for example, in the Pastoral Letters of Saint Paul and Chapter 10 of the Gospel of Saint John). If this doctrine of well-intentioned tolerance had been followed, heresies would have always had a *carte blanche* in the Church: Saint Athanasius would not have put an end to Arianism, or Saint Augustine to Pelagianism, nor would Saint Bernard have unmasked the errors of Abelard, for example. But all this is talking for the sake of talking, for no one is going to listen to me. If someone does not agree with what I am saying, all he need do, if he wants to take the trouble to do so, is to accuse me of *extremism* to completely disqualify me without having to prove a single thing.

But, as I said at the beginning, these lines have not been written in the hope of winning people over: I write because I feel a duty in conscience to do so. For my part, if God grants it to me, I hope to die *believing* in the Church, just as I do believe in her now. For, even if it is true that I do not *see* the Church as I would like to see her, it is also true that my *faith* in her needs to be asserted more and more; for, after all, God is good. Moreover, it may well be that things have always been like this, though now they are breaking records. I mean, maybe the Church has always seemed to be too human, composed as it is of our own flesh and blood. This has not prevented true Christians rendering unconditional faith and love to the Church over the twenty centuries that have gone by.

There is no doubt about the fact that we find ourselves in challenging times. Although it may seem trite to say that the Church has always been saved by its saints, it is still a true saying. And

even though we do not now think about saints, that does not mean we have any less need for them. Moreover, since we are faced with a crisis of faith, the saints of today will have to be, above all, men and women who have a deep faith. A faith so intense that it causes them to practise a charity which is equally unshakable and which, in turn, provides them with a hope against all hope. This is the only way, and there is no other, that the gates of hell will not ever prevail against the Church.

IV

Questions do not always have as simple an answer as one might hope. It often happens that an apparently simple question is asked, in the expectation of a rapid, and simple, reply; and yet that reply is not forthcoming. Sometimes the question creates problems which are much more complex than one might have expected. It follows that sometimes, to give a proper reply, one needs to do it in a roundabout way, adding perhaps new considerations, because that is the only possible recourse. Many questions, which at first sight seem to lend themselves to a simple, spontaneous approach, turn out to be too complicated, even though the person who posed the question would have liked an instant reply. Things are not always as easy as one imagines. This was the experience of a person who asked our Lord how many people are saved: *Lord, will those who are saved be few?* And our Lord replied: *Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the householder has risen up and shut the door, you will begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, "Lord, open to us." He will answer you, "I do not know where you come from."*¹

¹Lk 13: 22-30.

The episode gives one the impression that either our Lord is not replying on this occasion to the question put to him or else he is doing so in too indirect a way. Will it be many or few who are saved? Clearly our Lord's reply could have been interpreted in different ways: as a refusal to reply, as an ambiguous and evasive answer, as a very indirect answer, or as the correct, adequate answer. Even though it is probably not possible to give the question a simple answer, it seems that our Lord, as usual, is choosing to address directly the deeper and more practical aspects of the matter. It follows, therefore, that he is answering the question; but he is doing so in an indirect way, because that is the only way possible.

He already urged us to try to enter by the narrow gate: *For the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*² From this we can see that many choose the path that leads to perdition, whereas few opt for the path that leads to life. The most imminent reason for this seems to be pointed out also by our Lord: one path is easy, the one that leads to destruction; the other is difficult, and it leads to life.

It is not, of course, a direct reply, of the sort which might have easily satisfied idle and often even impertinent curiosity. But our Lord prefers to go to the core of the matter and to what we really need to know. That is why his reply is much more substantial and practical than what anyone might have expected. Concentrating on the concrete point of the original question, even though our Lord clearly does not involve himself in the game of vain curiosity and avoids giving a direct answer, he does warn us all about a real danger that lies in wait for us: it is much easier to be lost than to be saved.

²Mt 7: 13-14.

And now that this warning has been given, each individual can draw the conclusions he deems more convenient. As our Lord himself liked to say: *He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*

These conclusions would probably not be very palatable to some modern Catholics, and even less to what I usually call *theologies of goodness*. These theologies propound ideas such as ‘Hell is a mere possibility’; they speak of a so-called *anonymous Christianity*, and say that salvation is for everyone —because God is good and wants all men to be saved—, so they certainly will not agree with this doctrine. Also, these theologies do not give much substance to the fact that our Lord often speaks in the Gospel about the fire of hell, or about those who will be thrown into that fire, and the Last Judgment. Nor are they bothered by the clear doctrine on this subject contained in the other books of the New Testament; and even less by the fact that the Magisterium has been teaching this doctrine throughout the entire history of the Church.

However, according to our Lord, after the Last Judgment men will be divided, and some of them (the saved) will be put on the right, and the others (the damned) will be put on the left; the decision as to where each will go to depends on certain conditions. Besides, these conditions are well known. The reasons for damnation, for instance, include such things as: *For I was hungry, and you gave me no food; I was thirsty and you gave me no drink. . .*³ If the facts are looked at coolly and calmly, one has to admit that there are a lot of people who seem to fit these conditions. This seems to be the only and obvious conclusion one can draw.

We should accept, however, that if our Lord chose not to give a direct reply to the question put to him, it seems to follow logically that we ought not to provide one either. Despite this, I still

³Mt 25:42.

insist that the *theologies of goodness* are to be rejected, because they are at odds with the teaching of the New Testament and of Tradition, teaching which is quite clear and which is guaranteed by the Magisterium of the Church.

The doctrine contained in the New Testament, interpreted and taught by the Church for twenty centuries, is undoubtedly a revealed doctrine. Good schools of exegesis, which have contributed so much to our better understanding of the Bible, thanks to the painstaking research they have conducted, perform a valuable and irreplaceable mission.⁴ But exegetical research and progress should not get in the way of our peaceful conviction that the Bible was written *for people to understand it*—and to do so without racking their brains—, and that what is found in the Bible *is simply the truth*. When all is said and done, it is the word of God that is the truth, *not the word of scholars*. Besides, it is the Word of God interpreted by the Church, when there is need for interpretation, for the simple reason that that is the role of the Church and it is the Church that has the ultimate and supreme decision.

These theologies do not accept this. Arrogating to themselves the final word on Revelation, and replacing the Church's teaching with that of theologians,⁵ they see themselves as the final court of appeal on all questions of exegesis. In times gone by, *the faith of simple folk* was treated with respect, but now it is suspected and subjected to ridicule. Things have reached the point where any pure and simple act of faith—whether simple folk are involved or not—is given the low esteem that is allotted to anything which is not *scientific or rational*.

⁴Truth to tell, the advances made by sound exegesis, as also the attainments achieved in recent years in the area of purifying the biblical text, are a source of great consolation. This includes, for instance, the work done to produce the text of the *New Vulgate*.

⁵That is, the same “theologians” who have devised these theologies.

The *theologies of goodness* practise what the ostrich is said to do when the hunter comes along: they stop seeing things as they really are and instead see them as they would like them to be. But in this case it is not so much a matter of imagining things as of creating them, thereby following the dictates of the best strain of thought of Idealistic philosophies. There are quite a number of people who try to make out that things are not as they really are but as they imagine them to be. And then they immediately move on to devise a strange fiction, which consists in thinking that what is purely imaginary is in fact real, forgetting that it is just a product of their own fantasy. This leads to the conclusion that the only things that really exist are those thought up by the promoters of these fictions, and no other reality is possible.

Underneath all this lies the conviction that things are badly designed and, therefore, need to be otherwise. Or, better: given that things *should be* otherwise, *they are so in fact*. The sun, for example, could rise in the west, or in the south, instead of always rising in the east, with a regularity so monotonous as to seem an obsession; and it could also rise in the afternoon, or perhaps at night, at least occasionally: on the first Thursday of every month, or on the third Tuesday, let us say. And if that example seems a bit far-fetched, other more true-to-life ones could be provided. No one denies that it would be much better if hell was only a possibility and was in fact empty. It is clearly more in keeping with divine goodness that everyone should be saved and no one damned. Or would it be better if people went to hell...? Clearly, then, hell cannot exist. At most, if someone stubbornly does not go along with this, hell can be left simply as a real possibility; or even the existence of hell can be conceded to those who stubbornly argue that it does exist, provided they accept that it is empty. That would truly be in keeping with the infinite goodness of God and with his universal salvific will.

It is easier to see now why I call these doctrines *theologies of goodness*, which stand a very good chance of being widely accepted. They seem to meet better the demands of the human heart, which desires happiness at all costs, if possible without effort or threat of punishment hanging over it. They also seem to be more in keeping with the nature of divine goodness, which desires all men to be saved; and even with the requirements of divine justice, because it does not seem just that a mere creature should be damned for all eternity even though it has sinned. All this provides these theologies with the appearance, in everyone's view, of being more Christian, more progressive, more human, and more in keeping with the Message of Salvation.

However, they run up against a difficulty which is so serious that it disqualifies them: they do not accord with the truth. For that reason alone it is useless and unnecessary to discuss the matter any further.

—Would you be good enough to tell me why they don't ring the bells in this town? —a visitor asked a local in a small mountain village.

—For twenty-four reasons —the local replied—. Let's see: The first is that there are no bells. The second...

—Say no more —said the visitor—. That does me.

These theologies are not interested in how things are in fact, but in how they should be *as they think they should be*. The next step they take is deciding that they are in fact as they see them, and cannot be otherwise. According to Revelation, for example, it is quite clear that there is a hell and that there are people who are going to end up in it. But these doctrines still argue that the demands of divine love and justice make that impossible. So, some other suitable explanation must be found. Here is a job they are

happy to tackle: what else are they for, these theologies of goodness, love, understanding, peace of conscience and the exaltation of human dignity?

But the problem is not as simple as that. It could well be that the need for everyone to be saved, a need proclaimed by these theologies and supposedly demanded by divine justice and love, is belied by the fact that the divine justice and love *are not* what the supporters of theologies of goodness *think they are*. Given that Revelation and the teaching of the Church are pretty clear on the matter, one must accept at least the possibility that things are not as these avant-garde theologians explain them. If the question of salvation is also a question of possible damnation—insofar as, because salvation has to be accepted freely, there is therefore also a possibility that it may be rejected freely—, and if in fact God did create hell and did allow damnation, no one should be arrogant enough to judge God and decide that things should be arranged differently. That arrogance is virtually the same thing as the foolish pretension to think that man knows better than God about how to do things. To claim damnation *could never be*, in contradiction to what Revelation plainly says, is nothing other than to maintain the vain belief that one can go one better than God.

In this connexion, it may be worth recalling the old fable about the peasant who rested from his labours in the fields. The story goes that on a particular summer's day, at the time of the siesta, a farm worker stretched out on the ground to take a rest under the shade of an old oak tree. Looking up, he could see the acorns hanging from the branches and he began to think:

—It's not really true that God made all things well. For example, here's this small little acorn and yet it's the fruit of a tree as big as this oak. But a pumpkin, which is rough and enormous, and can often weigh as much as seven or eight kilos, is produced by a little and feeble plant which crawls along the ground and is so weak that

it never reaches to any height, not even one foot high. There is no rhyme or reason here, in fact it looks as if things should be the other way round.

But, when he was absorbed in these thoughts an acorn detached itself from the oak and fell, a remarkable chance, right onto the tip of his nose. And then the peasant said to himself:

—By . . . I'm glad it was an acorn. Because I don't like to think what would have happened to me if an eight-kilos pumpkin had landed on me from that height.

I hope that no one is so simple-minded as to think that we are discussing here the number of people there are in hell: whether there are few, many, or maybe none, as if it were a matter of counting. For, what is at issue at the bottom of all this is really something much more serious.

As I said earlier, apart from the crisis of faith, there is the unspoken desire for God *not to exist* and, consequently, for things *not to be as they are*. Once man has made himself the judge of everything, ousting God, it is natural for him to want things to be the way he thinks them and only as he thinks them. And since that is what he wants, that is what he decides shall happen. From now on, what is just or unjust, good or bad, and even what exists or does not exist, is something for man alone to decide. Accordingly, man decides, for example, whether it is just or unjust for hell to exist, after first deciding whether or not hell is compatible with true goodness and a true sense of justice. Having set things up like that, the question of fact—that is, whether things are in conformity with the truth or not—has no relevance any more, once the decision is made that the only acts and truths, that really exist, are those which man regards as such.

So, it is not that these theologies claim to have worked out certain concepts about goodness and justice, which are more in line with

the truth than those God has. That would be a very silly thing peculiar to naive people. What they are saying is that there is no justice, no goodness, nor any other truth, except for what these doctrines determine. This brings us right out as far as the ultimate consequences of Idealism: for Hegel, the only Absolute (whatever the Absolute was for Hegel) was entirely dependent on man's mind. From which it follows that if there were to be such a thing that could be called God, then God would be none other than man.

Apart from this, which is bad enough, some teachings, such as those about anonymous Christianity, or the doctrine which holds that hell is just a mere real possibility, for example, despite projecting themselves as progressive and open to goodness and justice, really get the notion of love all wrong. They make a big blunder which, unfortunately, the man in the street may fail to notice, because he is not very well educated; and it can even be missed by people who, although more educated, are determined to live according to their own licentiousness, and who put the annoying shadow of eternal punishment out of their minds. However, the invention of new and more advanced concepts about truth and justice—building a new Tower of Babel—, means doing away not only with the whole idea of Love, but also with every last trace of genuine goodness and true justice. Justice and goodness without love. . . ?

For the concept of damnation, due to its just and evident negative connotations, tends to leave the reality in which its true essence is rooted in the background, the fact that it really consists in *the rejection of a love that offered itself beforehand and meant to be accepted*.⁶ It is of the very essence of love that the person in love offers

⁶I write deliberately the word *love* with a small letter, even though it should be given a capital here. I do so to avoid anyone mistakenly thinking that I am referring directly to God, for what is interesting to notice here is the way the concept of love has become corrupted (love as such, and specifically created love, prescinding for the moment from its source and from the fact that God is perfect, uncreated Love) by these teachings.

himself, *with full freedom*, to the loved one; love has to be exercised with such freedom that *absolutely no one can be constrained to love*.⁷ But if love is freely offered, and if it is also essential to it that there be *total reciprocity*, then *it also has to be accepted in freedom*. The conclusion is obvious: given the undeniable fact that man's freedom is an imperfect one, he can only accept love freely to the degree that he can also reject it freely.⁸ Damnation, therefore, is the situation which arises when Love, which has been offered in a most free, total and definitive manner, is also rejected in a most free, total and definitive manner. If we approach the matter from that angle, we

⁷ *Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom* (2 Cor 3:17).

⁸ God loves himself necessarily, but this necessity is simply an expression of his infinite freedom. The Holy Spirit *proceeds* necessarily from the Father and the Son, but this is not at odds with the fact that the Father and the Son love each other in infinite freedom. In fact the Holy Spirit is freedom. The will of God is his very essence, he is fully identified with it. But the nature of God is necessary (in the sense that it cannot be otherwise: Being cannot but Be, and nothing is different from Being), and yet his will is sovereignly free. The infinite perfection of his will means that he cannot but be free and therefore he loves himself *necessarily in perfect freedom*. As regards created beings, given that they do not enjoy this condition of necessity, the love which God has for them depends on the free choice he made in creating them. But, once he decided to create them, the condition of freedom in his love for them is also manifested in the fact that he could have not created them. Obviously, there is a choice involved here, not just between nothingness and being, but also because, out of an infinite range of possibilities, he opted for one. And this brings in another condition essential to created love or to love which refers to created beings: choice, which would make no sense unless it is done in freedom; for choice implies freely selecting (or freely deciding) from a range of possible options. God freely chooses his creature, he freely creates his creature, and then he freely loves him or her. Reciprocally (because a love affair is involved) the creature is granted the possibility of electing for God or rejecting him; but in such a way that, since his creature has been made for love, he necessarily has to choose love or reject it (opting for something else): *No one can serve two masters*. Thus, if he who loves does so *because he so wishes*, then by definition it must also be possible for him *not to wish it*. The Spanish language, felicitously, uses the same verb *querer* to mean both to wish and to love.

must recognize that the word *damnation* has negative connotations—to do with punishment and vindictive penalties—which, although valid, can prevent one from taking a serene view of the matter. Using somewhat imprecise yet valid language, one could say that it is not so much a matter of punishment as of putting things in their place: a person who is damned is getting what he wants and he is being put, forever, in a situation he has freely chosen *and continues to choose*. In this sense it is not so much a matter of punishment being decreed as of an act of justice being carried out. A mistaken view, and consequent rejection, of the idea of damnation stem from the fact that the concept of love has been debased. It is simply not possible to give a *half-hearted* response to a Love which is offered in such a categorical and absolute way.⁹ Love which is offered totally can only be accepted or rejected totally.¹⁰ Now, this love, since it

⁹*No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other* (Mt 6:24).

¹⁰Logically, this totality also includes time and what is beyond time. Even mere human love has an intuition of this reality when it says such things as *I will always love you*, or *I will never leave you*, statements which cannot easily be termed as metaphorical. The modern world has difficulty in understanding this because it has lost from sight the concept of love. In this respect, I think that the only defence (with any prospect of success) to be put forward for the indissolubility of marriage must be made from this angle; which is the same as saying that divorce should be combated through a re-evaluation of the true concept of love. If *de facto* many Curiae have brought in divorce (this is a most significant feature of contemporary Catholicism, and one likely to have serious unforeseen effects, despite every effort has been made to conceal the fact that it is going on), that is simply because ecclesiastics have forgotten the concept of true love, or the true concept of love, if one prefers to put it like that. That fact is much more important than one might think, no matter how far people try to play it down. If this would lead to a general ignorance of the true concept of love, or it would just fade from people's memory, then we would have arrived at a situation where ignorance or forgetfulness of God is already a reality: *He who does not love does not know God; for God is love* (1 Jn 4:8). What is at stake here is something much more important than the sacrament of marriage. What is at risk now is the idea of love and even the very notion of God.

is Perfect Love, if it chose to offer itself (or to give itself, which is the same thing), would need, seemingly, to be offered in its *totality*. And how else could Perfect Love offer itself if not perfectly and totally? How could a time restriction apply to Perfect Love's decision to give itself (in keeping with its nature, which is the same as saying *perfectly*) to the loved one? Could we even imagine a love which is meant to come to an end and disappear? And if we could do so, would the reason not be that we do not know what love is...? That is why I said earlier that only one answer can be given, acceptance or rejection, to an offering of love made on these conditions, and it must be given only *on the same conditions*.

This makes it easier to understand the *ratio theologica* of the pain of damnation, which is what is truly characteristic of hell. The pain of damnation is nothing other than privation of Love, but a privation accompanied by an awareness that the situation one finds oneself in is permanent and irreversible, and one chosen freely by the damned person—and which he continues to choose freely. Hell is forever, to the same degree that love has been rejected forever and definitively. One can say, in a way, that the everlasting nature of hell is more the result of man's will than God's. That is why Dante, who as well as being an illustrious poet had a profound theological grasp of things, read on the gates of hell the inscription he has given us in his immortal poem:

*Giustizia mosse io mio alto fattore;
fecemi la divina potestate,
la somma sapienza e'l primo amore.*¹¹

It is more difficult to understand the *ratio theologica* of the pain of sense. But one must remember that man is a substantial unity,

¹¹ *Justice moved my exalted creator; the divine power made me, the supreme wisdom, and the primal love.* Dante, *The Divine Comedy, Inferno*, Chant III.

even though he is made up of body and soul; so, these two elements are inseparable in a definitive sense. Man can never be punished or rewarded just in his soul or just in his body. Hence the *need* for the resurrection of the flesh, both to make it possible for man to have a beatific vision adequate to his nature, and for exacting an equally adequate eternal punishment upon him (a reward or punishment which includes the body, too). It is the whole man who opts for love or who rejects it; for when a human being loves (or decides not to love) he does so as a human being and therefore also with his body.¹²

So, hell and its eternity, which so scandalize the *theologies of goodness*, could only be made by a Supreme and First Love who chose to offer himself and to give himself to man. Only Perfect Love, giving himself totally and therefore forever, is susceptible to being given a *perfect* rejection, which is the same as saying a total, definitive rejection. Once again we find the absolute reciprocity of love. Therefore, the eternity of hell is simply the other face of a perfect love which, having offered itself totally and forever, has been rejected also totally and forever. The perfection of Love is what God contributes, whereas the total rejection (and therefore the never-ending nature of hell) is man's contribution; man thus becomes capable of doing something that is eternal precisely because he is offered an eternal love. In this sense hell is the product of the power of God,

¹²Purely Platonic love, insofar as it really exists, abstracts so to speak from passion, or, better yet, from concupiscence proper; but in no way does it abstract from the body (clearly not from the body of the loving person, and even less from the body of the loved one). In Platonic love, too, the loved one is loved for what he or she is and therefore that love includes his or her body. How could the loved one be loved in any other way...? We should remember that we are discussing human love here, where man must love in keeping with his nature, that is, *more humano*; and then, raised up by grace, he can also love *more divino*. And the same happens when he decides not to love or even when he decides to hate: he always does so as man.

insofar as only He could offer himself in that way. But once man has definitively rejected Love, hell is simply the natural development of that situation. And it is difficult to see how the whole matter could have had a more logical or more just outcome than the one designed by divine wisdom itself. It is easy to appreciate Dante's surprise on seeing the inscription carved on the gates of hell: *Divine omnipotence made me, the supreme wisdom, and the primal love.*

The rejection of the notion of hell, as I said earlier, is simply a consequence of the corruption (or perhaps forgetfulness) of the concept of true Love. That is what has brought us to a situation where hell becomes impossible to understand. Since the first Love is God, it follows that to forget or be ignorant of that Love is to forget or be ignorant of God. And since God is also supreme Truth, the absence of God leads in the same way to being deprived of the truth. Not for nothing does the New Testament make a close connexion between truth and Love: The Holy Spirit himself is called there the Spirit of Truth; whom, according to Saint John, the world cannot comprehend because it neither sees nor knows him (Jn 14:17). If one bears in mind that Saint John also counterposes the spirit of truth and the spirit of error (1 Jn 4:6),¹³ there are good grounds for supposing that not having the former is equivalent to having the latter. Saint John goes further: not only does he counterpose truth and error; he confronts *the spirit of truth with the spirit of error*; as if to say that truth and falsehood, too, are something more than a mere specific human act. It would appear that, for the apostle of love, truth and falsehood are as it were a spirit, a spiration which envelops man, becoming for him like the air he breathes, turning everything he does into truth or falsehood. Spirits which can even be personified as the Spirit of Truth or the Spirit of evil, the latter

¹³*No lie is of the truth* (1 Jn 2:21).

being seen by our Lord as the father of all lies (Jn 8:44). So, truth is reached by the path of love, while falsehood is reached by the path of lovelessness (or rejection of love). *Divine omnipotence* would not have created hell were it not also and at the same time the *primal Love*, since Love rejected must first be Love tendered.

As can be well imagined, I have no interest at all in defending, just for the sake of defending, the existence of hell. It would not make much sense to do so. What I am trying to defend is the existence of love, and more specifically the existence of Perfect Love. The fact is that these two things —Perfect Love and hell— condition one another: if one exists, so must the other. But it is very likely that those who are capable of believing in love (1 Jn 4:16) are also able to believe in what it means to lose love for evermore.

Ultimately, what the *theologies of goodness* deny is the need to search for the Bridegroom; for, in the last analysis, as they see it the entire world is Christian, even if it does not realize it. Besides, it is in fact impossible for there to be a bride who is madly in love with the Bridegroom, since, in reality, neither is it possible to reject the Bridegroom outright: hell is a mere possibility no matter how real that possibility might be. And what meaning is attached to a *real* possibility which is only a *mere* possibility? For these theologies (which deny the existence of mortal sin, once they deny the possibility of someone totally rejecting God and therefore the possibility of damnation), denying that there can be a total *no* is just the other side of the coin of denying that there is a total *yes*. Or to put that in another way: just as there is no such thing as a Perfect Love offering itself totally to man, it cannot be that man has the ability to offer a total, complete yes to Love. If that is the way things are, how can anyone offer a categorical, absolute and total no, which may have effects for all eternity?

As a result, Christian life becomes empty and without meaning. For now everything is easy. There is no need for any searching or any yearning. The adventure of love has ceased to be an adventure in which man would feel it worthwhile to risk his existence. And the *Song of Songs* is nothing but a collection of epithalamic songs, without other meaning.

*Upon my bed by night
I sought him whom my soul loves;
I sought him, but found him not.
“I will rise now and go about the city,
in the streets and in the squares;
I will seek him whom my soul loves.”*¹⁴

And lots and lots of sayings of Jesus become emptied of their meaning. . .

*If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. . .*¹⁵
*He who loses his life for my sake will find it.*¹⁶

If there is nothing there to find, what is the point of searching? If there is nothing to give, what meaning does life have? If there is nothing to lose, what is the sense in taking risks? If Christianity no longer involves any effort, and if the Kingdom of heaven no longer suffers violence, if the violent cannot bear it away (Mt 11:12), what use is it, what is it. . . ? The *theologies of goodness* may succeed in

¹⁴Sg 3: 1-2.

¹⁵Jn 7:37.

¹⁶Mt 10:39.

tranquillizing people's consciences; but in doing so they will have emptied man's life of meaning. They may remove the fear of hell from the horizon of modern man's concerns; but they also leave him without Love. Calling themselves progressive and avant-garde, they have sent man back to that dark age when the mystery of Perfect Love and the possibility of possessing that Love had not yet been proclaimed to him. The message of the *theologies of goodness* suffers the same fate as that of the *theologies of liberation*. The latter claim to liberate man from oppression and (social) injustice, but what kind of liberation do they really propound? Since the only philosophy they draw on is Marxism, one must presume that they offer the kind of freedom and justice that is to be found in Communist countries; everyone knows what that is. But returning to the *theologies of goodness*: what sort of goodness and happiness can they give man once they have deprived him of genuine Love?

Like everything that is the product of the Kingdom of lies, the only place that these paths will bring man to is perdition. The truth alone, which is what shows man the path of holiness, is the only thing that can lead to the fullness of the new man. The truth is the only thing that can set man free (Jn 8:32) and bring him to holiness. That was what our Lord prayed would be given his disciples when he said, in his farewell address: *Father, sanctify them in the truth.*¹⁷

¹⁷Jn 17:17.

THE POOR WIDOW

He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury; and he saw a poor widow put in two copper coins. And he said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all the living that she had."

(Lk 21: 1–4)

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Quite a number of years ago, and in circumstances I need not go into here, there came into my hands a pile of books and old documents which belonged, I was told, to an old priest who had died a good while before and whom I never got to know. I spent a few hours going through them fairly carefully, with that curiosity and sense of expectation one tends to have when examining things of the past. To tell the truth, none of those old writings, whose dampness and abandonment made more pungent their smell of antiquity, were of any use to me. So I had no scruples about disposing of the collection, though not without devoting some kind thoughts and prayers to that man whom, oddly enough, I have never managed to forget ever since. Maybe I still remember him because I was moved by the impression I got at that time from the way many priests end up. Whoever that man had been, good or bad, holy or mediocre, he was so forgotten that no one, not even the people who had given me his books, gave him a thought any more. At that time I was a fairly idealistic young man, who had not yet finished his studies for the priesthood. So, this episode gave me an opportunity to get a glimpse of what destiny held in store for me; and it was an experience which provided me with a substantial knowledge of the path I had set out

on. However, what most caused me never to forget that unknown priest was something I will now go on to narrate.

Among the papers there was an old manuscript made up of a number of sheets loosely gathered together, which I rifled through for a little while and which seemed to be part of a kind of autobiography or diary, though I am not quite sure it was exactly that. The manuscript was incomplete and parts of it were very difficult to read. But it looked interesting, so I decided to keep it and read it calmly when I had an opportunity. However, a good few years went by before I chanced on it again, lost among the few books which, in my youthful optimism, I thought of as my library. It was then I realized that the manuscript was a meditation or commentary or something like that on the text of Saint Luke, 21: 1–4, which speaks of the poor widow who put her alms into the Temple. Eventually I managed to read the whole work, though not without much difficulty because the handwriting was rather unusual and there were lots of deletions and blots and gaps. Also, as often happens in medieval manuscripts, there were no full stops, and I had the strange feeling it was meant to be read all at one go, almost without taking a breather.

It seemed to be quite interesting, so I decided to transcribe it, because I thought it might be useful to someone else as well as myself. To tell the truth, I really had to write it all out again, and in my own way (adding a footnote here and there; especially to give biblical references, because the author seemed to have quoted from memory), for it was unlikely that there would be many heroic souls ready to read it in the style it was written. Of course, this created a couple of trying inconvenients. Firstly, there was the risk it would lose its freshness and spontaneity, for it was a discourse that seemed to be written from the heart; secondly, maybe someone would think it had really been written by myself. As regards the first point, I felt I had to do that work because, if not, no one would read it; as regards the second, I reassured myself thinking that it would not really be necessary to point out that I had nothing to do with the authorship of the work, because

people are not as unobservant as one might think. Anyway, since you never know what people may do, I decided I would make the last point perfectly clear, and I felt more at ease. In point of fact I have no real reason to think that the author of the manuscript was the unknown owner of those old books and documents—or to think that he was not. But maybe that is the least important thing anyway, because the author for his part certainly did not seem to make much effort to establish his authorship. We can, therefore, respectfully think of the reasons the author may have had to omit his name, and some other particulars, and then with no more ado move on to read the fruit of his reflections. All that remains for me to do is express the hope that the seasoning comments I provide do not get in the way of the reader's savouring the profound and very moving teaching that the manuscript contains.

I

I must confess that whenever I start to speak about the Gospel, I feel something much worse than what is usually called, too euphemistically, reverential fear. What I really feel is shame; and I would go as far as to say I even feel afraid. I hope the sort of fear I feel is the kind the Bible says is the beginning of wisdom.¹ For, if my life is so far off what the Bible says, how can I dare preach...? Yes, I know I have the recourse of admitting it openly before people and of making the point, in advance, that whenever my preaching involves denouncing human weakness, it is aimed at myself first and foremost. Honesty requires I do no less. But I ask myself if that is enough to set me at ease. And the worst of all—or perhaps the best, who can ever tell?—is that I have a duty to preach. As Saint Paul said: *Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!*² This brings to my mind the mystery of the Christian life and, above all, the even greater mystery of the priesthood. When God entrusted this job to me, he knew my limitations, and yet he still gave it to me. So, I

¹Prov 9:10.

²1 Cor 9:16.

ask myself: Why...? I do not know the answer, and I do not even think I have the right to know it. But it is possible that, once again, what is hidden here is one of those mysteries that are proper to love. Did God hope that in spite of everything I would manage to perform this task? Or that I would accept it in spite of everything? I get the impression that I am touching the very depths of the mystery of Love. Doing the impossible when it is so ordered to us remains an impossible thing; but trying, out of love, to do the impossible when it is God who tells us to do what seems impossible, that is something which makes the impossible possible (Mk 10:27; Lk 1:37; Mt 17:20). However, I still feel a kind of fear because I really do not have clear explanations for this. As Saint Paul also said: *Lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.*³ True, Saint Paul said it as saints do, whereas I state it as sinners do. That may well be the only thing that gives us mediocre people the advantage over saints; in the sense that statements of this sort are completely true only when they are made by people like me.

This happens to me every time I face any passage from the New Testament. But when I read the episode of the unfortunate poor widow who gave away everything she had as an alms for the Temple, it makes me even more uncomfortable. I feel an uneasiness which is even more intense than the admiration she inspires in me. I think that this Gospel episode dismays me because it is the one that in some way best reflects what my own life has been. I realize that I could do what most people do when they read this text: be impressed by the generosity and faith of that woman who, as our Lord himself said, *out of her poverty put in all the living that she had.* Instead of that, no matter all the efforts I make to avoid it, I think about my own case. That woman, who was needy, *gave everything she had*

³1 Cor 9:27.

to live on; I, on the other hand, see myself included in the group of *those who put in as an offering money they could spare*. It makes me sad because I feel inside me the reality of my own life, such as it is; and at the same time I can see that the poor widow's action, on the contrary, shows that hers is a generous soul quite different from mine.

Those well-to-do people put into the Temple *what they could spare*. But, as everyone knows, it takes little or no effort to give up one's surplus. Being surplus or what is left over, *they are really things we want to divest ourselves of*. What is left over after a meal is given to animals, and old clothes that are of no use are given to the poor or sold off at a cheap price to the rag-and-bone man. Occasionally, although certain things could be of *some advantage to us* —not much really—, we give them up because we think we may get a bigger benefit back; like those hypocrites our Lord referred to who sounded the trumpet before them when they gave alms *in order to win human admiration*.⁴

This is the one big problem of my life. It is really my only problem, to tell the truth. Because, clearly, what I give to God is exactly the measure of what He means to me. But if I only give him things that cost me little, it means that God does not matter to me a lot; to put it another way, I do not really take him seriously. And yet every day I see more clearly, now that I am in the autumn of my life, that taking God seriously *was the only thing I should have been doing*. To the precise degree that I did not do that my life has been a failure.

Of course once I have said that, I have not said all, not in the least. For, it is not a matter of giving God a little or a lot, as one might suppose: if it is bad to give God things that do not cost a

⁴Mt 6:2.

lot, that means you must give him things that do cost a lot. And that is right, because a person who gives up a lot shows that he has a lot of love: *I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much.*⁵ Although that is quite true, it does not apply to someone like me, who feels he has to approach the question in another way. My relationship with God has never been couched in terms of a small or a big amount, it has always been a question of the whole lot. That was what He expected of me, because it was also exactly what I offered him when I started.

In the parallel passage in Saint Mark (12: 41–44) we are told that the rich put large amounts of alms into the Temple treasury. The very fact that the evangelist refers to the “rich” seems to indicate that he wants to stress that the alms they gave were substantial. I do not think that he means to rail against or criticize the rich or anyone else. What I think he is trying to do is *to show exactly where true Christian poverty lies*, and, in doing so, stressing its intimate connexion with genuine love. For, even though it is true that all the virtues are grounded on charity, it is clear that poverty is particularly dependent on charity. Our Lord does not condemn here either the rich or their alms. All he does, at least as I see it, is to side with the poor widow: *Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them.* Indeed there are many generous people who have given quite a bit to God. When I look back over my own life, I myself can make up a fairly complete list. But, although that may be important to me, perhaps I have used it to avoid the real question, preventing me from grasping the truth. I rather feel I have used this relative generosity of mine to hide from myself the fact that I have not given God the very best part, the most intimate part of my heart, or what I saw as my world and *my life*. It is as if I had decided, more or less

⁵Lk 7:47.

unconsciously, that God would have to make do with what I gave him; and he should even be quite happy with that, because it was not little what he was receiving.

But now here is this woman who, in spite of being truly needy, as our Lord tells us, has given all she had to live on as alms to the Temple. This means she had nothing to subsist on, no resources at all to live on, if I have not misunderstood the Gospel account. So, it was her very own life that this woman was giving up. And it is clear to see that the fact that she, by doing what she did, was compelled to put her entire trust in God, confident that she would be listened to, in no way reduces the value of her action.

I sometimes ask myself, apropos of all this, whether it would not be better to be poverty-stricken and therefore to have a more inclined disposition to give up everything. For the text seems to be saying just this: the needy are in a better situation to make real this kind of self-surrender.⁶ But, since I do not want this question to deflect me from my main problem, I hasten to remind myself that indigence falls short of Christian poverty. A person can be needy without being truly poor in the Christian sense. That does not prevent the sense of one's own indigence from being something beautiful and desirable; as I myself experience when I see me as I am: poor, naked and needy. For, then and only then, do I sense that I am on the path that leads to true poverty, to the fullness of truth, and, ultimately, to God (Rev 3:17).

What this woman gave, therefore, was nothing less than *her life*. Unfortunately I am so accustomed to that expression that I suspect

⁶It may be worth pointing out here, once and for all, that words and phrases like "giving up everything," "giving one's life," "poverty," "indigence," and similar ones, are being used by the author in an entirely supernatural sense; without the political or sociological connotations that modern Christianity gives them, connotations that the author would have considered totally strange.

I am using it deprived of all its pungency and sharp points, as if it were a pebble, so it no longer has any particular punch for me. I am very familiar with the framework of things that make up *my life* and I know how difficult it is to be detached from them. Maybe that is why, now and then, at those times when I want to believe I am doing what I ought to be doing, I take some of these things and give them away. But I am always trying to deceive myself: for I give them with one hand while at the same time hiding the other hand, which is the one that is holding those very things that I just cannot let go.

I am sure that this happens to me because I am afraid that if I give up everything I have, surrendering *my own life* and the purpose of my life, I will not be able to live. So I resist giving up everything and therefore I bend on understanding these things in my own way, the worldly way, not God's way, which is the true one. That must be why I feel sad when I read any passage in the New Testament. It is a sadness which I realize has no bitterness or hopelessness in it, but there is an element of nostalgia; and there are those gentle tears which sometimes our not-yet-perfect love causes us to shed, or the memory of things that ought to have been and never were: like the traveller who never reached his destination, or the chrysalis that never became a butterfly, or stunted, dried up stalks that never produced any grain. . . In the last analysis tears shed by a love that never was Love.

I have often meditated on the famous words of Saint Paul: *It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.*⁷ The most I can say is that I think that I have a vague presentiment of their depth and beauty. I quite understand I should not be satisfied with that presentiment. Presentiment is like stopping on the threshold of sensing without actually perceiving things as they really are. And I

⁷Gal 2:20.

know that my destiny is not to stop there, outside the gates; much less to leave them closed, but opened wide, so that I and others can go in and out. And above all, so that He whom we are always awaiting can go in and out, easily and without delay: *Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. . .*⁸ *He who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. . .*⁹ *I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. . .*¹⁰ Therefore, despite my fear that I might end up not being able to live, as I said before, I have always had a longing and a desire to make my own those words of Saint Paul about it being *no longer I who live*; and also what he goes on to say: *but it is Christ who lives in me*. Because, if I truly had given up what constituted my whole life and its purpose, and therefore was not able to live it because *I had lost it*, then I would have to find it some other way. For, some way or other, I have to live my own existence and fulfill my own destiny:

*If, then, on the common land,
no more am I to be seen or found,
you will say that I am lost
that, wandering love-stricken,
I lost myself and was won.*¹¹

⁸Rev 3:20.

⁹Jn 10:2.

¹⁰Jn 10:9.

¹¹Saint John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*:

*Pues ya si en el ejido,
no fuere más de hoy vista ni hallada,
diréis que me he perdido,
que andando enamorada,
me hice perdidiza y fui ganada.*

The last verse of the stanza is really an echo of our Lord's words: *Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*¹² Therefore, if I also had been able to lose my life for love's sake, I would have found it again; but I would have found it enhanced, as Saint Paul did, and then Christ *would live in me*. Jesus promised this very clearly, with reference to the Eucharist: *He who eats me will live because of me.*¹³ I would have needed to give up everything, changing my life for another as love requires, so that my wretched existence would have been changed into the existence of Jesus. Then I would have seen come true what the Apostle says: *It is Christ who lives in me*. And what Saint Teresa says:

*I live without living in me,
and I hope for such a lofty life,
that I die because I do not die.*¹⁴

¹²Mt 16:25.

¹³Jn 6:57.

¹⁴In the original:

*Vivo sin vivir en mí
y tan alta vida espero,
que muero porque no muero.*

II

As I see it, my problem is nothing other than that of giving up everything and surrendering my life for love's sake. I am convinced that only then will I find my true life, as our Lord says: *Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*¹ A very beautiful reality, and yet I find it difficult. I would go so far as to say that, were it not for faith, I would think it impossible to reach.

And that is not all. As the years go by I have become more and more convinced that not only is it difficult to put that reality into practice: it is even difficult to understand it. For, either we never manage to comprehend it totally, or we misunderstand it. I ask myself whether it is that we do not live it because we do not understand it, or, rather, we do not understand it because we do not live it. But, speaking for myself at least, I am afraid it has more to do with the latter.

When I was a young man I eagerly meditated on our Lord's well-known statement: *Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.* And then I related it to my life: my projects and plans during

¹Mt 16:25.

those years, my career and my future, not forgetting all the immense affections harboured in my heart. I prepared, enthusiastically, to give up everything, convinced that that was the right way to respond to our Lord's call, and consequently I had nothing else to give. I did not realize that I was being naive, until the point came when I discovered that my renouncing those things did not cost me much of an effort.

Looking at these things from a good point of view (I mean supernatural) I saw that they were not as precious or important as I had thought. When all is said and done, what were these plans and projects of mine really worth? I was bright enough to know that I was not going to be a scholar, and I had enough common sense to realize that, even if I did become a scholar, would anything of any transcendence have resulted from that? My career, my life, my thoughts, my yearnings and my heart were all churning around in my brain. . . Fortunately I have always had a good idea of what my heart was and was not capable of. It was not difficult for me to reach the conclusion, taking all this into account, that, since I was so poor and of such little account, anything I could ever do or give would always be very meagre indeed.

It always has astonished me how wrongly the virtue of poverty has been usually understood. Were I to use an infantile pun I would dare to say that we have a very poor concept of the virtue of poverty. Our poverty is so *poor* it has hardly anything to do with that Christian virtue.

I think that, just as there are virtues, such as chastity and sincerity, that are difficult to disguise, either you live them or not, there are, also, other virtues that seem to lend themselves more easily to deception —self-deception or deception of others—, humility being one of them. However, in the case of poverty, something unusual happens: despite its amazing tendency to be denatured and misin-

terpreted, poverty has a very special aptitude to project a convincing seal of legitimacy; so much so that it can pass itself off to everyone as good and genuine when it is not.

When I was young, I was very impressed to read that Saint Francis had married Sister Poverty, though I did not know very well what that meant. Now that I have got a lot of years behind me I am beginning to think that we have preferred to confuse poverty with things like meanness, misery, and even lack of generosity and of heart.² For sometimes it is found in distorted, debased forms which really cannot be compared with a virtue which is the greatest of all, charity apart. As I see it, Christian poverty is not just a matter of giving up some of the comforts of life, or even all of them. Poverty is not

²The author had no experience of the clamorous, spectacular forms poverty has adopted among certain Christians of our time, particularly clerics; forms adopted, they say, for pastoral reasons or which, others say, are just playing to the gallery. That is why it is not uncommon today to come across priests who claim to be *bearing witness* by working as plumbers, electricians or bricklayers.

I for my part am quite suspicious of spectacular poverties, poverties shouted to the four winds. With or without pastoral motivation, true poverty is such that it always passes unnoticed: whether one likes it or not, it is always in the eyes of the world a *poor virtue* not very apt to be applauded. The poverty of Jesus Christ, the authenticity of which is unquestioned, was never a spectacular poverty: he dressed elegantly (Jn 19:23), and his life was normal enough as to mix indiscriminately with all kinds of people; hence he was accused of eating with tax-collectors and sinners (Mk 2:15; Mt 9: 10–11; Lk 5: 29–30).

I also think that the figure of the *poor priest*, simple and with no ambitions—not even the ambition to be known—is something also needed. Plumbing and bricklaying count with quite a number of competent people already who have made them their trade, but there are specific functions which only a priest can perform: such as the celebration of Mass, preaching, Confession and administering the other sacraments, or catechesis, to mention some. Of course, nowadays anyone who concentrates on such tasks, and nothing else, is looked down on as a poor fellow. But, then, who is the man truly poor...? However, what the author goes on to say later seems to prove me right.

the same as just giving up money, for example; or travelling by mule when you could go in a carriage; or going off to live in a cabin or something when you could be in a comfortable house. These, and lots of other things like them, can be done but not be virtuous in themselves (1 Cor 13:3). And therefore they would have nothing to do with the Christian virtue of poverty.

I hasten to point out, however, that I have nothing against people who do some of those things, or even all of them at the same time. True, even though they do not constitute poverty yet, they can lead to it; of course, you have to take into account that intentions are here the key thing. Therefore, not only do I refrain from saying that these are bad things: I am convinced that everyone is entitled to do them if they so wish; even despite the inconveniences some of them may involve: travelling by mule, for example, can mean losing a lot of time and causing some risk to your health; but again there is no accounting for taste... Certainly it would be very desirable that those who go in for such things should not claim they have a monopoly on Christian poverty; or project themselves before the world with haloes of martyrs, who in this case are famous and applauded. Saint Paul seems to have been thinking along these lines when he said that these things are worth nothing if they have not got the right motive behind them, a motive which cannot be other than pure love (1 Cor 13:3).

I am astonished when I find people claiming that Christian poverty consists in that sort of things. I think that such view of reality debases the content and the grandeur of the virtue of poverty. My astonishment increases when I hear it said that if all this is done it is in favour of the poor, and that this has to be carried out even at the

expense of skimping on divine worship. It looks rather as if we will end celebrating Mass with vessels made of tin or earthenware, so we can get rid of the ones made of precious metals and help the poor with their sale. I do not think anyone would object to that happening if it really were true, very unlikely as I see it, *that anyone had to go hungry on account of the dignity of divine worship*. Anyway, I am not trying to establish doctrine on this point; I am not a theologian and I have no authority of any kind: in this as in everything else I go along with whatever the Church says. I would just dare to say that I thought this whole matter was settled once and for all by our Lord's remark to Judas, and others who thought like him on this subject, in a text everyone is familiar with (Jn 12: 1–8). Besides, I do not believe that anyone has gone hungry through rendering appropriate worship to God; in fact I think it would be difficult enough for us ever to honour God with a sufficiently dignified worship, or with the worship He surely deserve.

I am sure that—in the unlikely event that anyone might read these thoughts of mine—no one would dare accuse me of ingenuously thinking that there is no hunger in the world. I have personal experience of hunger and the sufferings of people, because I have lived in some of the most difficult regions on this planet. I have shared with my parishioners real need when we had no food to eat; and I have wept with them, seeing them prostrate with pain when we lacked doctors and medical supplies. But I am ready to say before God that, in that situation, it never entered my mind I had an important role to play, never mind that I had to bear witness. I suffered with the children the Lord had given me for the simple reason that I loved them and because I sincerely believed that I loved

in them the suffering Jesus, without giving it another thought.³ I thank God for the grace of being at one time in that group of people

³If the author had been writing nowadays, he would probably have availed himself of the chance to speak about *bearing witness* and other similar concepts, but rejecting the meaning usually given to those words today. *Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven* (Mt 5:16). But light does not shine for people to see it; it simply shines, and people see it. The Christian does not do things in order that people will see him and be convinced; he acts solely out of love, which is the only thing that can win people over: *Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say 'We see,' your guilt remains"* (Jn 9:41). Hence it is quite clear that the key thing is not the sheer fact that people see us; for, as our Lord also said: *This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah which says: 'You shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn to me to heal them'* (Mt 13: 13–15). And elsewhere: *Beware of practising your piety before men to be seen by them* (Mt 6:1). Someone may say that it all has to do with intentions; true, but without one's realizing it one's intention tends towards the side which is being stressed. And nowadays there is too much talk about things like the witness of poverty, and commitment to the marginalized—things everyone agrees about. But they forget that neither poverty *on its own* nor the mere fact of living among the underprivileged convinces anyone. The Bible is full of passages which show that man does not easily allow himself to be convinced by what he sees. It seems as if the only thing that can win him over is genuine love, nothing else. This happens in the case of our Lord; the clinching proof of the Resurrection passes first through the trial of love: death on the Cross, with miracles now a thing of the past, the very miracles which would have been of no use were it not for the Cross. As I see it, what the Christian people really want to see is not the priest who becomes a plumber in order to be poor, but the priest who is, simply, a poor priest. The figure of the poor priest—like that of the poor Christian—is something very serious; and it certainly has no need of electricity or plumbing. I know more rich plumbers than I do truly poor priests.

who had the good fortune to share the hunger and sufferings of their brothers. There were even times in the course of my priestly life when I had to beg for alms in order to be able to eat. But I do not think that the hunger and suffering of mankind will ever be solved, or lessened in the slightest, *by lowering the decorum of the worship that is due to God.*

I have always believed, without claiming that anyone should feel obliged to think along the same lines, that poverty is a virtue which comes next in the hierarchy after charity, and that both those virtues are equally arduous to practise. Of course, I am referring to genuine poverty and genuine charity. For, as I have already said, poverty can easily be deceptive, and does not mind using disguises and adopting forms which have nothing to do with the true virtue of poverty. Someone may say that the same happens with charity; which is true. After all, these two virtues depend much upon each other. For my part I can say that I have spent most of my life seeking God as best I could; falling down here and getting up there; and it is only now, at the end, that I am beginning to see that that search is nothing other than a struggle to practise poverty. The only thing I ever dreamt about in my life was to give everything to God. And I thank his kindness for never letting me become dispirited, even though I have realized many a time that my dream never came true. God has made me understand, however, that it may all be part of the same game; in the sense at least that awareness of my wretchedness has given me a sense of indigence which is not that far away from true poverty. When all is said and done, poverty is a very destitute virtue; it is so unadorned, so unattractive and unenticing, that not only does it usually pass unnoticed but most people even find it unappetizing and undesirable. Who, for example, likes being in the company of people who are destitute...? And that is exactly what

makes poverty different from humility. Humility can pass unnoticed, even to itself (particularly to itself); whereas poverty is a despised and little desired virtue, and all the more so ever *since her first husband wedded her on the cross*, as Saint Francis of Assisi used to say. I think that I will reach the end of my life convinced that my poverty has amounted to nothing more than the fact that I failed to be poor, despite always wanting to be poor. Here again it all depends on the heart of God; because poverty is really a grace and therefore it is also a question of love.

I said earlier that my life has been nothing but a search for God. And that that search has turned out to be a struggle to practise poverty. Just like the rich people who were queuing up at the Temple treasury, it did not take me much of an effort to give God what I had left over. However, I always knew that the real problem and its solution did not lie there but in something much more difficult, somewhere I felt I could not reach if I had to rely on myself alone. For it was not a question of just giving what I had left over, but of renouncing everything that made up the entire fabric of *my life*. It did not matter whether they were big things or little things, and I even feel that the little things put up more resistance to leave me; because the big things I had already handed over, or so I thought. In fact, what I really had to give up was *my life*. Although, of course, and as it happens to everyone, I knew that it was too hard for me to cut myself off from my life and die to myself: which is precisely what true poverty is all about.

Hence the danger of the substitutes, as I said earlier. Seemingly it is all a matter of going to live in a poor neighbourhood, of travelling in a bad carriage or in the globetrotter wagons that Saint Teresa used (and spending bad nights in bad inns, as the Saint used to do), of going around dressed as a beggar or in some other strange

garb to attract people's attention, or lots and lots of other things not worth listing. Some of my brother priests say that this kind of thing needs to be done to show that we are the same as other people. Nevertheless, some times I suspect that what people really want is to see us as different. Anyway, it may be true that these things are good, although I find they have a basic defect as far as poverty is concerned: they aim at a *poverty which shines out*, whereas poverty is anything but shining: that in fact is why it is poverty. Therefore, I wonder whether all this is not just a pretext for not tackling the question seriously. Fortunately it is not within my competence to judge intentions (Mt 7:1). As a Christian I make an effort to presume that people's intentions are good, and I do not find it very difficult to do that. Unfortunately, that does not solve the problem, because intentions can be wrong and do a lot of harm to souls. Besides, there is my personal problem.

I am convinced that poverty is not a matter of having more or less possessions or enjoying better or worse facilities. That is why I could not be at peace if I would go off to live in a poor neighbourhood, for example, and think that *everything is alright now*. Nor do I think that it would be enough to give up everything I have to buy food for the poor, to give another example; because, nevertheless, it could happen, like Saint Paul says, that *it will do me no good whatever* (1 Cor 13:3). The Apostle seems to have been thinking along these lines and not giving a lot of importance to the sheer materiality of things. He said of himself: *I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have mastered the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in Him who strengthens me.*⁴ From this we can take it that, as he saw it, both poverty and wealth *a pari*, can only be borne with

⁴Phil 4: 12-13.

the help of Him who strengthens us. And maybe that is the key to everything. I think that poverty, sublime virtue among virtues, is something more serious, more difficult and more beautiful than people usually think.

I have been reading Saint Thomas Aquinas' treatise *De Perfectione Vitæ Spiritualis*. In Chapter 6, I found an illuminating passage, apropos of this subject, which I refuse not to quote here:⁵

“The first among the material possessions to be renounced are those extrinsic goods that we call riches. Our Lord counselled us to relinquish them when He said, *If thou wilt be perfect, go, sell all that thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in Heaven; and come, follow me* (Mt XIX, 21)...

“The utility of this counsel is again shown us by those words of our Lord, *A rich man shall hardly enter into the Kingdom of Heaven* (verse 23). St. Jerome tells us the reason for this difficulty. *It is, he says, because it is hard to despise the riches that we possess. Our Lord does not say that it is impossible, but that it is hard, for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. For difficulty does not mean impossibility, but signifies infrequency of performance.* And, as St. Chrysostom says in *super Matth.*, the Lord goes further, proving that it is impossible, for He says: *It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven* (verse 24). From these words, says St. Augustine in *de quæst. Evang.*, the disciples understood that all they that covet riches are included in the number of the rich; otherwise, considering

⁵The long quotation from Saint Thomas which follows is given in Latin in the manuscript, and some parts are quite illegible, which is why I have had to go back to the text of the Saint himself and translate it. The text is taken from the Marietti edition (1954), and I had but to correct the manuscript in some expressions of little importance, except for the curious fact that he wrongly gave the chapter as six instead of seven.

how small is the number of the wealthy in comparison to the vast multitude of the poor,⁶ they would not have asked: *Who then shall be saved?*

“From these two utterances of Our Lord it is clearly evident, that he that possesses riches, will, with difficulty, enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. For, as He says elsewhere (Mt XIII, 22), *the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches choketh up the word of God, and it becometh fruitless*. In truth, it is impossible for those to enter Heaven who love money inordinately. Far easier is it for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. The latter feat would indeed be impossible, without violating the laws of nature. But, if a covetous man were admitted into Heaven it would be contrary to Divine Justice, which is more unfailling than any natural law.”

And I cannot resist the temptation to interrupt Saint Thomas' text for a moment to savour it and enjoy his exegesis. It is a breath of fresh air, a flood of clear thinking and full of common sense. Something quite different from the exegesis one so often comes across, which is either too technical, accessible only to experts (though sometimes I suspect it is only hot air; maybe because I am no expert and I do not understand it) or else too bland, too sweet and rather empty, designed presumably for bored, devout old ladies. By contrast here we have the Gospel read without any preconceived ideas, and with love; with a sincere desire to learn what our Lord is saying, because his words, as He himself told us, are spirit and life. Spirit and life, therefore; and not the sort of technical research scholars go in for (dissection of a dead cadaver) whose meaning I never quite manage to discover. I smile when I think of what certain know-alls would say if they read this —the sort of people who would squash me with their *scholarly* arguments. Fortunately I am not writing for

⁶Which was even more true in the period when Saint Augustine was writing.

them or for anyone, but simply to tell me my own thinking. And, of course, I continue to believe that to understand the Gospel it has to be read with love. I was going to say *with pure eyes*; but since there is no one who can claim to have such a pure gaze, the net result would be that no one could read it. That is why I think that good will and a sincere desire to listen to God are enough. Enough, *but also necessary*. I sometimes think, in connexion with the Gospel, that it may not matter so much whether you are good or bad (I certainly am not good) *as to strive sincerely to make the Gospel live in us*. I am sure that, for Saint Thomas, the Gospel was the soul of his life, and that was why he was able to understand it. And what is no less important: that was why others understood it when he preached it. As regards the kind of homilies we preach, so beautiful and brimful of oratory (I have never properly understood the expression *sacred oratory*),⁷ they give me the impression that they are saying nothing: they go off in one direction, and the people in another. As happens with parallel lines, our speeches never meet and fail to connect with the real problems souls have. That perhaps is due to the fact that the Gospel does not become alive in us (we neither meditate on it in prayer, nor do we crucify ourselves on it), and therefore our vague perorations, which go over people's heads yet are miles away from heaven, almost never coincide with real life. That is why they do not hold people's attention, why people listen to us less and less. Ever since I was a child, even before I made my first communion, I had a great love for Saint Thomas, though I cannot remember why. Now I realize that it was simply that God loved me

⁷Our author did not grasp what in his time used to be called sacred oratory because it was more oratory than sacred. And I agree with him. Nowadays oratory has changed, and it would certainly not like to be called sacred. Of course, among other things that are different about it is the fact that it now has nothing whatever to do with oratory either.

a lot and chose to give me a great love for the truth. However, it is time to close this parenthesis and go back to Saint Thomas' text, to take up the thread of my digressions on poverty and the poor widow of the Gospel.

“Hence, we see the reasonableness of Our Lord's counsel; for a counsel is given concerning that which is most useful, according to the words of St. Paul (2 Cor, VIII. 10): *Herein I give my advice, for this is profitable for you.* If we wish to attain eternal life, it is more advantageous for us to renounce our possessions than to retain them. They that possess wealth will hardly enter into the Kingdom of Heaven; the reason being that it is difficult to prevent our affections from being attached to riches, and that such an attachment makes admission into Heaven impossible. Therefore, Our Lord, with good reason, has counseled the renunciation of riches as our most profitable course.

“It may be objected, however, that St. Matthew, St. Bartholomew, and Zacchaeus were rich; nevertheless, they entered into Heaven. St. Jerome replies that *we must remember that they had ceased to be wealthy at the time of their admission to Heaven.*⁸

“Abraham, however, never lost his wealth, but, as we read in *Genesis*, died a rich man, bequeathing his property to his sons. According to what has been said before, how then could he be perfect? Nevertheless God said to him, *Be perfect* (Gen XVII, 1).

“This question, therefore, cannot be answered if we hold that it is the mere renunciation of wealth which constitutes perfection.

⁸With all due respect, I think this is rather naive of Saint Jerome. I do not know what the author of the manuscript himself thought about this, if in fact he was aware of it. Saint Thomas, for his part, does treat the question more seriously, as we will go on to see.

For, if such were the case, no one who was rich could be perfect.⁹ If we consider carefully Our Lord's words, He does not say that perfection lies in giving up what we possess, but He mentions this renunciation of our possessions as a means to perfection. We see this by His own words, *If thou wilt be perfect, go, sell all that thou hast and give it to the poor, and follow me*. The following of Christ constitutes perfection; the sacrifice of riches is a means to perfection. St. Jerome, in *super Matth.*, says, *As if to show that merely giving up our possessions does not suffice to make us perfect, Peter mentions that wherein perfection consists, when he says, We have followed thee.*"

That is the end of the quotation from Saint Thomas that I wanted to bring in. It seems to make it clear that the really important thing is following Christ, and that poverty is simply the way to achieve that. Of course, it is taken as read that the poverty being spoken of here is Christian poverty, which is the true poverty. A much more serious, more difficult and more beautiful poverty than what those who try to manipulate it make out. Poor, unfortunate poverty, so mistreated *ever since her first husband wedded her on the cross. . . !*

However, I would say that now poverty is more despised than counterfeited; which maybe is much worse. Anyway, I am still of the view that it is the most beautiful virtue after charity. Or perhaps

⁹I think the important thing here is not so much the scriptural basis the saint begins from as the correct doctrine he establishes in clear and forthright terms: *This question cannot be answered if we hold that it is the mere renunciation of wealth which constitutes perfection*. And particularly in what he goes on to say, as we will see, where one cannot but be in awe of the saint's grasp of sound doctrine and his freedom from prejudice. As the author of the manuscript goes on to underline, as Saint Thomas saw it perfection does not depend on whether one does or does not give up one's wealth; *it consists in following Christ*, though the one thing helps the other.

they are both equally beautiful, because deep down they really are the same thing. For it is not possible to be truly poor unless you love, and you cannot attain true love without poverty. Therefore, I think that real, authentic poverty is as difficult to practise, and as beautiful, as true love. That is what I mean to write about next.

III

I have already said that for me poverty consists in giving up what constitutes the “warp” of my life. This “warp” is our Lord and the children He has placed in my care. Nothing else. I would even say that my entire life is the Lord, because I also owe my children to him. They are the best gift he has given me, as an earnest of his love, and I love them with the same love as I love Him. If they are now my children, it is because they are his; and, as we know, love holds all things in common.

In spite of my falls and failings, which have been many, my life has never had any other aim than Jesus. When I felt close to him, I experienced the joy of his presence and the fear of losing him; when I felt far from him, I suffered intensely the sadness of his absence and my yearning for his affection. Our Lord granted me the grace, when I was still very young, of realizing that only He could give meaning to my life. I always knew that I had been born to love and to be loved, and it did not take me long to see that no merely human being could ever fill the desire for tenderness I felt in my heart. This was not something I needed to learn through disillusionment or failure.

From my youth onwards I loved those around me intensely, although I suspect no one ever noticed it. And at the same time I kept on searching. I was always searching, even though I knew that no one was going to respond to this love I was giving and in the way that I bestowed it. I went along like that until I encountered our Lord, and with Him the joy and meaning of my life. At long last, for the first time in my life, my heart felt full.

The years went by. I will never forget the day when I asked our Lord to accept my life; in fact, He himself was my very life. I offered him our mutual friendship: my friendship for Him and His for me. Together with friendship I offered Him our mutual affection: mine for Him and His for me. In this way I gave Him what went to make up the joy and the meaning of my life. Everything that made me feel happy, including the joy of knowing that He too was happy with me.

I think it was a sincere offering. I am able to say that when I made that offering, I was convinced that I had nothing else to give. Everything else, which I had surrendered, I now regarded as unimportant little things. The plans I had as a child and a youth, my interest in my career, my friendships and youthful affections, the joy of human love found in marriage. . . Prior to this, these had been my world and I had generously given them up, out of love.

But it was different now. What I gave up at that time, a decisive time for me, was not my life, *but his*, Jesus' life. It is very difficult for me to write about this; but I will at least try to clarify my thoughts and tell things in the order they happened. I *knew* what that offering meant; and I still know it, though I find it impossible to describe. The generous desires of my early years, when I was keen to offer my own life, were not difficult to understand. Beautiful, happy memories of youth. I had given absolutely everything to our Lord.

I was still quite young when I began to realize that the only true joy in this world is the joy that comes from perfect love, or the joy one receives in exchange when one gives up everything. Now I can see that it is very easy to be generous in that sort of way, because one gets much more than one gives. At that time I felt so happy that I just could not see that there was something else I still had to give up: the very joy I received when I gave everything up. For, although it is true that one can always go beyond, in one way or another that is even more true in the case of love. I would even say that love consists precisely in pressing on more and more, aiming at a final goal which never turns out to be final.

I have already said that our Lord and the children he gave me were the only basis of my life. They were everything I had and I wanted nothing more, because I had everything when I had them. Until I discovered that that was the root of the problem. For, if I now *had everything* —after giving up the things that were my world— I was still not truly poor, genuinely needy. It was clear to me that I was still in fact a rich man, given that it is an undeniable fact that poverty is simply a matter of being *truly needy*.

But I will take it step by step to put my thoughts down on paper as clearly as possible and to the best of my memory. First there were my children; for it was only later that it happened that I was also left without Him. . .

I had meditated many times on the text of Saint John: *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.*¹ I always thought that God could have given no greater proof of his love, because I do not think that there is any greater love than that of a father or a mother for their children. It is indeed true, as our Lord said, that *greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his*

¹Jn 3:16.

*life for his friends,*² but that only confirms what I have said. For a father, his children are his best friends, and much more than his friends, because they are nothing less than his children. The figure of Abraham preparing to sacrifice his son in order to do what God commanded is a truly grandiose one. That is why I was always so impressed by our Lord's words: *He who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*³

Now that I am in the evening of my life, I realize that the real focus of my struggle with the angel of Jacob (that is, God) has always been my children. They are the only thing I have owned in my life. God asked me, when I was a young man, to give him what I had, and I did so. Then, keeping his promise (Mt 19:29), He endowed me with my children. This truly divine gift which meant that they and I would love each other *to the end.*⁴ I am sure that we would not have loved each other so much if they had been children of my body. Up to then I did not know that it was possible for human beings to love and be loved like that. I saw them as truly my *children*, as genuine *brothers* and *sisters* of mine and sincere *friends*. All at one and the same time, and to the highest degree. Sometimes I thought that that was what God wanted all for parents and children of this world, but I have rarely seen it happen in practice among the families I have known. But my personal experience has been different. Even though I never had any doubts about our Lord's promise, I have experienced the truth of it in my own life in the most marvelous manner I could have imagined. I am not a theologian and therefore I do not know whether, paralleling what happens in the Trinity, the most perfect form of love vouchsafed to man is the love between parent and child.

²Jn 15:13.

³Mt 10:37.

⁴Jn 13:1.

But I am quite sure that I loved my children intensely and that they loved me in the same way. Many a time I shed tears thinking that even if I had offered my life to them I still would have given nothing. And, also, since my life has clearly never amounted to much, I have the feeling that I will reach the end and die wishing that I could have presented them with a truer and more worthy life.

Yet in spite of everything it was beautiful. They and I thought that our giving our lives to each other —my giving them mine, and their giving me theirs— really amounted to very, very little. Our love, being genuine, desired to give everything; but we knew that it was still an imperfect love. Surely enough our mutual, actualized love wanted to love till the very end; but since he was not able to, it seemed to him he was loving very little. Because he wanted to surrender everything and he always fell short, he thought he was giving nothing. And this, in fact, was true. Only God can love with perfect love; and only He, therefore, can give everything and receive everything. Yet I do recall that experience with great joy. Thanks to my children, and despite my mediocrity, my life has followed a path of love and has been a life of love; even when my love was imperfect and strayed, it still continued to be a search for total Love. A total Love which always took tender care of me and led me back to the right path when necessary.

That is why I said earlier that my love for my children was a constant struggle, like the Angel's wrestling with Jacob. At all times they were my only and sole possession. Through them God filled me full with happiness; I neither had nor desired any other thing. I always loved them with the same love as that with which I loved our Lord; not only because it was He who had given them to me, but because I have only one heart and one soul. I have never believed that one can love in different ways, because love is one and it flows

from only one source. In spite of everything, as I said before, my children are the only thing that I have had to strive hard for during my life. And now that I have come to the end of it I understand that everything has been a trick played by God. For love also has its own repertoire of tricks and stratagems, and it often uses them. All one need do is read the love story of the “Song of Songs” to know what I mean. That is why I have the suspicion that God has made me wondrously rich, by the splendid gift of my children, and he must have had some curious and undoubtedly loving reason for doing so. I am inclined to think that our Lord has done the same to me as He did to himself: he made me rich so that I could be poor (2 Cor 8:9). To put it another way, He gave me my children so that they should be mine and thus I could give them to him.

I think I can truthfully say I never resisted giving them up. That does not mean that it did not take me an effort, even involving battles which I am not embarrassed to call heroic. It has been the only real struggle of my life and it has shaped and filled my existence. Sometimes it occurred to me that this trial was too cruel and too painful. But now I see that we men are very small-minded and do not think nearly enough. I did not realize, as I said before, that God had made me rich so that I might freely make myself poor; or, as Saint Paul says, *so that by his poverty I might become rich*.⁵ If he wanted that I were really poor he had to make me really rich; sufficiently rich so that I could turn myself, out of love, into a full-blown poor man. If God wanted me to love the All completely, he had to give me something that I would value as much as the All, something I could offer up to him. Only in that way could I give all to the All and attain perfect Love.

⁵2 Cor 8:9.

I should like to add in my favour that I never thought that God would want to rob me of my children. I knew well that they were his and that it was He who had given them to me. But there was something more which I had then only a presentiment of, and which now that I am older I at last understand. I refer to the fact that love gives everything and receives everything, since in the last analysis it works by reciprocity. That is why I needed to give up everything I had if I truly wanted to hold on to my children. But now they would be mine in the heart of God, which is the only place where one can truly possess all things: *Deus meus et omnia*. And that was not all. I at last realized that it was not a matter of having or holding on to my children; love gives up everything and does not look for anything in return. . . , unless it be the very person of the Beloved.

Seemingly you have to be old to learn these things. That is why I smile when I hear people talking about poverty and using some very stunted ideas. They talk about wealth and money, about property and creature comforts, about fame, honour, power. . . , and lots more, as if it were true that it costs a lot to give them up. And maybe it does, because very few people do give them up. But it is unbelievable that anyone should think that poverty is just a matter of not having such things. It is quite empty-headed to think that poverty consists simply in a lack of comfort, respectability or money. Have not there been many people in the world who had none of these things and yet were never poor. . . ? They quite arbitrarily put a high price tag on something that is worth little or nothing; and then they declare that all one needs to do is renounce that thing. . . and poverty is achieved. And so, contrary to what I said before, you don't have to be very rich in order to be poor; any mean-spirited person can bestow the title of poor man on himself. But that is not enough, not nearly sufficient. We can easily deduce that from the Bible: you must be truly rich in order to become truly poor.

I choose my words carefully: *to become poor*. For, poverty, like all the virtues, is a reality which develops and grows over the course of a Christian's life. It is true that grace brings us all the virtues; but that does not mean we do not have to work at them thereafter hand in hand with God. In the last analysis virtues are habits, and habits—including these—have to be *made* before we can wear them. The only thing is that these *habits*, being so special, have to be made by the person who intends to use them. Any other sort of poverty is not Christian poverty but wretchedness; no matter what kind it is, it is wretchedness. That is why it has been possible for a world accustomed to manipulation and deceit to become incapable of distinguishing those who are truly poor from those who are down and out. And I am not referring to the destitute or to beggars when I talk of people being down and out; I mean those who use poverty as a front and do very well out of it. They have given up nothing, or at most very little, and yet they have not hesitated to ostentatiously call themselves poor. Some of them have proclaimed themselves paladins of the poor without ever having known what poverty is. They also usually claim that they became poor in order to bear witness to poverty before the world; which means, apparently, that their kind of poverty is designed to be shouted from the rooftops, well known and winning everyone's admiration. Yet against this stands the undeniable fact that poverty never tries to make a show of itself. To tell the truth, the only thing that poverty could possibly show off would be its nakedness; better yet, it would have absolutely nothing to parade. And if it has nothing to show, what is it trying to make a noise about? I see a lot of people who parade their poverty and manage to be looked up to and respected. But true poverty, which seeks to own nothing, has no honour, acquires no fame, because it takes no interest at all in being seen by men or

looked up to or admired. It is not looking for that sort of thing, because in fact it is not looking for or claiming anything.

Poverty makes no effort to be known by others; it does not go around looking for honour or dishonour. One would debase poverty if one thought it was just a matter of shedding things which, when all is said and done, have no value. Poverty has said an outright No to everything. In the first place to itself, which is the same as saying that it has renounced its own life, its own flesh and blood. In this connexion, speaking for myself, I feel myself to be a father in Christ; my flesh and blood were my children, and therefore, as I saw it, I needed to renounce them in order to make my own self-surrender a real one. Like our Lord, who gives up his Body and Blood in the Eucharist, turning them into true food and true drink.

Children. . . And I am referring to my own children, of course, who are so good and whom I love so much. It goes without saying that in order to be able to give them up, one needs to have them first, as always happens in the business of giving and renouncing, because no one gives what he has not got. That is why I have so often said that poverty must pass through riches if it wants ever to become true poverty. To put it another way, one first needs to be rich in order then to become poor. There are those who go no further than giving small things, or saying that they are giving them—maybe because they have nothing better to give—and who never succeed in being poor. Christian poverty, which like all the virtues must be completely *voluntary* and freely desired, must also have as its object something which is truly possessed and is *worthwhile*. Poverty consists in freely divesting oneself of something which was, logically, one's own prior to this—and something substantial, not a miserly alms. Poverty cannot be anything other than giving up everything to the point where it makes a eucharistic offering of itself

in order thereby to become, out of pure love, someone's food and drink.

Given that that was my understanding of things, then clearly I could not be poor unless I gave up my very life. My flesh, my blood, which was tantamount to saying my own sons and daughters. And, because I have never liked fooling myself, I knew all the time that anything less than that would mean giving our Lord leftovers. Exactly the opposite of what the poor widow did in the Temple: *she out of her poverty put in all the living she had.*

And now, as I write this, I realize the route one must take to reach the point where Christian poverty lies. A route which passes through three key places: first having received a lot; then recognizing that one is destitute; and then surrendering everything, even the wherewithal to live. Or, in case there be any doubt: wealth, indigence, and poverty. A strange and almost incomprehensible way to go, as the ways of God always apparently are.

Someone might ask what would have happened if I had not been rich to begin with. If God had not bestowed on me the great gift of my children, where would it have been then, that unique way of wealth, indigence and poverty? Given that, after all, the poor widow in the Temple gave in only a small coin because that was all she had, in what did her wealth consist?

First of all it is clear that *God had to make me rich if he wanted me to become poor.* And since he did want that, He would have endowed me in some other way if he had not given me my children. I am convinced that every human being is destined to possess true wealth. As regards the widow in the Temple, who had only a base coin, there is no doubt but that she was immensely rich, because hers was the most enviable possession that men could desire. I refer to her generosity, which became so apparent when by doing what

she did she gave in *everything she had*. And when one gives up one's possessions, absolutely everything one has, does it really matter what the quantity is? Can love in any sense be evaluated by measures and quantities?

I recognize, however, despite what I have said so far, that when I surrendered my life to God —my own children— as an oblation of everything I possessed —or everything I thought I possessed—, I was still a long way from true poverty. There was a point at which I could see that Christian poverty was still a long way in the distance, and that I had only just set out on my journey. I knew that true poverty, that forgotten, unknown poverty, aimed still much higher. That it was a virtue as deep and unfathomable as the path of authentic love. The virtue closest to, most akin to, charity. But then...

So, I think it is only now that I can begin to think about true poverty. Because up to now I have been writing about *my poverty*, which is of interest to no one else and which everyone would know —if it is worth the effort of finding it out— is really a *miserable poverty*. In order to speak about true poverty *one needs to speak about Christ's poverty*, because mine can only be genuine to the degree that it bears his seal. But that was something I discovered later, after contemplating the poverty of Christ naked and abandoned on the cross. Beautiful poverty, wedded to her first husband on the cross, and then wedded to the saints...! Her praises sung yet repudiated, her memory kept yet forgotten, exalted yet unknown, and ever loved by all true lovers. By those who understand that love, in the last analysis, is nothing other than giving up everything, divesting oneself of everything one has, for the sake of the person one loves.

IV

I knew I had reached a crossroads in my life when I realized that I still possessed something that I could give to God. It was the only thing I was left with and what I regarded as most important; it was what I had always dreamed about, what gave my life its deepest meaning. This was the most *important*, most *fundamental* point in my whole existence.

I thought that, by building on the solid foundation of poverty, I had at last discovered the true meaning of my life. I had a superabundance of two things which formed the background of that life: joy —complete Joy— and love —the greatest, the only, Perfect Love. Possessing, as I did, real Love and, as a logical consequence, enjoying Perfect Joy, I quite rightly felt that I possessed All. And then I came to see that, because I had it, it was something I could give up.

I am afraid I am not going to have much to say, because I ought not speak about things which I just cannot explain. That is, complete Joy and perfect Love. I really feel I am not able to write about these subjects. My ideas and feelings seem to refuse to express them-

selves, even though in my mind and in my heart they are so very clear and intense and so accessible.

Around that time... How many years ago? I do not know exactly, all I know is that it was many years ago. I was feeling happy, quite convinced that I had renounced everything. I was in love and there was nothing else I could wish for. How could I, if I had everything? I had given up everything and the result was that I possessed All. Jesus was my very life to me, too (Phil 1:21); and therefore, I was left with much: He was my Life, my Love and my complete Joy. That was the point when, with great enthusiasm and not a little daring—the generous imprudence of youth—, I told our Lord that I was also ready to give Him that.

Undoubtedly mine was a rapturous love. It was not surprising that I should act like that: love of that sort—authentic love— does not think when it comes to giving, or, if it does think, it is about how to give itself even more. The offering I made was as sincere as the feelings of all true lovers. But the truth is that I never thought I would be listened to, precisely because what I was giving was too much. What can man give or receive in return for Love? And, if he succeeds in giving up Love, can he offer more? And once he has given up Love, is there something that he can receive in exchange? Can “That” be given without receiving anything, so that one is left with nothing?

*For love is as strong as death,
jealousy is cruel as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
a flame of Yahweh himself.
Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.
If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house
he would be utterly scorned.¹*

¹Sg 8: 6–7.

However, my Love was so great that I would have surrendered it anyway even had I known what I did not yet know.

What I was quite unaware of at that time was that God, being even more crazy than I, was capable of accepting the offer and did so. The years have gone by, with all their various events and sufferings, and now I understand things better. I refer above all to the sufferings which resulted from his absence. Are there many who can understand that the only real suffering is that caused by the sense that the Loved One has gone away? And could authentic Love not but accept a total offering, which in fact consists in Love itself, so that no other donation thereafter has any meaning any more?

*Were a man to offer all his family wealth to buy love,
contempt is all that he would gain.*

However, a difficulty arises here about the concept of love as gift and self-surrender in perfect reciprocity. Since what was surrendered in this case was the *Loved One himself*, what other thing could the person receive in return or what would he even wish to receive? He had given All without expecting to receive anything in exchange. His gift was motivated by a madness of love whereby he gave up, as the only and greatest thing he had, the Loved One himself. This brings us to the point where Love is simply and solely a donation, a surrender, and a sheer Gift; as if prescinding, by some process of abstraction, from any notion of reciprocity. Which is what happens in God, where Love is pure Gift-giving itself, not expecting or needing anything in return. And this is where love ceases to be human and becomes divine, but with an extra which makes it even more divine: for, being purely divine, it is offered to man for him to possess it as his own.

That is the only way I can understand what the poor widow in the Gospel did, when she put into the Temple collection all that she had to live on. How would she survive...? Very probably she did not know the answer, did not even ask herself the question. Love does not make tidy plans about ways to enjoy a better life or even about how to go on living. All it wants to do is to give up everything without wondering what is going to happen later. If it does involve expectations and nostalgia, as happens with us, that is because it is still an imperfect love. As love sees it, life can mean only one thing: losing one's life, *surrendering it now* and not thinking about anything else (Mt 10:39). I have written the words "not thinking about anything else" slowly and deliberately because that keeps very much at bay certain false forms of poverty. Here I am speaking only about the beautiful and difficult virtue of Christian poverty. Being, as it is, the virtue closest to love, the only thing it understands is self-surrender and nuptials. Real nuptials which lead the lovers to the tournament of a love which throws down a challenge, a love which is ready to surrender all it has without expecting anything in return.² Who can give more and, at the same time, be disposed to receive least in return? Who will become still more poor so as to be able to love more?

*You well know that foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.*³ These words of our Lord, addressed to someone who wanted to follow him, have led me to reflect a lot over the course of my life. The Son of man had no place to go or nowhere to lay his head. Given that these words were addressed to an aspiring disciple it is legitimate

²I think the author is referring here to the text of Sg 2:4: *He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love.*

³Lk 9:58.

to think that they are an imperative condition for everyone who intends to follow him earnestly. When I was a young man, full of enthusiasm for my priestly life, these words always filled me with joy. They acted as a goal for the future and I could not imagine the priesthood making sense otherwise. I interpreted them as requiring a total donation to God and to others. As far as I could see, given the forcefulness of our Lord's statement, enhanced by his reference to foxes and birds of the air, his words could not refer simply to things like doing without rest or something like that; for that would turn his words into a euphemism, depriving them of their pungent meaning, their tremendous forcefulness. As I read them they evoked the idea of a total renunciation which included one's peace, one's happiness, and even one's holiness if one were in fact holy.

Now that I am old I am at ease writing this, because I can clearly see that those intuitions of youthful generosity were quite correct. That is precisely the great joy of the Christian and especially of the priest. Whereas anyone —and when I say that, I mean absolutely everyone, including the birds of the air and the tiniest of animals, and not forgetting the destitute of the universe— possesses at least the most basic things, even if it is only a place to shelter in, the true disciple of Christ does not have even that. And here is the great paradox, the great joy of the priest lies in this. He has no right even to his peace or his joy, for it is his office to give up everything; he cannot even think of enjoying peace, happiness, rest or repose, for the simple reason that *he has nowhere to lay his head*. But at the same time he is well equipped to give all these things and without measure because he is the only man in the world who can give something he does not have. Just as he is able to shed light though he sees himself obliged to continue to make his way in the obscurity of faith; to speak clearly and firmly about things which for him are no more

than stammering; and to heal others, even though he has no health himself. *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you.*⁴ When he transmits peace or happiness it is not his own peace and happiness that he communicates, but *that of another*; it was that other who gave him these things so that he should share them out with open hands. A peace and a joy that can be given because they are gifts. That is how, and we are still within the mystery of the Christian paradox, the priest finds his own peace and his own happiness, *provided that he had first left himself without them through having given them to others.* That is why a considerable part of our Lord's farewell discourse has to do with promising his disciples joy: *Your sorrow will be turned into joy.*⁵ Hence the mystery and marvel of the Christian aporia—which is but the greatness of a mystery that transcends us—have been used by lie-merchants and devisers of ambiguities to present a false poverty as being the true one. They project themselves as being poor, when in fact they are not; and the world acclaims them as being poor and protectors of the poor, forgetting that *true poverty was never applauded by anyone.* Saint Francis of Assisi consummates his poverty by dying naked on the bare floor, surrounded by the few disciples who were left and contemplating the fact that his Order, which he had dreamed about so much, had been replaced by another more *sensible* one, more in line with the world's criteria. The true disciple of our Lord is well aware of his poverty and his indigence, and has no doubt about the fact that his is the right version. But for that very reason he never shouts about it. What is there to shout about when he knows that poverty is *nothing*? It is just as well that, here again, as always, God's thoughts are not men's thoughts. The

⁴Jn 14:27.

⁵Jn 16:20.

true poverty of the genuine disciple is seen by God for what it is and in *all* its reality. That is why it is possible to say that perhaps the true poverty of Christ's disciple is regarded by God as wealth: *I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer.*⁶

I now, at long last, realize, after all these years, that true poverty is a lonely virtue. I do not refer to the fact that, because it is unattractive and despised, no one or almost no one accepts it as a companion; I refer to something that is as important and as profound as it is beautiful. True poverty is something solitary because it suffers the pain of the most severe loneliness that can be imagined: that of having lost the Loved One, *who was all its good*.

I think I am coming closer to the heart of poverty, or to where one feels the absence of what is one's very life. Jesus himself, who when he felt alone and misunderstood by people, and even by his disciples, went so far as to say on one occasion: *Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me,*⁷ when he was nailed to the cross he could not but exclaim: *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me. . . ?*⁸ It is at this very moment that poverty acquires the status of a beautiful virtue and is given a new meaning. A meaning which often passes unnoticed or is misunderstood due to human nature's well-known difficulty in understanding something that is too great and too beautiful. After this, seeing how Jesus on the cross felt so abandoned by the Father, what importance for us are all other hankerings for things past and all the rejection inflicted by the world. . . ?

It makes me think of the abandonment and indigence I have experienced in my poor life, since I cannot truly call it my *life of*

⁶Rev 2: 9–10.

⁷Jn 16:32.

⁸Mt 27:46.

poverty: it has consisted in only one thing, the Lord's absence. Of course, compared with the abandonment and indigence of our Lord on the cross, it is easy to see that there is the same distance between my experience and his as there is between my love for Jesus and Jesus' love for his Father. As that stanza of Saint John of the Cross goes:

*Whither have you hidden yourself,
O Beloved, leaving me to lament?
Like the stag you have fled,
having wounded me;
I went out after you, calling, and you were gone.⁹*

We must presume that the poet is referring here to the abandonment he himself felt, although without excluding my own and that of all men who realize they are far away from God. A human abandonment with a divine basis, even though it is very different and distinct from the abandonment of Christ on the cross.

Yet it is a true abandonment, consisting precisely of a painful feeling caused by absence of the Loved One. It is a feeling that I have lived with almost all my life, and I am convinced that it is the only thing that can lead to true poverty. For to be without the All is the only thing that leaves man with Nothing. Nothing else from which he detaches himself, or of which he is divested, will make him truly poor. But freely surrendering infinite wealth, for love's

⁹In the original:

*¿A dónde te escondiste,
Amado, y me dejaste con gemido?
Como el ciervo huiste
habiéndome herido;
salí tras Ti clamando, y eras ido.*

sake, places the person who acts like that in a situation of infinite poverty. That is why our Lord is the only truly Poor among the poor (2 Cor 8:9), and also the only one able to share his infinite poverty with his disciples.

*Upon my bed at night
I sought him whom my soul loves,
I sought him, but found him not.*¹⁰

.....

*Tell me, you whom my soul loves,
where you pasture your flock,
where you make it lie down at noon.*¹¹

I have always been very moved by the account in Acts of Saint Peter and Saint John curing the man born crippled, at the Beautiful gate of the Temple.¹² Saint Peter's words fill me with wonder: *I have no silver or gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ, walk.* And I am amazed by the enormous power given to the virtue of poverty. As Saint John of the Cross used to say, through the nothing into the whole. Clearly one needs to have nothing in order to be able to do great things and be ready to surrender oneself entirely. Saint Peter would not have been able to cure that cripple if he had owned silver or gold.

However, I always seem to see a small —though wonderful— incongruity in this episode. Saint Peter displays, in spite of everything, an extraordinary power which made available to him the immense

¹⁰Sg 3:1.

¹¹Sg 1:7.

¹²Acts 3:1 ff.

wealth of the name of Jesus: with it he could do anything. Whereas I do not have the power of Jesus' name available to me; neither his Person; nor his love.

I have often reflected on the unfortunate deprived people who appear in the Gospel. The paralytic at the Probatric Pool, for example, who had spent over thirty years waiting for someone to put him into the water in time to win a cure.¹³ Or the blind man of Jericho, who threw himself in tears at Jesus' feet, shouting: *Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*¹⁴ And so many other unfortunate people who probably, though, had or still have someone or somewhere to go to. But what about me, what do I have? I have no particular goodness, no brilliant quality, no merit —extraordinary or ordinary— nor have I done anything in the course of my life which is worth telling about. I cannot boast of the small, daily heroism of a good priest's life, much less of that holiness which aroused so much my enthusiasm in my youth but which I can see no sign of anywhere.

It is said that we old people live off memories. Maybe that is why I remember now the day I said to our Lord in front of the tabernacle, availing myself of the intimacy and solitude of prayer:

—Lord, I would like to offer you something and not feel I have always to be going to you empty-handed. . . . Some good action; some sacrifice; something to show; or some merits gained for you through love. . . .

And my prayer made me smile when it occurred to me that our Lord could easily have told me in reply:

—If you did have merits I would have to love you taking them into account. My love would be in some way a *just pay-back*, and could even run the risk of being distracted by its high regard for

¹³Jn 5: 1–9.

¹⁴Mk 10:48.

your works. Whereas in the present situation all I have to do is love you, devoting myself to you alone, because there is nothing else that needs to be taken account of. And remember always that what interests me is not so much your merits as your heart.

When I was still an adolescent, in the spring of my vocation, I was very impressed by something Saint Paul says to the Corinthians: *For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.*¹⁵ I knew that these words were written for me too, because I had no doubt that our Lord had called me. But because of my youth I did not understand them properly. I thought they referred to something the world interpreted as weakness, or to not having certain values proper to some kind of Knight Order, values I had no need of because I was quite convinced that I would acquire much better ones. It would never even have occurred to me that Saint Paul was referring to a *genuine, real weakness*. A weakness so real. . . that, rather than consider it weakness, I would call it absolute lack, nakedness, total indigence. Precisely the things which would have shocked me and maybe killed off my vocation, if I had fully understood them at that time.

That is why now, in the evening of my life, when the time has come to bring the harvest to the granary to be stored, I have such a strong desire to say to our Lord, making Saint Peter's words my own: *Master, we toiled all night and took nothing!*¹⁶ Because to tell

¹⁵1 Cor 1: 26–29.

¹⁶Lk 5:5.

the truth there is no such harvest. My children are not the result of my apostolate: they are a *pure gift* from God. Instead of the fruits I expected to gather, all I seem to have is a poverty and a need which make me think that I have never known how to respond generously to Love. And I feel I want to cry, because it makes me so sad to be convinced that I have defrauded God.

But thanks to God's goodness I am still a long way away from bitterness. I would say, rather, that bitterness is exactly the opposite of what I feel. If I had to start again, knowing in advance what I now know about my life, I would not hesitate to do so. And also, although I do not know why and cannot explain it, I do thank God for making me a useless priest. Sometimes, however, in those occasional moments when I get flashes of enlightenment in my old age, the words of our Lord come powerfully to my mind: *I appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide.*¹⁷ And although I never will understand why, I am sure that the Master said those words for me too. When all is said and done, it was He who chose me, perhaps not so much to give fruit as to respond to his love. Or maybe there are—who knows—all sorts of ways of responding to love, and bearing fruit, which I am unaware of.

I do not know but it does not worry me too much. I have already said that my sadness is something much closer to happiness than to bitterness. I feel happier than ever and I do not at all mind having made my life's journey on my own, forever seeking Him whom I knew was the only one capable of giving me pleasant companionship and filling my heart. I have already said that true poverty is a lonely virtue. That is why, now that I have reached this point, I can speak about one of those discoveries vouchsafed only to those who carry

¹⁷Jn 15:16.

the burden of many years. Given that poverty is a lonely virtue and is closely connected to love, and bearing in mind also that everything in love is reciprocal, this means that it has to be shared equally by the person loved. Therefore, as always in things to do with love, loneliness and nostalgia are called on to form part of the very life of the Loved One. Saint John of the Cross wisely intuited this in his ineffable poetry:

*In solitude she lived,
and in solitude she has built her nest,
and in solitude now her beloved guides her
alone, who likewise
in solitude was wounded by love.¹⁸*

It follows, that, if I lived in loneliness and nostalgia, the reason is that the Loved One has done the same. If my poverty consists in being totally divested it is because it shares, at least in some way, in the despoliation and abandonment of Christ on the cross. If poverty means giving up everything for love's sake, including the Loved One's love, it is because poverty is simply another name for love or at least it is the result of love: of true Love, if it is true Poverty we are discussing. That is why poverty is destined, like love, to hope for its final consummation in our Homeland.

This leads me to conclude that poverty is as eternal as love itself (1 Cor 13: 8.13), but I have to ask myself a question. Given that that

¹⁸In the original:

*En soledad vivía,
y en soledad ha puesto ya su nido,
y en soledad la guía
a solas su querido,
también en soledad de amor herido.*

is so, what does poverty consist of once love attains its consummation in Heaven? And, although clearly I cannot imagine a reply, I still think that, when that point comes, the lover and the Loved One will attain the fullness of their mutual poverty in their total, definitive mutual self-surrender. Finally, and more definitively, each of them gives himself entirely to the other, *holding nothing back*. This means that everything is reduced, for both, to a pure donation, which is what both the one and the other become. In the last analysis, Love is pure donation or pure Gift. In this reciprocal self-giving, which is only one —because Love is one and the same for both parties, to the point that it is produced at one and the same time by both—, the two become one and the same thing, while retaining, each of them, their *otherness*, their own identity as persons. This means that each of them experiences his own donation as well as the other's self-surrender. Thanks to this mutual donation and self-surrender, each of the lovers, through a mysterious miracle of Love, is possessed by a double love for the other. It could not be otherwise now that the lover cannot give the Loved One anything better than the Beloved himself, nor can the Loved One give the lover anything better than his Love for him: *That the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them.*¹⁹ It is only now, so many years later, that I realize that Jesus wanted to give me his own Love and that that is what he did. And I equally understand at last something Saint Paul said which I have always thought mysterious: *God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*²⁰ If God is Love, because he is a Trinity —and he is a Trinity because He is Love— it means he is infinitely rich; but because he was first infinitely poor. Or perhaps it is the other way around, and

¹⁹ Jn 17:26.

²⁰ Rom 5:5.

my formula is not quite able to express the reality. Anyway I think that what we have here is the total donation of the Father to the Son, as also that of the Son to the Father, in the Holy Spirit. Be that as it may, I have no doubt that God is infinitely Poor, because he is total Simplicity, which is precisely what the infinity of Being means. So much so that his Poverty, which is a self-surrender that is absolute and freely desired, is turned into Donation or Gift. Therefore God is Love. A Love which because it surrenders Everything also receives Everything. And that is why one can also say, and one is perfectly right, that God is infinitely Rich —the only one who is truly rich.

I am afraid, however, I have been “diverting” myself, as Saint Teresa used to say, and I think that tiredness is getting the better of me: I will have to stop writing for today. But not without stressing again, here and now —not leaving it to tomorrow, because I no longer trust my memory—, that I am happy to have been a wretched man. Who knows if, thanks to that, taking pity on me, God will not grant me some day the grace of becoming a poor man...! But I do not want to expect too much. Maybe the most a priest can claim is that he has been an indigent man. I do not really know. For he is a man who carries too much on his shoulders: the burden of all the churches (as Saint Paul said), the burden of all mankind, the weight of all the sins of the world. Even though I do realize and am well aware that *my yoke is easy, and my burden is light* . . .²¹

But that is when one loves our Lord, of course. Whereas I do not know if I have ever managed to truly love him. The only thing I am sure about is that I would have liked to love him. With all my soul, yes indeed. Or perhaps with all my love. . .

²¹Mt 11:30.

EPILOGUE

The manuscript ends, or is broken, at this point. I do not know which, because the other pages in the bundle are blank and my search among the other old documents where I found this one proved fruitless.

I remember that when I finished reading it for the first time, I tied up the dusty sheets again, using its own yellowing tapes, and I stayed pensive a good while wiping the tears that ran down my cheeks.

I admit that I was taken aback by the odd notion of poverty I had had up to then. It was a rather mean notion, to be sure. The sort of human, triumphalist notion that is far from the valid triumphalism of the Gospel. Which moves me to think that we will never manage to understand it. Our tendency to dilute it and smooth its edges, turning its content into something closer to our narrow-minded ideas, gets in the way of our perceiving its grandeur and its beauty.

For, whoever the author of those pages was, one thing stood clear in my mind. He was someone who experienced the poverty that comes from

the worst kind of deprivation: being without Jesus; or without the Loved One, as he puts it. He was someone who, despite having journeyed all his life with an anguished feeling of nostalgia, caused by the absence of God, never tired in seeking him. Yet one thing is certain: in spite of everything, his nostalgia and sense of absence always happened in a context of utter fidelity. One can see this clearly from the manuscript, particularly its final pages. I think that this absence of God was for the author rather felt than real. I mean, God was probably at his side, more present than ever, yet through the mystery of the abandonment on the cross, an abandonment the author has shared perhaps without knowing it. Like the grain of wheat in the Gospel: it does not realize that it is dying, yet it ends up bearing fruit.

Just like that man, I too come to learn things as the years go by. One of them is that true goodness, like true humility, is always unknown to itself. I also think that, if we should ever manage to really share our Lord's existence, we will be allowed to experience the mystery of Christian suffering and poverty in all its fullness. And I even think —although I cannot be very sure of it, because I lack experience— that our Lord will never be closer to us, even though we may think the opposite, and for that very reason, than when we miss him with all the anguish and all the nostalgia a heart in love is capable of.

The author says that he never met “the Loved One,” and that he never owned anything because he had given up everything out of love. But who knows. . . ? Because maybe this search, maintained tirelessly his whole life long, and spurred on by a powerful sense of absence caused in turn by love, was much more beautiful than a possible encounter that might have been accompanied by the joy of anticipated presence.

The author seems to be familiar with the writings of Saint John of the Cross. And I rather think that the saint, who was so very identified with the feelings described here, could have written, though much more beautifully, some of these stanzas which also speak of the search for the Loved One in a distant paraphrase of the Song of Songs:

*My Lover, we will climb
the mountains of the rosemary and rockrose,
and then we will drink
the two of us, from the abundant spring
its fresh, clear, and murmuring waters.*

*Let us go to the village,
there we shall wait for the crimson dawn
so that I may look at you;
and there we'll fall silent
and the awakening of the fields we'll listen:*

*The chariot of dawn,
the voices of shepherdesses and young men,
the turtledove's crying
among the oak tree groves,
and the kiss of the breeze to the wheat fields.¹*

.....

¹In the original:

*Mi Amado, subiremos
al monte del tomillo y de la jara,
y luego beberemos
los dos, en la alfaguara
el agua rumorosa, fresca y clara.
Vayamos a la aldea,
y el carmín de la aurora esperaremos
para que yo te vea;
y luego callaremos
y el despertar del campo escucharemos:
El carro de la aurora,
las voces de pastoras y zagales,
la tórtola que llora
entre los robledales,
y el beso de la brisa a los trigales.*

.....

*Were you to see me again,
yonder in the valley, where the blackbird sings,
do not tell me your love,
for I would surely die
were you per chance to tell it once more.²*

I too am beginning to think, after reading the unfinished manuscript, that perfect Joy can only be felt in this world if one experiences the nostalgia of true Love and the pain of its absence. A nostalgia and pain that one experiences all the while one makes one's way in the security of a sure hope. However, it is a way that each of us has to take, for there is no one who can take our place in that suffering. For the anxieties and the pain caused by God's absence are our own personal endeavour. Like love, which is always personal and unique to each of us. That is why our poet of Fontiveros could also have said, in another stanza which never came to be written:

*The wounded nightingale
I begged to tell me his lamentations,
but then I entreated him
not to answer my request,
for I wished to go on crying in my fashion.³*

²In the original:

*Si de nuevo me vieres,
allá en el valle, donde canta el mirlo,
no digas que me quieres,
no muera yo al oírlo
si acaso tú volvieras a decirlo.*

³In the original:

*Al ruiseñor herido
pedí que su lamento me dijera,
mas luego le he pedido
que no me respondiera,
para seguir llorando a mi manera.*

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