

ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

THE ordinary Christian is apt to wonder at the traditional teaching of theologians and spiritual writers on the two ways of living a Christian life. He hears of the active and contemplative lives, but to which of the two, he asks himself, does he belong? Of course, his life is one long activity; but it would not seem to be precisely Christian activity. His days are spent in earning his living, and what little time he has for himself he uses for his personal recreation. Must he, therefore, conclude that his life does not come into the Christian scheme of things, that it is neither active nor contemplative? Then again, he remembers how Martha hurried about the house in Bethany; but Mary sat still at His feet. It seems that the rebuke is turned towards him: 'Martha, Martha, thou art careful and art troubled about many things. But one thing is necessary. Mary hath chosen the best part, which shall not be taken away from her' (Luke x, 41-42). How distant it all seems, how remote from his own life. And what chance has he got of practising the one thing necessary, which would seem to be the life of contemplation? But he recollects perhaps how St. Paul, and the Fathers of the Church after him, taught that variety is necessary for the perfection of the Mystical Body which has some members for more abundant honour and some for less honourable functions: he is perfect if he fills his perfect place in that Body. But he does not appreciate the idea of living perpetually among the second rate.

Such difficulties need not be met by long discussions concerning the relation of action and contemplation or the nature and state of perfection. Instead we shall examine the fundamental truths which underlie the division of the Christian life. For it is the life of grace and it is the life of Christ, a consideration of which is at once revealing and reassuring. It reassures the Christian who feels condemned

to an eternal third-class compartment, it reveals the way from the third-class to the first-class compartment.

The Christian as such is alive so long as grace is inspiring his soul and raising him to the level of divine things. But this life is not just any sort of elevated life; it is a divine life, the life of God. One in a state of grace works and moves himself by becoming absorbed into the Godhead itself, by sharing in the working and self-movement of God in His intimate mysterious nature. Or, if we look at it not so much as the soul rising to God's level as God Himself coming down into the soul, we see that a soul is 'graced' by the presence of the Three divine Persons of the Holy Trinity. Whereas before the coming of grace, God was present to the soul only as the mysterious First Cause keeping the whole man from crumbling into nothingness, now by grace He is there personally, and being Three Persons He dwells in this new temple according to the intimate life of the Father, the Word and the Love. But does the soul share that divine life of the Blessed Trinity? If a new bond between God and the soul were not formed through the recognition of these Three divine Persons it would make little difference if God were present either as the First Cause or as the Three in One. It is in the knowledge of this presence that the new life of grace is found—the Blessed Trinity lives in the soul as the object of the soul's knowledge and love. Not knowledge alone, nor love alone; but both together they seize the whole Truth and the whole Good in a personal embrace. It is through loving and knowing that the soul is formed and fashioned to the likeness of what it holds within itself. The soul becomes united with the unique life of the Deity by means of the mind and will which are informed and specified—saturated, if you will—by the Three Persons Whom it sees and loves. This union, then, is rooted in the divine life of the Trinity; God's perfection becomes our perfection, which makes possible a life of knowing and willing, as it were, within the Trinity.

We speak of the soul as though it were something separate from the body, but we must not forget that the whole man is raised to the supernatural order by this divine gift. The soul is that by which man lives: but it is the whole man that lives. And when the soul is transformed the man does not suddenly fall in two or leave some of himself behind, as the newly-formed butterfly discards the husk of the crysallis. All that is truly man is transformed and lives by a new life, so that all that he does, his thoughts, words and deeds, become gracious, performed in the presence of, and together with, the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Eating and sleeping and working, as well as praying and receiving Holy Communion, are all done for God, with God, and in God, in the intimacy of His three-fold life. Such is the Christian life, the life of grace, the life of God.

The Christian life is, therefore, the way to the happiness of heaven where God's own perfection perfects each soul to the fullness of its capacity. St. Peter called grace the 'seed of glory' because the glory of heaven consists in living wholly in the presence of the Blessed Trinity. We long and labour for the happiness of heaven; and yet what is grace but a foretaste of its joys? Between the seed and the flower there is no interruption. Nature does not step in and remove the seed and put a plant in its place; the process is one of normal development and growth. Thus no bottomless abyss separates the soul's road on earth from the Abiding City which lies at the end of the road. The Christian life is the eternal life already begun, so that the life of a Christian on this earth is not wholly an earthly one; it is in part a heavenly life. 'Dearly beloved,' writes St. John, 'we are *now* the sons of God.' We have, therefore, our place with the Only-begotten Son in the bonds of the Trinity. St. John tells us too that God has already given us eternal life, while St. Paul tells Timothy to 'lay hold on eternal life' not as something to be done in the future, but of pressing, present urgency.

There is little need for us here to insist on the difference between the beginning and the completion. The Christian life is essentially a life of travel. The mind knows of God's presence by faith, which is necessarily an imperfect way of knowing, quite different from the clear and perfect vision that we shall have of Him in heaven. Seeing God thus in a glass and in a dark manner leaves room for that variation in the life of a Christian which is the basis for the division between the active and contemplative lives. Yet however imperfect it may be, this realisation of God's presence is an intellectual and contemplative knowledge. Moreover, the will goes on ahead by its love and reaches the very goal that it will attain fully in heaven. Hence while the Christian life is thus imperfect, a life of travel, it has, as it were, already reached the outskirts of the New Jerusalem. It took three days' journey to enter the city of Ninive; but it takes a lifetime to enter fully into the City of God.

There are two important conclusions to be drawn from these truths on the nature of the Christian life. The first is that it is a whole life. If a man lives as a Christian he cannot divide up his life between his religion and his business life. He cannot forget all about God during the week and then become a Christian for the Sunday. Perhaps it may be a very mediocre and half-hearted life that he leads as a Christian, yet if he preserves the grace of God in his soul and does not thrust the gift aside by sin, he lives a Christian life even in his most worldly occupations. The presence of God is there as the source of all his works, even when he is unconscious of it. But gradually he should become more aware and more loving, more in harmony with his divine Collaborator. Secondly, this doctrine shows that every Christian life is rooted in contemplation, for it is lived in the presence of the Blessed Trinity and is the beginning of the vision of God, the highest form of contemplation. The faithful soul in every walk of life possesses God by faith and love. But the life of faith is

not necessarily one of profound theological speculation about the nature of the relations in the Trinity or the praise type of Christ's human knowledge. It is rather a loving realisation of this real presence within the soul. More than this, the faithful Christian is endowed by the Holy Spirit with those divine Gifts of the mind, Wisdom, Knowledge and Understanding. By these Gifts he is led not merely to assent to these realities, but he is given the power to understand them, and to see and judge everything from God's point of view. Of course imperfections and venial sins can harm considerably the working of these Gifts, but always they remain in germ, at the very centre of his life of faith, his divine life of grace. So long as he remains faithful his life is founded in contemplation; and the strength that gives life to his many activities that fill almost every moment of his waking hours, rises up from this contemplative life of grace. Indeed it is precisely the contemplative aspect of the Christian life that gives it its wholeness and unity. The works of the active life are separate and multiple. They are done for food and clothing, or for rest and pleasure—there are many different purposes and ends so that by itself the active life cannot be united into a whole. But when eventually they are brought back to the source and last end of all, to the Three Divine Persons for Whom these activities are ultimately performed, they are gathered into a whole by love, faith, and the Gifts.

The Christian life is also the life of Christ in the individual. It is here that we find not only the focal point of this life of contemplation, but also another fundamental aspect of his life, namely that it is also a life of action. In the first place, therefore, we are taught that the grace we live by is always the grace of our Lord merited for all and given to all by His action on Calvary, when, as Head of the Mystical Body, He redeemed all His members. The contemplative, then, of the lowest or the highest degree, must see God through Christ, for all grace comes to him

through Christ's life, death and resurrection, so that he must, of necessity be conformed to that Model, represent it in his own daily life. But this is not achieved solely by living the life of Christ's grace. He must also see Him as the primary object of his mind and will. Every contemplative must first look on the Incarnate Word before he can begin to see the Word itself, in Whom he is to see all truth, the truth of the Godhead. And by this loving gaze on the Incarnate Word the contemplative reproduces in himself that life to which he is united by mind and heart. Our Lord is the Way of all grace to man and of all men to God: the Truth in which every Christian must see God: the Life that gives strength to every Christian that walks in grace.

The Christian, therefore, looks to Christ to discover the truly Christian life; and one of the most obvious things that demands to be reproduced in his own life is the Activity of our Lord. For although our Lord spent so long in prayer and retirement that His life must be said to be fundamentally contemplative, yet He had received an active mission from His Father; He had come to redeem mankind. He spent three years in preaching and in healing the sick; and, at last, He gave Himself to that Sacrifice which was the Act of His life on earth. He came as the Revelation; hence He had to be active in preaching. He came to destroy sin, and so He had to fight against the powers of evil. He came to lead men to God, and that demanded going among men and drawing them to Himself. Every Christian, therefore, by virtue of the very life he lives, must take his share in the preaching of the Word, in the destroying of evil, and in the drawing of men to God. Every Christian who is alive in grace must, therefore, share in the apostolic and mediatorial life of Christ; his life is fundamentally active.

But the contemplative sees more than this as He gazes on his Model: he sees our Lord as the Head of the Mystical Body to which he himself belongs as a living member.

He treats our Lord, the Blessed Trinity, the One God, as though he and God were the only two realities in the world; and God treats him in the same way. For they are friends. There is the unique union of friendship between them; the Blessed Trinity dwells with the individual as though there were no one else besides. But in Christ he comes to broaden his view of this miraculous life and to realize that as one member of the Incarnate God he must necessarily live a social life, receiving his vitality in union with all the other members. The individual member depends on all the other members, and they in their turn depend on him. 'But now there are many members indeed, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand: I need not thy help; nor again the head to the feet: I have no need of you' (I Cor. xii, 20). Life as a member of a society demands action; co-operation with the rest of the society is essential to membership. To cut oneself off from one's fellows is to cut oneself off from the source of life. Again the contemplative eye of faith reports that the Christian life is in some way fundamentally active because it is a corporate life.

There is yet one more aspect of this active element of the Christian life, which perhaps begins to lead the way to a synthesis with the other, the contemplative element. For in considering how the Christian becomes a member of this Mystical Body, we are shown that it is through a sacrament instituted by Christ, by which he, the Christian, receives the character of Christ himself. Baptism stamps a man indelibly with the mark of Christ, so that from then onwards he is an *alter christus*, another christ. That is why he is called a Christian, and why he must live the life of Christ. Now the basic design of this mark on his soul is a priestly one, which makes him a sharer in the priesthood of the One Mediator between God and man. This means that all his actions, the actions of that life which we have seen is a whole and a unity in grace and contemplation, become holy and are offered to God as part

of the honour and reverence due to Him from the Body of Christian society. The priest is ordained for action, but for a special type, for that which can rightly be given to God alone. Sacrifice is an action that man must perform for God but for nothing below God; and the Christian in virtue of his baptismal character turns his whole life into a sacrifice united to the one Sacrifice of Him whose character he bears in his soul and whose life he leads. The Christian character therefore turns all external activity back to God and to that extent links it to the permanent foundation of contemplation which never turns away from that one Object of all love and all knowledge. And though each offers his life as a sacrifice with the one High Priest, and with and for all the other members of this priestly Mystical Body, yet the offerings arrive with their multiple activities at one single destination, the Triune God, Who dwells within the Christian's soul as the object of his knowledge and his love, as the object of his contemplation. The Christ life of action turns all back to that one point.

So far the ordinary Christian in a state of grace, will realise that his life is composed of two elements, the one contemplative and the other active; and moreover his own activities not only have the sanction of his Model and his Head, but they also seem at last to come back of their own accord to the one centre of his life. Let us consider this last point a little more carefully. The fact that the Christian turns all his works into religious actions of sacrifice offered to God alone emphasizes one aspect of the relation between the contemplative and the active elements in his life, an aspect that has been largely forgotten at the present time but has always been the tradition of the Church. From the first moment when Christians began to discuss the relative values of the active and the contemplative lives, out in the Eastern desert where the old monks experimented in various forms of living according to Christ's wishes, it was agreed that the active life was but the preparation for the contemplative. Just as life on earth

sets things in order for the full life of heavenly contemplation, so the external activities of one who is given more to the practice of the moral virtues than of the theological must prepare the way for the 'one thing necessary' in this life as in the next. Indeed if such activities are carried out under the full influence of grace they will of their nature prepare the soul for contemplation. Cassian brought back this doctrine from his travels in the Egyptian deserts, but S. Augustine also taught it and with him the other Fathers, culminating in the clear expression of the truth by S. Thomas. Walter Hilton has made it plain for his countrymen—'Bodily working belongeth principally to worldly men or women, the which have lawfully worldly goods and wilfully use worldly business. Also it belongeth to all young beginning men, which come newly out of worldly sins to the service of God; for to make them able to ghostly working, and for to break down the unbuxomness of the body by reason and by such bodily working, that it might be supple and ready, and not much contrarious to the spirit in ghostly working Bodily working was made for ghostly and not ghostly for bodily. Bodily working goeth before and ghostly cometh after' (*The Mixed Life*, c. 1; *Minor Works of Walter Hilton*; Orchard Series 17).

Thus if every Christian that lives the life of grace of necessity finds both action and contemplation as essential parts of that life, he must with equal necessity use the one for the sake of the other. Matter and form are both essential elements in a bodily substance, but ultimately all reality comes from the form; the matter is only playing its true part when it is wholly subject and obedient to the form. The active part of the Christian life is the material element, the principle of multiplicity, which is informed and united by the contemplative part. Hence the daily actions of the ordinary Christian should, however slightly, lead towards a development of faith, hope and charity, together with the Gifts, that he may become more con-

templative, with his gaze fixed more intently on the one Object of his mind and will. All that he does, whatever his work may be, should therefore be for him a step nearer to God, nearer to the full vision of God that will reward such Christian work in the next life.

In the modern age of Action there can scarcely be any doctrine more urgent than this conception of the foundations of the Christian life. For it is only by insisting on these aspects of the life of grace in Christ that modern action can be preserved from 'activism' in which contemplation of any sort is at a discount and an enormous premium put on good works. Many Christians tend to be frightened by prayer unless it is accompanied with much external ceremony and many spoken words; but they can understand 'doing things' for the Church at a time when she seems particularly in need of help on account of the onslaught of many enemies. So gradually all the best energies of the Christian are spent upon material occupations, boys' clubs and bazaars, anti-communist activities, and associations for a thousand and one things; even upon a liturgical movement largely concerned with Gregorian chant and vestments. All these things have their place in the Christian life, but they are not the one thing necessary; they are not the formal part of the life of faith and the Gifts. This latter tends to be smothered by external actions. There is no time for thought, and not a moment to spare for the consideration of the presence of the Blessed Trinity within the soul. Consequently, far from these external activities preparing the soul for prayer and contemplation, they have exactly the opposite effect. They draw the soul away from the 'ghostly working' of the contemplative life, and the longer a Christian engages in them, the less prepared is he for any true life of the spirit. His soul becomes dried up; he has to work all day long to avoid the sense of hollowness and boredom when left alone to himself for a few moments with nothing to do. This sort of activity, therefore, cannot be the true Christian action

which is essential to the life of Christ, which is the coursing blood of the Mystical Body, which is the material of the priestly sacrifice of every Christian. The element of action in the life of the ordinary Christian, if it is the true element, should be leading him to develop constantly the other element of contemplation. There must be a constant interaction between the two, not one without the other, not one decreasing the other, but each nourishing the other as any body and soul work together for the good of the man. Thus every ordinary Christian should meditate on these words of St. Thomas: 'Although every one who is in the active life cannot reach a perfect state of contemplation, nevertheless it is necessary that every Christian who is in a state of grace should have some share in contemplation, for the precept is for all: "Be still and see that I am God" (Ps. 45, v. 11), to which the third Commandment of the law also applies' (In III *Sent.*, D. 36, art. 3 ad 5).

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.