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CHRISTIAN LIFE

DAILY duties are very ordinary things. But when done to serve the needs of the Body of Christ they have extraordinary value. No action of the day is trivial or unimportant to true Catholics, for every action done in Christ has ascetic value and leads to perfect union with Him. When the Christian miner plunges down the shaft he is really soaring to Heaven; his wife at home preparing the dinner is, like Martha, preparing a meal for Christ; every pace a Christian takes is another step towards Christ. The Christian Life is nothing more than growth in Christ, and unto Christ, by membership in His Mystical Body, and Christian Asceticism is the process of growth into a perfect man. This is the thesis of an excellent book¹ which has recently been translated into English, and which has inspired these pages.

The analogy of the Mystical Body comes to us from St. Paul, who distinguishes an historical Christ Who was born of a woman, Who was crucified and rose from the dead; and a mystical Christ with Whom 'we are buried unto death' (Rom. vi, 4), and of Whose body we are members (I Cor. xii, 12). *The complete mystical Christ is not He Who was born of Mary, but consists in Christ the Head plus the members . . . The expression 'Mystical Body of Christ' signifies a mysterious union with Him, which is the basis of an actual reality. This does not only indicate our moral relationship to Him, owing to the fact that we love Him and call Him brother and friend, but implies an ontological union.*² The Mystical Body is not a pious fan-

¹ *The Mystical Body of Christ.* By Friedrich Jürgensmeier, D.D. (Geo. E. J. Coldwell; 12/-.)

² *Op. cit.*, p. 22.

tasy, an apt illustration of a truth, a parable; it is a fact. *The Mystical Christ is an actuality*³—but yet a mystery quite beyond our comprehension, and patient of expression only in allegorical forms. The union of Christ with His members is real and organic, urges St. Paul in all his teaching. Christ is Head and we are His Body; we, His Church, are the Bride of Christ, bound to Him by intimate spiritual bonds, strong and real; in Baptism we die with Christ in order to live in Him with a new life. The teaching is familiar and inspiring and comes home to us, just as it did to St. Paul himself at his conversion, when he learnt this truth in a way that must have been vividly before him whenever he spoke of it in after life. His persecution of the Christians earned the rebuke, which was for him the happiest revelation: 'I am Jesus Whom thou persecutest' (Acts ix, 5). Our union with Christ is ontological, founded on the nature of Christ's mission as Saviour, for it was to manifest and save His Body that He came.

*The doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ . . . is the central point of St. John's proclamation.*⁴ St. John wrote his Gospel in order that we may 'believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God: and that believing we may have life—the life of Christ—in His Name' (Jn. xx, 31). Suggested in the Prologue, and in the discussion with Nicodemus, it has its full expression in the teaching on the Holy Eucharist, where the communion resulting on the reception of this sacrament is so intense that 'he that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood, abideth in me, and I in him' (Jn. vi, 57).

O felix culpa! O happy sin! We are more fortunate now than was Adam before his fall from favour, for sin has been engulfed and swamped in a surge of grace. The redemptive mission of Christ has brought us into the closest

³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

union with the Father, since the ingratitude of the Fall has been repaid by God's embracing human nature into the Godhead. Here is the prototype of all forgiveness. Instead of the punishment we have deserved in Adam being meted out to us, God has drawn us into union with Himself, and what has come to pass because of sin is more wonderful than was man's blissful state before he fell. Though the difficulties which fallen man must overcome are greater than they would have been if he had remained in an innocent state, the treasures of grace to which he can have recourse are more abounding than they would have been had he not sinned, for 'where sin abounded, grace did more abound' (Rom. v, 20).⁵ Being brought into close relationship with the Holy Trinity, man's dignity has been most wonderfully enhanced; he has been permitted to associate with Christ in His most personal work as Mediator, sharing His Priesthood in self-oblation, and, with Him, crushing sin under the weight of the Cross. Raised to the dignity of a son of God, man is allowed freely to work out his own salvation in the manner most suited to his human nature. His suffering alone could not have sufficed to make reparation for the wrong he did to God; but when united to that of Christ, his suffering assumes a totally different character and value. And herein, surely, is the precise reason for the institution of the Mystical Body. Just as the Incarnation, so we are taught by the Church, was effected for the remission of sin, and God took human nature to this purpose; so did He take to Himself, in addition, human members also, in order that His atonement might be shared by them. To forgive a malefactor

⁵ Cf. *The True Vine and its Branches*. By Edward Leen, C.S.Sp., p. 201. *The True Vine and its Branches* by Father Leen makes an admirable supplement to the more speculative work of Dr. Jürgensmeier. It is a simple, clear and practical application of the principles embodied in *The Mystical Body of Christ*, and shows the way to practise them in daily life.

unconditionally, without restitution or satisfaction, might at first sight seem the kindest course to take. But is it really? However well-intentioned the one who forgives may be, however freely and willingly bestowed his forgiveness, the one who has done him injury must feel dissatisfied. Is it not surely true, psychologically, that satisfaction appeases the sinner as much as it propitiates the offended one? Hence the loving mercy of God in the Sacrament of Penance, wherein the sinner is the one who gains everything, since God can gain nothing from his satisfaction. Wholly gratuitous forgiveness serves only to emphasise the distance between the miscreant and the injured one. God did not want us to be oppressed by the enormity of this gulf, and the Mystical Body was the bridge He erected to surmount it. *'Christ, at once permanent and active, stands eternally between God and Man like a living bridge, by means of which God transmits the divine life to His creatures'*^{*}

God could have allowed the redemption to terminate in a single act, like saving someone from drowning; but the gulf would have been there. But in fact God did not choose this way. He willed Christ to be our continual mediator, making constant intercession in such a way as to make it possible for us to have an active share in the work. Not only are we allowed to share in Christ's work, but if we wish to reach God we *must* share, for the way to God is through Christ, and there is no other, since in Christ is all the fullness of grace, and our salvation is entirely dependent upon grace. There is, however, no question of harsh compulsion; even though we are entirely dependent upon Him, God will not affront our dignity by forcing His salvation upon us. It is a question merely of end and means; if we want God we must take the means to find Him; in other words, we must seek Him through Christ. 'The

^{*} *Mystical Body of Christ*, p. 71.

Kingdom of Heaven--wherein is salvation—is likened to a king who made a marriage for his son' (Mt. xxii, 1). We are the invited guests, distinguished by the wedding garment which we assume when we 'put on Christ' in Baptism (Gal. iii, 27). Without the wedding garment we cannot enter the feast. This truth is the basis of the Christian Life and all the sacramental system, for Asceticism, life in the Church, and enjoyment of Her sacraments, are designed to bring us personally into contact with our redemption. It was the human race which severed connexion with God through original sin; it was the human race which Christ restored on the cross; it is the individual soul which receives the fruits of the Cross through membership of the mystical body, through life in Christ, and through the reception of the sacraments. The tree of Calvary bore the fruit of the redemption; but we must pluck it. *Universal salvation was wrought and established through Christ's sacrifice, but according to divine ordinance the personal acquisition of this grace was to depend upon an especial act. Christ's work of redemption could only become effective in the individual inasmuch as he was intimately connected with Christ and through Him with this work.*⁷ As human nature sinned in Adam, so was human nature redeemed in the New Adam, Christ. Original sin is incurred and, as it were, individuated, or made personal, in each man at birth; and in the same way the grace of redemption is acquired and made personal in each new man reborn in Christ by Baptism. Without this rebirth which effects union with Christ, no contact with the source of redemption is possible, since in Christ dwells all the fullness of grace; since He is the Door: the Way: the Life: the Light; the Vine—and the Head of the Mystical Body. *The subjective work of salvation has its origin in God, . . . but its work, however, must be continued and completed*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

*through the willing co-operation of man. Christ wrought salvation for us objectively in all fullness and perfection, but the individual's co-operation is necessary for its further development and final consummation. Subjective salvation—that is to say redemption as applied to the individual—is a voluntary acceptance on the part of man.*⁸ The conferring of a gift not only implies bestowal by the donor, but also acceptance, and all that that includes, by the recipient.

In this voluntary acceptance and co-operation, acts not of a moment but extending over the whole of life, consist the Christian Life; they constitute the life in Christ, which Dr. Jürgensmeier styles Asceticism. *Asceticism is the doctrine of a gradually increasing incorporation in Christ, in organic union with the life of the Head. It is a constant assimilation of His grace and vital strength which brings forth fruit in the Christian's daily life, and an ever increasing vital fellowship with Him through which the Mystical body grows towards completion Asceticism consists, therefore, in moulding our lives on the pattern of Christ's life. Its object is to make the spiritual life a continuation or repetition of His.*⁹ How best to live the life of Christ is only to be learnt from the study of His life, as it is taught in the Scriptures and in the dogmas of the Church, which provide the material for a science of Ascetical Theology, a science 'which aims at the highest goal possible, the glorification of God by His creatures and their final attainment to a state of eternal beatitude.'¹⁰

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Manichaeism in piety is a blight which from time to time has choked true Asceticism, chaining the soul in prison by an over-emphasis of the leaden weight of matter, and bar-

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

ring its way to God. By way of recompense, however, it has invented a course in prison-breaking, which it calls 'Ascetical Theology,' and of which the aim is to liberate the soul by purgations and every kind of introspection from the bands which restrain it, and so put it on the road to God. Its aim is praiseworthy, but the means it puts forward are more likely to hinder than to help. It takes too circuitous a route and its emphasis is wrong, it is negative. Whatever pragmatic value it may have had in particular circumstances or at particular times, it makes intimate union with God, at least implicitly, the unusual rather than the ordinary outcome of the Christian Life. It makes man self-centred, turning all his attention upon himself. It may distract him from God to such an extent that the very practice of virtue may become a motive for pride, and an obstacle to the progress which it should be furthering. 'Be nothing solicitous; but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your petitions be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasseth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus' (Phil. iv, 4-6). To keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus is the task of the Christian Life. It is quite as distracting to be unduly solicitous about spiritual matters as about temporal ones, perhaps even more distracting. The Christian life is a race, and he who runs a race has no time to stop by the way to estimate his progress. It must be a Christ Life, as its name implies, and Asceticism is the attempt to achieve the life of Christ in ourselves. It is a process of growth into the likeness of Christ—*donec Christus formetur in vobis*: until Christ is formed in you, as St. Paul expresses it. Union with Christ is not the crown of the spiritual life. It is the beginning of it. For union with Christ is effected in Baptism. Complete union will, we hope, crown our efforts; but it remains true that we are in union with Christ right from the beginning of the spiritual life, and the process throughout is one of the

growth and flowering of this incipient image of Christ into the perfect image attained in heaven.

Many modern treatises err in that they treat of growth in perfection in a wholly negative way, stressing the impediments to it, and the means of overcoming them, rather than the ontological process of growth in Christ which is the real approach. They are castles built on sand, lacking the firm foundation which the doctrine of the mystical body alone can supply. The thesis set down by Dr. Jürgensmeier would not contradict them, but would be the foundation which they sadly lack. Asceticism is, first and foremost, concerned with man's sanctification, that is to say with perfection, or conformity to Christ the All-Perfect. *Christian Perfection is the development and consummation of the mystical, vital union with Christ, leading to conformity with Him, and to that inner spiritual state described by St. Paul when he said: I live now not I; but Christ lives in me. Sanctification and Christian perfection can only be acquired through union with Christ's Mystical Body . . . it is utterly impossible at any time to perform any supernatural act or to succeed in any endeavour for the salvation of our souls except as members of the body of Christ.*¹¹ Advancing in perfection is a homogeneous growth, smooth and steady, unbroken by artificial stages; a growth so steady as to be unbroken even by death, for death is only the door which opens on to everlasting perfection. If we accept this notion of the Christian Life, our patience and perseverance is assured; we will be preoccupied with Christ, not with ourselves, and our progress, though probably unnoticed by us, will be unswerving. We do not examine our lungs to see if they are inhaling sufficient air; we simply breathe and live. Why should we not do the same in the spiritual life? We have put on Christ, and Him we breathe in Whom 'We live and move and have

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

our being.' Our life is so permeated with Him, that we need only live it, not dissect it. There can be no stopping to gauge our progress. Such an attitude as that which constantly halts to measure its advance is selfish; and it may lead to despair, in so far as it withdraws attention from the mercy of God and the power of His grace. Charity requires us to love God for His own sake; to love our neighbour and ourselves for His sake, and not for our own advancement, or for the rewards which might accrue to us. Love offered for the sake of gain is a meagre shadow of true love. The law of growth in love and knowledge of Christ is a law of nature for the Christian. To strive after perfection in this way would still be an obligation even had no positive precept been given. For the Christian is joined to Christ *organically*, enjoying a superadded life; and where there is life there is necessarily growth—or oblivion. The new man, born in Baptism, his nature decrees it, must grow 'unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the age of the fulness of Christ' (Ephes. iv, 13).

The sacraments are the veins and arteries which carry grace, the life-blood of the mystical body to every member. Baptism, the sacrament by which the new member of Christ is made, is the foundation of all Ascetic Life, for it opens the way to all the other sacraments, bestowing the seed of life which they will nourish. In the recipient of the sacrament, there is the virtue of Faith, the *necessary personal factor which unites man with Christ and incorporates him in the life of the head.*¹² Hence the profession of Faith which forms an integral part of the ceremony of Baptism. The union with Christ is completed and strengthened by the sacrament of Confirmation.

Just as ordinary food is required to sustain natural life, so too is spiritual food necessary to nourish the supernatural life. And this is where the Holy Eucharist plays

¹² *Ibid.*

its part in the mystical body of Christ. Indeed, this is the whole purpose of the Eucharist. It is essentially a food which nourishes Christ in His members. *Christ did not give us the Holy Eucharist primarily to be venerated and worshipped therein by the faithful; on the contrary, He intended it to be the source of strength of our daily life in Him.*¹³ So that to suggest that frequent communion is undesirable on the grounds that it makes for too great a familiarity with God, is to miss the point of this sacrament. We do not receive Holy Communion precisely to glorify God, as an act of adoration; we receive the sacrament to promote our spiritual life, and the more frequently we receive it in right dispositions, so much the more intimate will be our union with Christ.

Moreover, the Holy Eucharist is a sacrifice. Christ offers Himself daily in the Mass, but He is not alone now as He was on Calvary, for it is the privilege of His members to fill up those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ (Coloss. i, 24). The manner of offering in the Mass is different, though the victim is still Christ; but the glorified Christ suffers no more in His own person; His sufferings are supplied by His members when they offer all their trials, great or small, in union with the offering of Christ in the Mass. Their rôle is to be co-victims with Christ; for being co-heirs of his Kingdom they cannot dissociate themselves from Him in His suffering. So suffering for them is a positive thing; it is their way of sharing in the work of redemption.

The principal act of the priesthood is to offer sacrifice. The members of the mystical body perform this act of their priesthood when, in the Mass, their representative consecrates and consumes the Victim. But there are other duties attached to the priesthood as well, for the priest is teacher and guide to the faithful and, in a spiritual way, all that

¹³ *Ibid.*

being a 'father' implies. Hence the family and the priesthood are closely knit together, as are the sacraments which belong to them. Holy Order gives a spiritual priesthood, or fatherhood over men, whilst the sacrament of Matrimony ordains 'lay priests' who have a special function in the mystical body. In virtue of the sacrament of Matrimony they are made fitting instruments for the bringing of new members of the mystical body into the world; and they are given graces to help them tend these members of Christ, whom God has entrusted to their care. Hence priest and laity find themselves linked together in the care of Christ's members, and since their duties are complementary, there should follow unity between priest and people, and a mutual confidence and love based upon their union in Christ.

Unity. 'One body and one Spirit: as you are called in one hope of your calling. One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism. One God and Father of all.' The keynote of Catholicism, like so many of the false political creeds of our day, is unity. But unlike the tenets of the followers of such creeds, Catholicism has the secret of true unity, a unity which embraces every kind of diversity, which over-rides all racial differences without destroying them. It is a unity of friendship, for friendship springs up where people are in love with the same thing—and Christians are all in love with Christ. The mystical body is a union based upon ties thicker than blood or water, a union rooted in grace and the love of Christ. It is useless to maintain that in the present-day world it is impossible to live a Christian life, or that the family spirit of the mystical body is an ideal which cannot to-day be attained. Grace is more powerful than any evil force; Christ has conquered the world; He is Christ the King, and in His Kingdom is the strength which no enemy shall ever overthrow.

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