

## IS RELIGIOUS LIFE WORTH LIVING?

BY

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**J**UDGED in the light of human standards the answer to this question may well be in the negative. But it is unsatisfactory to measure the value of human life simply by natural standards, since the standards set by God for man are supernatural. The real, true end of man is supernatural, that is, beyond his natural reach, and the means thereto must needs be supernatural. To be raised above one's nature signifies to be elevated beyond one's natural capacity. In a sin-laden world and in a nature broken by a fall, man cannot be lifted up into a realm that is not his, into God's own kingdom, without grace bestowed out of the divine bounty, which is both life-giving and healing. Even so the downward drag and fret are so great in making the ascent that no one can scale the heights without intensive effort of his own and more than his own. All purely human aids and devices are but props and stilts in making the grade on this precarious journey which goes into eternity beyond the region of space and time. As the psalmist sings, 'in the strength of my God, I will leap over the wall'. (Ps. 17, 30.)

Even the man of prayer finds it difficult to concentrate on the matter with which he is occupied, because 'the human mind is unable to remain aloft for long on account of the weakness of nature, since human weakness weighs down the soul to the level of inferior things: and hence it is that when, while praying, the mind ascends to God by contemplation, of a sudden it wanders off through weakness'. (II-II, 83, 13, ad 2.) Imperfect as this state may be it is not sinful, but as St Thomas teaches 'purposely to allow one's mind to wander in prayer is sinful and hinders the prayer from having fruit' (ibid ad 3), which is to be devoid of merit as well as of that refreshment of the spirit which should come from prayer well made.

It is not impossible however that prayer should be prolonged providing that the affections persist in the desire of one thing. No matter how good and determined the purpose may be at the outset, the persistence in the purpose is not easy. Indeed it is impossible without special grace. Such is the moral dilapidation of man's fallen nature that he is in dire need of grace to heal his nature in order to be in a position entirely to abstain from sin. This healing effect exerts itself on the higher level of the soul, in the mind and will, but the lower carnal appetites are left unregenerated. The

struggle may be great enough to shun mortal sin, but it is even greater when it is a matter of venial sin. Without very special grace all venial sin cannot in fact be ruled out. The difficulty is that when a person is trying to resist a wrong impulse of his lower nature, at the same time another may arise, and also he cannot be sufficiently alert at all times so as to repress these unexpected uprisings, but is overtaken by surprise and yields to these disorderly inclinations. (cf. I-II, 109, 8.) Inclinations of this kind can and must be tackled individually. Unfortunately although by grace the stain of original sin passes, its effects linger on, though reason and free-will are not so fettered as to be unable to check at its first appearance what would be wrong if consented to. Certainly it is possible instantly to turn ones thoughts right away to something else less harmless, yet in doing so some other impulse may arise. So it is that when perhaps a man 'turns his thoughts away from carnal pleasures, to the consideration of science, sometimes an unpremeditated movement of vain glory may arise'. (I-II, 74, 3 ad 2).

From the above considerations of human weakness it becomes quite clear that a great deal of self-discipline is needed in the life of the spirit if the soul is to rise to the requirements of grace. The religious state offers the opportunity of such self-discipline to those who are called to it, and as in a school of perfection and of service may be learnt, by using the means provided, the way to attain a love of God which is all-pervading. Therefore men and women are moved to leave the world for the cloister, not primarily to look for work, but to seek God. Many religious there may be who do not succeed in finding God in their work, this is perhaps because their mode of living has led them to become self-centred rather than God-centred. Over-much work, from which many suffer, if not approached in the spirit of self-sacrifice can lead away from God, and end up in self-commiseration. Some of their tastes and habits may remain behind, and cause them to seek relief from drudgery in liturgical forms or in stereotyped outward religious observances. These, because they are of human-making, will not of themselves bring them nearer to God, because there is an absence of inward vitality, and a lack of unselfishness which should spring from and foster the love of God. No work, whether active or contemplative, is worthy of the name religious unless the motive-power behind it is the love of God and zeal for his interests. This can only be when the soul has acquired the mind of God-made-man, which is both active and contemplative. As divine charity has prompted the formation of different religious organisations, so it must be divine charity that prompts the life and

activities of the individual religious. For this external forms and habit are not enough, but deep spiritual qualities of soul are required. Because this is so, sanctity is not confined to any particular walk of life, and fundamentally Christian living is the same wherever it may be found. There should be no more holy place than the hearth and the home, where Christian culture begins to grow, though within the cloistered home of the religious it is reasonable to look for it at its best. Basic training is undoubtedly required in religious houses, which should be something more than a kind of drill whereby are acquired habits of a religious etiquette, often arbitrary, and not rooted in any ancient or authentic tradition. Not seldom it happens that religious institutions, the members of which sometimes wear the habits of ancient religious orders, are not only severed from the traditions of the parent stem to which they are in some way affiliated, but are outside the orbit of ordinary Catholic influences other than their own. Very commonly the annual retreat is about the only time when any religious instruction is received, and their guidance is in the hands of the clergy, who seldom have any grasp of the fundamentals of religious life. There seems to be a gap in seminary training in this matter, and many nuns suffer in consequence. One result of all this is that many superiors are in charge of others and are yet unskilled themselves in religious principles beyond those which they have formulated out of perhaps a short experience of religious life as they have found it. The convent library, such as it is, as may be seen at a glance, is a poor substitute for proper instruction and theological guidance. Lack of formation, mental and otherwise, and the negative approach to a life which is intended to be expansive and fruitful, may easily lead to frustration and discontent. The sense of security too, if misdirected, is not a safe seeding ground for virtuous living, and tends to breed irresponsibility.

The crisis through which the world is now passing makes it imperative that religious, whilst adjusting themselves to the new conditions of the world in which they are still members, and the pains of which they must share, should before all else be faithful to their calling. The religious is one who is in a special way consecrated to the work of sacrifice. 'Those are called religious who dedicate their whole life to the worship of God, withdrawing themselves from all worldly cares.' (II-II, 81, 1 ad 5.) The religious life is not an escape it is a fulfilment, it is not a servitude it is a liberation. Religious profession is a consecration of the person making it, rendering him sacred as belonging to God. It is a pledge to do God's work in God's way.

The life of our Lord was cast into the mould of sacrifice. Calvary was the tremendous act of visible homage rendered by Christ the Priest to God's majesty in the name of all mankind. That was the tremendous act whereby the Christian religion was inaugurated. The Holy Mass enshrines that self-same sacrifice that we may make it our own, and gather from it the spirit of self-sacrifice which animates it. It is the spirit of sacrifice that must prompt the religious in the making of his vows, and the love of God must be at the heart of the daily sacrifice of himself. As with every sacrifice that which is exteriorly offered is but a token of the interior spiritual sacrifice by which the soul offers itself to God. (II-II, 85, 2.) Such a life's sacrifice, deriving its meaning and its efficacy from the Christian sacrifice of the Cross, has a tremendous value and can be world-wide in its influence. It is as it were charged with a divine efficacy. And it has within it the power of every sacrifice to bring souls to God, and to bring souls together, on the two arms of charity.

The religious can only reach the perfection of his state when the fulfilment of his vows is made expressive of his love of God converted into sacrifice. For the response to his calling requires that he should be poor in spirit, that is, freed from attachment to the riches of this world and all they stand for. He must be clean of heart, for his chastity is a refinement of his charity which strives to give to God an undivided love. And his obedience implies the surrender of himself into the hands of divine providence, in following his divine Master more closely by becoming obedient unto death.

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## FROM ST AUGUSTINE

BY

JOHN SEARLE

Ex effractore erit metallicus:<sup>1</sup> de opere metallici quanta opera construuntur? Illius poena damnati ornamenta sunt civitatis. Sic ergo Deus novit ubi te ponat. Noli putare quia turbas consilium Dei, si perversus esse volueris.—*Sermo CXXXV*, 5.

The felons labour in the mines,  
 And from the mines great stones are sent,  
 To builders of fair palaces  
 For many a city's ornament.  
 So felon sinners work the Will  
 Of God—they may not mar his scheme:  
 Fixed is their task, and all their talk  
 Of liberty an idle dream.

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<sup>1</sup> In the marble quarries.