

It was the feast of the Conversion of St Paul, the day he kept as his own feast. Some fifty years before, Father Paul had vowed stability—that is, faithfulness to his monastic home—conversion of manners, and obedience. He never lost the enthusiasm, or the boyishness, of his first days in the monastery that he entered as a novice when he was seventeen years and three days old.



ALTER CHRISTUS

M. B. KOLB

THE possession of an immortal soul opens up such wonderful possibilities to man that a thinker, overwhelmed by the greatness of life, once exclaimed: 'However great things a man would say about the meaning of life, he would always say too little.'

These marvellous possibilities begin to be realized as soon as a soul is received into the bosom of the Church. 'O marvel of Baptism', a convert joyfully exclaims. 'If only we had faith, we should be wrapped in joy whenever we assist at a Baptism, if we remember the spiritual greatness of the neophyte, who becomes the living tabernacle of the Holy Ghost.'

All without exception can happily become temples of the Divine Spirit; in everyone the consoling word of Christ can be fulfilled: 'The Father and I will come and take up our abode in him.'

Indeed, the Christian faith shows us glorious summits that merge into the region of the Divine. What happiness to long for these summits even in the world such as it is, though only in the full light of eternity shall we fathom how ineffable is the grace to reach them, and how all the steep roads on which we walked in the heat of the day were roads of salvation and eternal bliss.

Now, among these summits that are accessible to the faithful, there is one—the most luminous of them all,

because of its proximity to God himself. This summit can only be reached if Christ calls to it, if he repeats to a Christian the words which once St Peter heard from him by the lake of Genesareth after the first miraculous draught of fishes: 'Follow me . . . from henceforth thou shalt catch men', and if the Catholic Church confirmed this call with the ordination which gives the chosen one the power of administering the mysteries. This summit, which needs the wings of an eagle and the courage of a lion and the martyr's spirit in order to remain on it worthily all one's life, is the Catholic priesthood.

I once knew a priest who, about thirty years ago, had followed the call of Christ as quickly as Levi at the receipt of customs, though the call came no less unexpectedly than to the Apostle and Evangelist. Of an extraordinarily lively intelligence, but led astray by unfaithful priests, he had lost his faith as a boy of fourteen. From that time he tried to destroy the Catholic faith wherever he found it. He had chosen the naval profession, making a brilliant career, and soon rose to the position of captain. When he was still only in his early twenties, his ship, coming back from the Far East, landed at the coast of his native Spain. His first goal was Loyola, the place where St Ignatius had been converted. But his journey there was not a pilgrimage, rather the reverse. The young captain wished to know the Catholic faith better by making the Exercises, but only in order to fight against it the more effectively.

As soon as he entered the famous monastery he asked for an interview with one of the priests; but when the day of his departure came no one had yet come to see him. He had already packed his suitcase and was looking at his watch (it was a quarter to two) when he noticed something on the opposite wall, which he had overlooked all the week: it was a crucifix. Fixing his gaze firmly on it, the young man suddenly exclaimed: 'They say that you are the Truth. . . Here is one who seeks the truth with his whole heart. If you would show it to him, he would follow you wherever you would go, until the end of the world, come what may.' He had hardly said these words when his spirit was immersed in such a fullness of light that, overwhelmed with

joy, he immediately apprehended the whole consoling reality of the Christian faith. He saw everything so clearly, so simply, so logically and at the same time so marvellously that he cast himself down at the feet of Christ as once Saul did on the way to Damascus.

A loud knock at the door brought the newly converted man back to reality. It was the Father whose visit he had been expecting in vain all that week. It was just striking three o'clock. What to the new Paul had seemed a short moment of wonderful illumination had, to his great surprise, lasted an hour and a quarter. 'You have nothing else to do but to hear my confession', he told the Father. And the angels of heaven had more joy then because of him, than for ninety-nine just who need not penance.

That same afternoon he resigned his naval commission as simply as one would push a stone out of one's way. Without hesitation he delivered himself into the hands of him who had showed him so marvellously that he is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

When this priest spoke to me of both the greatness and the sacrifices of his vocation his conviction so moved me that the miseries of this world and all its pressing needs and anxieties ceased to exist. As long as this priest was speaking I sensed something of the wonderful simplicity of the world beyond, the eternal now of timelessness.

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The hour, that had been filled with the inaccessible light, passed, but in me there remained a much clearer, more living, more intimate vision of the priesthood, of the *alter Christus*, his dignity and his sacrifices, especially also of our own duties towards the priest.

Even in the time of my unbelief—now long past, thank God—I had never completely lost sight of the exceptional spiritual position of the Catholic priest. But since I have come to believe in our redemption through Christ, I see in him so much dignity and privilege that I cannot understand how a believing Catholic, however high his social position, cannot always respectfully let the priest go first. For there is no higher dignity on earth than the *alter Christus*, the anointed of the Lord, the one who dispenses the divine

mysteries. Therefore St Francis once said: 'If I should meet a priest and an angel at the same time, I should first salute the priest, and then the angel.'

I am afraid some readers may shrug their shoulders at this—those who cannot distinguish between the divine and the human, who can only see the priest as a human being, and therefore his human failings which he has as well as we others. Those who shrug their shoulders do not know that the Church of Christ is not measured by its human composition, but solely by the supernatural character of the consecrated priest. Many, alas, never realize that this character, that is to say the divine power which Jesus Christ has given to his Church, never changes. For it is always the same, and neither the personal holiness nor the personal unworthiness of a priest can modify it; it remains independent of either. The priest deserves our veneration not because of his personal qualities and abilities, but because of his priestly consecration which makes him a mediator between God and man.

Now it is true that in the Host that has been consecrated by an unworthy priest Christ is as truly present as in that over which a holy priest has said the Words of Institution, and that absolution is equally efficacious whatever the moral qualifications of the confessor, though the personal holiness of a priest exercises an enormous influence in his office as a pastor. Therefore St Philip Neri said: 'Give me ten holy priests, and I will convert the world with them.' Therefore the holiness of her priests is the greatest concern of our Holy Mother the Church.

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In our days pragmatism is busy denying the absolute character of Truth; and so one has tried in many ways to attack the value and the justification of the priestly way of life, as the Catholic Church demands it of those whom she consecrates to preach the Gospel to the poor and to heal the contrite. But in the face of pragmatism and other modern errors great contemporary thinkers (not only Catholics, but also Protestants) have shown that the Catholic priest realizes the greatest victory over nature as well as the most profit-

able sacrifice on behalf of human society, if he fulfils his voluntary vow of celibacy. Even a Nietzsche, who hated and tried to destroy all Christian values, saw in the priest a 'victim for the good of the people'.

The historian Michelet writes in his *History of the Reform of Gregory VII*: 'Without priestly celibacy the poetry of solitude and the fullness of love with which the soul embraces God and the world is unthinkable. A Church of married priests could never have raised the vaults of the Cathedral of Cologne, nor could she have brought forth the soul of a St Bernard or the genius of St Thomas.'

The Catholic Church is without doubt the greatest phenomenon in history and the celibacy of her priests is the wall that protects this city on the mountain against the attacks of materialism. Catholic and non-Catholic thinkers agree that this vow guarantees more than anything else the independence of the spiritual life in this world. The results of serious research prove not only its supernatural greatness but also its beneficial influence on the spiritual and intellectual life in general. The great theologian Adam Möhler emphasizes that 'the only factor which in feudal times guaranteed the value of man as a human being was the celibacy of the priest. If the son of a serf became a bishop, he ranked with a reigning duke.' In this way one recognized that scholarship and intellectual abilities in general are as valuable as noble blood. The same scholar says, regarding the future: 'Celibacy will always prevent princes from becoming bishops and will be the cause why priesthood and state remain apart.' Another German apologist wrote against the errors of Nazism: 'Humanity develops not only by blood and race, it does not only propagate what belongs to the vegetative and animal life; it lives and develops especially through the spiritual and intellectual, through the recognition of natural law and moral ideals, especially through religion and the service of God. Hence these values must be handed on and kept alive in a special way. . . . Now for this we need men devoted to special moral effort and to the service of spiritual and religious values in the interest of the community. Man does not only live by physical propagation; he lives even more by a thousand conquests

of self, by renunciation and sacrifice, which alone make it possible to live together on this imperfect earth. . . . Beside the physical parenthood the absolutely spiritual and moral fatherhood and motherhood has an extremely important task. . . .'

Those many great Popes and bishops who fought relentlessly for the restoration of the purity of the priestly life had clearly understood the true reason for celibacy. Despite the contemporary moral decline, they did not doubt that the celibacy of the priest is the spiritual power which gives the Catholic Church her power of resistance against the 'gates of hell', which protects her against the destructive invasion of the world and keeps away in advance those who fight shy of the sacrifice. Without celibacy the ecclesiastical dignities would have become hereditary, and precisely at those times when it would have been most dangerous to the Catholic Church and in those places where ambition and avarice would have seen the greatest chances.

And, as regards the divine service, should we there think less spiritually than the pagan philosophers of antiquity, who demanded celibacy from all who served their gods? Ought not those who administer such a high office be, as it were, above nature, and possess something of that purity and solitude which reflects the Godhead?

St Chrysostom, seized with awe for his own priesthood, exclaims: 'How pure ought to be our hands who lift up daily the Body of the Lord!' It is very impressive to read these words from the pen of a Protestant poet: 'Something in me tells me that the Trappist Order is higher and more to be envied than the City of London. Human happiness does not rest with the Bank of England. . . . Happiness, the holy priest possesses thee.'

Yet there are many who belittle the priestly dignity. In the name of false science they fight against it, even though not denying its existence, whereas others deny it all dignity. Yet there will always be impartial defenders who will raise their voice against the slanderers, and not only among Catholics. A famous German educationalist, F. W. Foerster, writes: 'The talk of the abuses of celibacy ought to be silenced. Impartial Protestants have always been com-

pelled to admit that the Catholic clergy, on the whole, observe their celibacy with dignity. How few scandals there are if one considers the sum total of priests and realizes how carefully their way of life is being watched.'

The sordid attacks of the 'racial politicians' repeatedly caused the German bishops to oppose these accusations. The Archbishop of Paderborn, Dr Klein, wrote in a pastoral in 1936: 'The enemies of Christ and his Church like to adduce as crown witnesses against the priesthood apostate priests, whom they themselves despise in their hearts, but whom they pretend to honour as heroes. Frequently they are not content with collecting faults of individual priests from all times and countries, which they exaggerate and broadcast far and wide; no, they give rein to their impure imagination and do not hesitate to invent the vilest and most slanderous lies. . . . We certainly do not mean to deny that there are priests, from time to time, who are a dishonour to their cloth, or even worse. Priests, too, are men, not angels. Though their dignity is exalted and unearthly . . . yet they, too, bear their treasure "in earthen vessels" and can stumble, can fall, can sin, can give grave scandal and even apostatize from the faith. . . . But who gives our enemies the right in such sad and lamentable cases to condemn the whole priesthood, to make it the target of attack and scorn, whereas in the case of faults committed by members of other professions they know very well how to distinguish between office and person and do not lay to the charge of the office what an unworthy representative of it may have committed? I take this occasion to say with sincere gratitude, not in a spirit of Pharisaic pride, that our priests, though they are frail human beings, keep up a high moral standard. Cases which bitterly wound the heart of the bishop and of every faithful Catholic are rare exceptions. These are confronted by the large company of priests who use all their learning and ability, all their noble desires and activities in the service of God and for the salvation of immortal souls.'

Another apologist says with compelling logic: 'No one would blame marriage because there are adulterers. In the same way nobody ought to condemn celibacy because some of those bound to it occasionally stumble.' In the time of the

Nazis great stir was caused by a book with the title *A Trappist breaks his Silence*. The title seemed very promising to certain people, but it must have been a disappointment to many of these, for the author was sufficiently truthful not to misrepresent what he had heard and seen during his fifteen years in the famous monastery of Gellenberg in Alsace. Thus his book becomes a most effective apology of priesthood and monasticism for every fairminded reader. The one-time Trappist, whose name is Rugel, has nothing but praise for the high standard of 'human material' in his monastery. 'In my monastery there were counts and peasants, officers and clergy, craftsman and University professors.' Rugel never wearies of praising Gellenberg and its inmates. Of his first Abbot he says: 'For us he was only a monk like everyone else, but a wonderful person and an infinitely kind Father.' Of the second Abbot he says again: 'A very serious person, but a wonderful person and a spiritual director of the highest grade. My Prior was a man according to the heart of God, a man of exemplary life, genuine human understanding and never-failing kindness, full of humour, a priest of childlike piety, whom one never left without having been edified. Even today I am under a great debt of gratitude to my superiors and my monastery. Here I have not only been introduced to the world of scholarship, but I have also been introduced to the knowledge needed for my profession with so much love and care, as well as skill, that work became exquisite enjoyment and my original industry was transformed into the determined will to master this world of scholarship. . . . In one point I must give my fullest approval of monastic education: it forms a race of thoroughly healthy, hard and tough men. . . . It must also be admitted that immensely strong moral factors are brought into play against any possible undesirable consequences of celibacy, and in my monastery, for example, everything was so arranged that certain anomalies could, humanly speaking, neither originate nor develop. . . . I have brought nothing with me into the monastery, and I do not remember that this was ever demanded from us. A so-called guest-house was attached to the convent, the forty rooms of which were never entirely vacant. Here everybody might stay as long

as he liked, with no regard of person or religion, and the guests were served better food than the monks. Whoever asked, when he left, what he owed, received the reply: "To come back". Concerning the attitude of the monastery in the First World War, Rugel says: 'From the first day of hostilities we had provided a military hospital. I do not think that anywhere else the wounded could have been cared for with greater love and devotion than with us.' All these statements of the ex-Trappist seem to show the monastery of Gellenberg like a sort of paradise before the Fall. Why, then, does Rugel attack the monastic and priestly life at all? He does it because of the religious vows in general and that of celibacy in particular. In his view it is a robbery committed against a people's 'racial inheritance' that men of such high intelligence and morals should vow chastity. But this attack is always answered by the logic of facts. For the increase of population has not only physical, but in high measure moral causes. The great Empires of antiquity certainly did not fall because of the continence of their celibates, but through the licentiousness of married men and women. For our own day it is a statistically proved fact that, in general, the religious families have been those with most children, even through many generations, which no doubt proves the importance of religion for the increase of population. It goes without saying: in order that families should be founded willing to make the sacrifices necessary for producing many children, religion must be taught by men who sacrifice themselves in the opposite sense, by denying themselves the happiness of family life.

Scharnagl in Herder's *Lexicon* says with great logic: 'A people where many have still the moral vigour to profess voluntary celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven will also have sufficient strength and will-power to marry in accordance with the Law of God and of nature. It is a proved fact that Catholic theologians generally come from families with many children.' After all, celibacy is mainly a means to serve God and one's neighbour. 'Therefore celibacy', says Scharnagl in the same work, 'is not a shutting oneself out from the national community, but a liberation of all powers for its sake.'

Some time ago I heard of a three-year-old girl who, when she saw a priest blessing devotional objects in her parents' home, reverently asked her mother: 'Is this gentleman God?' How truly this child sensed what we ought to feel when we converse with priests: the thought of God and our immortal souls should dominate us. Therefore every truly Christian soul should experience a satisfaction if an *alter Christus* knows how to preserve a certain spiritual distance which makes it impossible that his intercourse with others sinks to the level of ordinary everyday life, which even enemies of Christianity — fortunately — criticize as unpriestly. For they all know in the depths of their soul that the priest must be different from others, that mankind has a right to expect him to be exceptional. And if such a priest surrounds his person with dignity he knows that this is not meant to honour him as a man, but his office that has been entrusted to him by his divine Master. Ordination bestows this grace on the one who was called to be different from the others. But this power is not infused into him automatically as if by some magic: it is active only where a priestly soul opens itself to it by personal effort. This personal co-operation, this faithfulness to the inspirations of grace often demands real, even though hidden, heroism. Hence, seeing that the sacrifices of the priest are made for the sake of all of us, it is only just that we on our part should offer our most fervent prayers for the priest, that he may become ever more like his Master. We should pray too for the tepid priest, that he may realize the wonderful sublimity of his vocation; and for him who unhappily goes astray and is unfaithful to grace, that the Blood of Christ may not be lost to his soul, this Chalice which he had consecrated so often. We should pray that the Master who asked him on the day of his vocation, 'Do you love me more than these?', may not have to repeat to him the terrible word he said to Judas.

Therefore, when we see a priest slacken in the devotion and enthusiasm of his first years, we should remember with gratitude and pity the pure intention of his heart on the day of his ordination, when he felt himself strong enough to start on the way of lifelong sacrifices. Once I had occasion

to ask a priest of exemplary life if he smoked. He replied: 'When I gave up such great things I felt I ought not to attach myself to trifles. Hence I never smoke.' A favourite word of this priest from his student years was that of St Paul: 'The world is crucified to me and I to the world.' Yet today I hear accounts that are contrary to such fine beginnings. There one can only resignedly repeat: 'Free will, thou divine gift of the power of the divine Creator! . . . Free will, that is the same path for the saint and the sinner! . . .' Yes, we are free for sin as well as for virtue, for faith as well as for hypocrisy. Grace compels no one. It does not force the door. But if a priest of such pure intention and such tender love of God and his neighbour can grow cold in his zeal (this priest, by the way, has since died a beautiful and truly priestly death), how much faithfulness to the inspirations of grace do not those need who began their priestly career with less enthusiasm and conviction.

Hence if our respect for the priesthood is truly deep and pure, we shall prove it by constant prayer and silent sacrifices for the perseverance of the priest. We should pray that he may not only be an *alter Christus* because of his ordination and vocation, but also in his outward life, which is the most effective sermon. In our conversation with priests we should live more than at other times in the presence of God, and we should, neither in nor out of the confessional, be together with priests without having Christ very deeply in our consciousness. The supernatural attitude of us laymen can confirm the devout priest in his spirituality, whereas our too natural treatment may be a stumbling block to the indifferent and distracted priest. I know of a layman living in a country where there are many priests, who, whenever he meets a priest, invokes his guardian angel so that he may 'illumine, protect and guide him'. How much good this would bring to both, priests and laymen, if it became a general custom in the Church.¹

¹ The author is a German lady living in Madrid, and this paper was originally read to a group of Spanish seminarists.—EDITOR.