

PRISONERS OF GOD

A.R.

I therefore, a prisoner in the Lord, beseech you that you walk worthy of the vocation in which you are called. With all humility and mildness, with patience, supporting one another in charity. Careful to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.—EPH. 4, 1-3.

WITH the last war fresh in our minds, we are accustomed to think of prisoners as harshly treated victims of international disorder or unwilling captives of social justice. But here in St Paul we find a famous preacher rejoicing in his bonds, glad to be fettered since these chains set free the Word of God. Because he is in captivity other apostles have gone forth with greater boldness to proclaim the Gospel, while from the fertile mind and burning heart of the imprisoned apostle issue the glowing words of some of his finest epistles. Even today there are many who are willing to be prisoners for God, to 'wear chains in the Lord's service' (Eph. 4, 1. Knox version). Urged by their love of God and of souls, contemplative religious gladly disappear behind the bars in an enclosed Order. Captives indeed in a material sense, spiritually bound yet further by their three solemn vows, they experience the true freedom of the children of God. The willing holocaust of their lives can be seen as reparation for the atrocities, committed against the unwilling victims of modern warfare and those bound under the tyranny of totalitarian rule. The glory of their lives is best described by St Thomas in the second part of the *Summa*: 'Those are called religious . . . who give themselves up entirely to the divine service as offering a holocaust to God'. 'Now the perfection of man consists in adhering wholly to God' (IIa-IIae, 187, 1).

Contemplative religious, then, strive for union with God and as a most effective means to this end bind themselves to God by solemn vows. Poverty, chastity and obedience are the chains which they willingly bear in the Lord's service. The vocation to which they know themselves to be called is to be a perfect holocaust continually offered to God in union with our Lord. Solemn Profession is an outward expression of that complete

inner oblation by which they become handcuffed, shackled to God. 'With Christ I am nailed to the Cross' (Gal. 2, 19). In this way they are made the prisoners of God, bound hand and foot and by their own choice united to Christ crucified. But in this way also they become free, with the complete freedom of the sons of God. 'But now being made free from sin and become servants to God, you have your fruit unto sanctification and the end life everlasting.' (Rom. 6, 22.) They are now, as it were, wedded to God, through their union with the Word and through him they begin to taste the joy of 'life everlasting'.

The vow of poverty which dispossesses the soul of the power to hold worldly goods yields it entirely to God whom alone it wishes to possess. 'Thou art the God of my heart and the God that is my portion for ever' (Ps. 72, 26). 'The Lord himself is their inheritance, as he hath said to them' (Deut. 18, 9). This bond is comparable to the nailing of our Lord's feet to the Cross, fastening him there unable to move. He was not allowed to possess even a few inches of the earth. So too the religious who has surrendered the right to own anything, understands that he is thereby the more made like to his Master. It is no loss when God is gained as the inmost treasure of the soul bound to him by its vow. 'As having nothing, yet possessing all things' (2 Cor. 6, 10). In opposition to the attitude of this materialistic age, where wealth is measured by an accumulation of the goods of this world, these new sons of Levi gladly hold no other possession than the very Lord of all. They gain a spiritual inheritance which surpasses all joy. 'And the Lord said to Aaron: You shall possess nothing in their land, neither shall you have a portion among them. I am thy portion in the midst of the children of Israel. And I have given to the sons of Levi all the tithes of Israel for a possession, for the ministry wherewith they serve me in the tabernacle of the covenant. . . . Only the sons of Levi may serve me in the tabernacle and bear the sins of the people. It shall be an everlasting ordinance in your generations. They shall not possess any other thing.' (Numbers 18, 20-23.)

The vow of chastity means that the soul has an undivided love of God for himself. There is a virgin heart in a virgin body, an integrity, a wholeness of purpose. 'The idea of virginity must be looked at entirely from the point of view of love . . . not as the quenching of human nature, but as the extreme expression of its

capacity, not as absence of love, but as its most beautiful fulfilment . . . a flame of white heat . . . through love the soul and its Maker are one. God is her lover and she his spouse' (Fr Bede Jarrett, O.P.). It can be likened to the nailing of our Lord's hands upon the Cross, fixing him and yet opening wide his arms to embrace the whole world. The more wholly one loves God, the more wholly does one love others as God loves them; the more then do we embrace the sorrows and sufferings of the whole world. 'Never forget that to be a Catholic is to bear the whole world in your heart.' (Maurice Zundel, O.S.B.)

The third bond of love, the vow of obedience, requires the sacrifice of the will by which the soul becomes the slave of God 'unto death'. This can be compared with the opening of the side of Christ crucified, the deep wound in his Heart, from which flow blood and water. Being united to Christ in this inmost holocaust, obedience springing from love and increasing it, all the treasures of the Sacred Heart, the very riches of the Godhead, are shared with the soul. In giving up its own will the soul has surrendered what is most intimate, most personal to itself. Like the wound in the side of Christ, it is the most piercing. Yet it is above all by obedience that the soul, bound so closely to Christ, becomes truly and in the fullest sense, his spouse.

The manifestation of this union with God in charity to which contemplative religious bind themselves by vow is seen in the daily exercise of the moral virtues. It is just these ordinary virtues which dispose the soul to the higher graces of contemplation. Here again the imprisoned Apostle preaches their vocation with depth and precision. Fixing their gaze upon our Lord they must have 'all humility'. The Son of God was 'all humility' in that he emptied himself, though he was God and took the form of a servant, bowing to wash the feet of his disciples. 'If then I being your Lord and Master, have washed your feet: you also ought to wash one another's feet' (John 13, 14). The disciple also must be wholly empty of self, transparent to God. This is coupled with 'all meekness', which suggests reverence for others, both towards their soul and their body. It is the virtue of the Lamb, the Ruler, for it demands great strength, while yet appearing to the unwise as weakness. The Apostle rightly names patience, suffering divine things, as essential. It means showing evenness, tranquillity in the face of many difficulties for it is 'the virtue which conserves the

good of the reason against sadness, lest reason succumb' (IIa-IIae, q. 136 art. 1). It is in patience that we truly possess our souls and have the mastery since it is 'the root and guardian of all the virtues'. (IIa-IIae, q. 136 art. 3 ad 3.)

Finally St Paul urges that constant mutual charity which our Lord said would reveal his true disciple. It is more than to support each other; it is truly to uphold each other, being ready to receive the burdens and sorrows, the joys or the confidences of others. At times, even, we may be required to relieve the trials of others by giving them the fruits of our own experience. Each one by the strength and depth of a very personal love compels his neighbour to press onwards towards the common goal. 'Bear ye one another's burdens: and so you shall fulfil the law of Christ' (Gal. 6, 2).

In concluding this wonderful description of a contemplative vocation, the Apostle names the one chain which alone is to bind these religious into that unity of the Spirit which contemplative houses make visible, the bond of peace: the fetters, the vows, which link the soul to God in a holy wedlock, bring peace in its relations to God. The exercise of charity and the daily expression of love revealed by the moral virtues bring peace with one's neighbour. In this way these prison houses of God radiate upon a stricken and divided world that all-powerful 'unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace'.

ERRATA: In the article on Padre Pio in the last (September) issue of THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT: Page 127 line 23: for *affection* read *affectation*.
Page 131 line 14: for *no authentic quality* read *an authentic quality*.