

THE ART OF LETTING GO

BY

A. G. HERRING



VERY now and then the Church is handed a bouquet over the fence as it were, by someone outside her fold. Professor Jung has done this and surely we can take it. He tells us that he finds 'frequency of complexes . . . highest among the Jews, Protestants come second and Catholics only third'. But what is even more interesting is the reason for this state of things. This is not found specially in the psychological value of confession but rather in the way in which Catholic belief helps a man through the natural psychological crises of ordinary human life. Indeed the professor seems to show that as christian morals help to keep people out of prisons, so christian dogma is of value in keeping them out of asylums. For the life of man is normally a progress beginning as a child under the care of its parents passing through various stages till he attains to maturity and becomes himself a parent. There is an almost complete reversal of roles, from being the child of its parents to being the parents of a child. And it is not surprising that many people fail to accomplish this progress in a satisfactory way—failure very often being due to a tendency to retain the infantile outlook and attitude when the time for these is past and gone. And we do not here refer to mere boisterousness or skittishness, which are common enough, but to deep-seated attachments and inclinations of which the subject may be quite unconscious. And this kind of adhesion can result in all sorts of mental trouble. One type of fixation is produced when a boy centres himself too much around his mother, and so his whole attitude towards women may be prejudiced. He may for this reason abstain from marriage altogether, or expect a wife to be a second mother. One writer goes so far as to say that most drunkards are men with a pathological mother fixation (J. A. C. Brown). Or, again, the malady known as dementia-praecox, which accounts for one third of our asylum population, is due to severe conflict . . . often arising from taking 'the way of regression, saying in effect "I will be a baby again".' (*Education and Crises*, by Fletcher.) And so we could continue, but it is better to give Professor Jung's view as to how the practice of the Catholic Religion helps to prevent the onset of these mental maladies, by aiding the individual to pass smoothly out of one stage of life on to the next, making it easier

tor him to relinquish the past (e.g. infancy) so that he can the more readily lay hold of the new—maturity or parenthood.

We see the father and mother world of childhood is dissolved by a rich system of analogical symbols . . . the Pope as *Pater Patrum* and *Ecclesia Mater* are the parents of a family which includes the whole of Christendom, except such parts of it as protest against this.—*Essays on Contemporary Events* (p. 21).

So it is easier to detach oneself from earthly parents and not to seek undesirable substitutes if one has reliance on God, our Lady and the Church. Moreover one can develop into adult responsibility and at the same time in religion retain 'that feeling of being a child which nothing can extinguish from the heart of man' (Jung). Thus does supernatural belief in God and the Church assist the natural course and development of the psychical life of man. We should expect that the Sacraments would play an important part in producing favourable psychological effects—and this is certainly the case. So Jung speaks of the psychological significance of Baptism which 'lifts a man out of his archaic identification with the world and changes him into a being who stands above it' (*Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, p. 167). We can see what a great part adult baptism would play in Missionary Countries in making men realise and appreciate the value of human personality, duly balanced by the social link of aggregation to the Church. This reminds us of the Initiation ceremonies of pagan peoples

in which the individual is released from the tie to his family and indeed from his whole previous identity by a ritual death and is reborn as a member of his tribe.—*Essays on Contemporary Events* (p. 29).

These ceremonies may be terrifying and painful but they probably give a boy what he wants by withdrawing him from the women and children and associating him solidly with the men. It must tend to prevent 'leakage' if such a thing were possible in these close-knit tribes.

In fact when we consider this problem of 'leakage' in our own country it seems that what our boys desire is to become more and more associated with the men and so they would welcome some grade or distinction which would mark them as having passed out of school stage and would be pleased if the effect of this was to join many of them together in a sort of group. At first sight it would seem, from theological considerations, that confirmation would effect this. But psychologically this seems not to be the case. For one thing it is often (and most rightly) given at too early an age for such results. First Communion is also given early so that there is no new Sacrament for him to look forward to—in fact the only

one that remains is Extreme Unction, for Holy Matrimony is not for all.

To speak purely psychologically one might be surprised that there is not a Sacrament for the crisis of Adolescence. But the Church does not provide a (more or less exciting) ceremony to mark and assist the boy's emergence into manhood, instead of which she gets to work earlier, at the age of reason, and so has some years of quiet sacramental life whereby the boy is assimilated to all the faithful—and if the men of the district receive Holy Communion frequently, his psychological longing for association with them will be duly satisfied. Indeed hero-worship of a sort is to be expected, and can be used and directed. The writer remembers a Catholic working man speaking with admiration of a priest he had known years before. He mentioned his qualities—six feet high, a grand priest he was, and a hand like a shovel. The growing boy tends to think little of law but much of a leader. He also likes to know why he should do this or that. Someone looking back on his secular education has remarked that it would have been better if his instructors had spent rather less time on what was to be learned and rather more on *why* it should be learned. In the same way perhaps more could be done in explaining the reasons for going to Mass as well as emphasising the duty of doing so.

So it appears that the problem of leakage is, in one respect, a too eager advance towards manhood with a consequent rejection of the ways of childhood—including Religion which is so often too closely identified with the school. So the phenomenon is an example of inability to pass from one stage of life to another in a satisfactory way.

Indeed in all life and thought we must retain some grip on what has gone before as well as reach out to grasp what lies ahead. So besides normal people, there will be those who hold on too long to thoughts and ways that are, or should be, over and done, and on the other hand those who relinquish them too quickly. This is called 'Perseveration' and the extraordinary thing is that—

It appears that very high and low perseverators are prone to be unreliable and difficult; the best characters, on the other hand, are medium perseverators.—*A Guide to Mental Testing*, by Cattell (p. 207).

This question is being examined by those concerned with moral delinquency and theories are being formed. Thus the Rev. J. S. Cammack, S.J. writes:

It may be suggested that the problem of 'moral defect' is in reality a problem of temperamental defect to be explained by a defect in

the perseveration factor. . . . *Moral Problems of Mental Defect* (p. 176).

But if perhaps inability to 'let go' at the right time may be a factor in some moral defect, on the other hand the power of 'letting go' seems to be an important element in what we know as genius. Discoverers and inventors must have arrived at a fresh and novel point of view—and this must involve the abandonment of certain aspects and theories which may be long established and their relinquishment requires insight to perceive at least vaguely the new position and courage to abandon elements of the old—altogether more difficult than it sounds. Thus to appreciate the theory of relativity one would have to 'let go' the notion of Newtonian space. No doubt it is this which accounts for the fact that in the careers of great thinkers there is often an interruption or disturbance (at the time regarded probably as a misfortune) which seems to have been necessary in order to jerk the mind on to the new view point. We may recall the theory of Conversion in *Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James. There is the existing centre of personality and interests, then a new centre begins to be incubated as it were, and that unconsciously. Before a man can act from the new centre he must abandon the old.

Here a homely illustration may help. There used to be a common sort of puzzle which consisted of a sketch and one was asked to find some other face or figure buried in the lines. The one essential for success was ability to renounce the ordinary view, to un-think the picture of its meaning, not to see the picture for what it was and so suddenly the hidden form would jump up. An example of this is when someone who has been studying non-Catholic history sees (with more or less suddenness) the figure of the Pope. If it is the case that genius requires some sort of dislocation in the mental processes we seem to get the paradoxical situation that the more we improve our educational system the less are we likely to have in the way of genius. For improvements nowadays are rather in the way of making study more smooth and streamlined, by removing obstacles and providing answers almost before the pupil can appreciate the question. Perhaps we see the value of the 'objections' which are such a feature in the *Summa* of St Thomas. It seems that the intellectual life, like the moral life, requires opposition to produce its finest fruit.

But in ordinary life the principle of 'letting go' is important, even in the purely bodily sphere. Years ago William James wrote an excellent essay on the *Gospel of Relaxation* and now there is an elaborate system for mentally concentrating on different parts of

the body and so getting a relaxation as superior to a usual rest as a Turkish bath is to an ordinary one. And the reason for this appears to be that muscles and fibres do not always go slack and easy merely because we cease to require their tension, but they seem to await a positive message of a rather special kind before they do so—quite like the boy on the burning deck. Those who have read *The Inside of the Cup* by Fr F. Valentine, O.P. will recall the use he makes of this method of relaxation in dealing with certain kinds of temptation.

The art of 'Letting Go' is thus connected with many things—and in one aspect it is another name for Trust.



THE SOLITARY RELIGIOUS LIFE

BY

RUSTICUS

RELIGIOUS life implies certain specific characteristics: the vowed and dedicated life; the three counsels of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience; the ordered sequence of Mass, the daily Office and Mental Prayer; with some element of work and recreation at ordered times. We are so much used to the life's being lived in community that we are apt to think the Religious life implies, *per se*, Community life. But to be precise, this is not so.

It is however recognised and revered in its two most common (coenobitical) forms, and it is unlikely that any proposed adaptations would change these fundamental bases of the life—the 'family' life of Benedictine monachism, and the collegiate or communal life of the various orders of friars, where the members are not tied as monks are, to one House, but—moving about among the Houses of their own Province at the will of the Order's duly constituted authority—are bound by the Constitutions of the Order, and live within its framework a life full of change of habitat and movement.

But strangely enough, while in the world these two types of life, family and communal, in their secular aspect are accompanied by the third way of 'living alone' to an extent unknown in previous centuries, the solitary religious life is now almost non-existent. The attitude towards it, in England, also is curiously contradictory, and in the main seems a swing-away from the traditional one. Its opponents put forward its danger as a reason for its non-revival, as if