

BLACKFRIARS

REVIEWS

CHRISTIAN LIFE AND LITURGY

THE ART OF SUFFERING. By Louis Bertrand. Translated by E. F. Peeler, with Introduction by C. C. Martindale, S.J. (Sheed & Ward; 7/6.)

For the Christian suffering finds its apotheosis on the Cross. The fact of Christ's Passion does more than make pain bearable; it gives suffering a meaning and radiance which makes the Saint embrace with joy what the Stoic endures with an impassive resignation. Our physical nature has a healthy and universal dislike of pain of any kind and in this it seems in conflict with the outstanding examples of Christian teaching. Where the physician suspects a neurosis, the theologian sees a normal manifestation of supernatural Charity. In most cases we will grant the theologian's point that Christianity provides a divine incentive for suffering, but the mystery still remains enshrined in a greater Mystery. Under the stress of personal pain nature seems to come uppermost. We are children of an age which faces suffering with far less equanimity than the ancients possessed: every day brings for our bodily and mental solace an easier anaesthetic, a new refuge from pain and a fresh distraction from tiresome and uneasy thought. How far do we fall short of the Christian or even the old pagan attitude towards the ineluctable fact of suffering? Do we try to accept, to endure, or to escape?

M. Bertrand's book accepts the fact of suffering, covers its whole sorrowful range quite plainly and simply, and attempts no facile solution of its profound mystery. Its value is manifested by its title. We must learn the art of suffering and accept it for our consolation. With a deft skill he first treats of the approach of old age, contrasting the attitude of distress and contentment at its approach in the persons of a woman of fashion and a modern Epicurean. There is a warning against fruitless escapes: "To drive away old age with the aid of memory is as futile as driving it away with a lipstick" (p. 31), and the uncomfortable reflection that the ancient world met old age with the therapeutic methods of the spirit, while the modern world denies it by attempting to rejuvenate the body.

The second part spares the reader nothing in its catalogue of human suffering, and again contrasts past and present. The great Hospital of the Salpêtrière in Paris with its palatial buildings for housing the incurables and the insane, like all the older foundations, has the aspect of a royal palace, and a "symbolic significance far surpassing its external object": in the terms of its

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Royal Charter the inmates were regarded as "the living members of Jesus Christ, not as useless members of the State" (p. 97). "Nowadays our hospitals have no such stylish grandeur; they are dully utilitarian, strictly adapted to the needs of their guests and the demands of modern hygiene. They are merely infirmaries and laboratories" (p. 96). The fastidious Philip II of Spain during his last illness, lying for weeks in a welter of suppurating filth and stench and never losing his equanimity, is taken as the example of the suffering Christian. He, like the ancients, had no analgesic remedy for the body's ills, but depended upon the spirit.

A deep and tender understanding is shown of temperamental "misfits," of the mystery of personal antipathies and of the conflict of powers all of us experience through what he terms our "Mara," "the residue of obscure (ancestral) heritages that sets us violently at cross-purposes with analogous heritages co-existing in ourselves or in others" (p. 151). "Against our will it makes us commit innumerable acts of folly; it makes us cruel and inexorable when we want to melt into kindness and affection. It makes us deaf to every reasonable remonstrance; it petrifies us into a state of stupid inertia when we long to give ourselves entirely and follow the dictates of our heart" (p. 148).

The final part has for its background the Escorial "as the most appropriate setting for a lesson in bravery in the presence of death," for it was there that its founder, Philip II, met death with Spanish and Christian courtesy. Extremes are avoided which would extol death by confusing it with its consequences, or would thrill the reader with the agony and panic which convention demands as its prelude. There is much to encourage the less resolute and to preserve a common-sense attitude towards the act of dying, supported by a great measure of direct medical observation. Those of us who have at some time lived in immediate danger of dying would support the writer's view that "As long as we are fully alive we are not afraid of death," and the fact that most men seem to die with comparative tranquillity. The Thomist would however question the assertion that "Reason alone can furnish us with proofs neither of the total annihilation of the individual nor of his future life."

Such a book as this is urgently needed. It will help those who find suffering in any respect difficult in the modern world to ride steadily between the extremes of self-complacency and rebellion, and will prevent their absorbing the prevalent tendency to escape, which not only falls far below the dignity of classical Stoicism but is the antithesis of Christian teaching and practice. *The Art of Suffering* cannot be read once and put aside: its courage and its stimulus are unforgettable; and it will always be kept close at hand for personal meditation, guidance and consolation.

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