

CONVERSION

PAUL CLAUDEL TO GABRIEL FRIZEAU¹*Consulate of France,
Foo-chow.*

Dearest brother and friend,

Please let me call you this and thank you for the immense joy your letter brought me.

I thank God who has enabled one soul at least, the only one, to understand the purpose for which all my books are written, that is to know him and to love him better and to have him better known and better loved. All those who have written to me about my plays have only praised the qualities of style and imagination, thereby proving that they did not grasp their spirit and meaning; so that up to now you are the only one whom I have really addressed and my life's labour will not have been in vain if I can bring you back to truth and happiness.

Yes, do believe with absolute certainty that there is no truth to be found but in happiness, in boundless, overflowing and joyful bliss such as it is given to us in a narrower range to experience in sublime works of art: Virgil, Dante, Beethoven, Shakespeare. Everything that makes us abide by this idea is true; whatever leads us away from it is false. We are assuredly born for endless happiness and for untold delight. And the fulfilment of this joy is to be found in divine love, that is in the presence both outside of and within us of a distinct being named God, infinitely pure, infinitely kind, infinitely innocent, who knows us and loves us with a personal love, each one of us, Paul Claudel or Gabriel Frizeau.

In the wealth of his bounty and wisdom he could have created beings far more beautiful and holy, and yet it is with us that he shares this personal secret, this special point of our existence, something that he does not find in his most sublime angels and for which he loves us with a particular love. But we, for our part, are distinct and separate so that

¹ Translated from *Etudes*, March, 1952, by E. Pullen.

we may have something individual to give him, so as to join our poor human heart to his heart. That is the truth, and if you believe that you believe the whole of Catholic doctrine. If you examine all its dogmas, all its most humble teaching, in the light of love, they will appear to you very easy to believe; in them you will find all peace, all satisfaction, the outward sign in this life of your inner wedlock with death. I myself had a childhood and a youth similar to your own, a pious childhood, followed by the dangerous *lycée* and the rank doctrines of the day, Kant and Renan. This misguided creature has proffered the most horrible blasphemy ever uttered by human lips: 'Perhaps truth is sadness'. In those days I believed that there existed no mystery in the world, that everything could be explained by scientific laws and that the machine of the universe could be pulled to pieces like a loom. But it happened that at that time, Christmas 1886, I attended vespers in Notre Dame, and in listening to the *Magnificat* there was revealed to me a God whose arms were extended towards me. For four years I forced myself to resist while I had within me, deep down, both the conception of a God whom I loved and in whom, beneath all manner of words, I believed with all the powers of my heart and of my being, and at the same time a scorn for the utter stupidity of these 'dogmas' and of those 'legends' that were taking hold of the pitiful, silly, proud little nincompoop I then was. After four years the conflict had not ceased but I had lost the strength to continue. I decided to make an end of it. I went to confession and Communion and from then on all doubts disappeared and I have not ceased to believe every jot of what is taught by the holy Catholic Church, the one and infallible depository of the truth. I may have sinned, but I have never ceased to believe in the love that God has for me, and in the indefectible treasure he has placed in the hands of his priests. In those day I saw no link between the outside world, such as the masters and books of my youth had taught me to see it, and this tremendous inner light which had strangely illumined my soul. All my plays are but the effort, the struggle of a soul in despair against the smothering darkness which is suffocating her, the alchemy of a soul that cannot but find outside of herself

in this visible world around her, order, peace and joy, this inner joy of which she is so intensely aware. This work of mine has entered into a new phase with the doctrinal works I am now working on, the first of which, *Connaissance du Temps*, I am sending you today.

It is eminently satisfying to Reason to believe in a Being perfect, immutable, essentially different from all created life, and for whom the mysterious name of Holy expresses this unutterable and fatherly difference which gives us existence. It is reasonable to believe that this Being, creator of the universe, has taken an interest in this the work of his own hands, that he has played with it, as artists would say, that he rejoiced in it. If we are his work, his fruit and the outcome of his eternal conception, how could he lose interest in us? 'Does a mother forget her child? and even if she were to, as for me I vow I shan't forget you, says the Lord' (Isaias). Therefore, if we are miserable and suffering it is impossible that this should happen through God's doing but rather as the result of a transgression, of an original lapse. That transgression is just what the Son of Man, sprung from the sacred womb of the Blessed Virgin, has come to repair in dying for us on the cross. Having opened the door for us, having shown us the way, he had to give us the means to see it and the power to follow it. That is why, to begin with, not only has he created the Church which is as ancient as the first man, but he has established it with its unfailing authority, giving it the power to be his permanent representative on earth, to speak and to legislate in his stead, to bind and to loose, to close and to open, without a doubt, without an error. And secondly he has instituted the sacraments which are our means of communicating with him, not only of hearing him as did the Apostles, but of eating his flesh and of drinking his blood.

All this follows perfectly, all this is in conformity with truth, and with the greatest happiness. That is all we need to know and that is why we do not know more. Truly these grandiose and wonderful truths are surrounded with mysteries, but they are not mysteries of horror of death, but mysteries of life such as we carry with us in our humble daily routine. The union of God with human nature can be

compared with the union of mind and body. These half-lights are as dear to a believer's heart as light itself. Who would care for a truth that could be grasped immediately, prostituted to every curiosity? The darkness in which our faith is veiled is like the Eucharistic species which enables our faith to remain unsullied through the trivialities of our lives furnished with make-believe ideas, like the frippery, tawdry, ready-made trinkets which we are wont to call our science, our reason. Our faith is not meant to be savoured by our palate but to be digested in the depths of the heart.

I shall always be extremely happy to write to you and to converse with you, and you can give me no greater pleasure than to confide in me all your doubts, all your uncertainties. I myself have been through this phase in which you are now, and at that time I cruelly missed the presence of a friend who could have understood me fully. But, believe me, hesitate no more. 'Thou wouldst not look for me, hadst thou not found me already', as Pascal said. Conversion is not a question of words, of objections to be solved more or less cleverly. If you succeed in overcoming one, ten will come to replace it. One must make a great decision with a courage which is both ludicrous and heroic. One must say to God, 'O my God, at last it is time. Now I am about to do something quite absurd. On the one hand are the scholars, the artists, the clever men, the statesmen, the men of the world who all tell me with absolute certainty that you don't exist; on the other hand are the sanctimonious bores, the pious old women, the "art" of the Stations of the Cross, the suffocating ineptitude of sermons. You can flatter yourself with having invented a silly and quite absurd kind of religion, and yet I like it the way it is; and as for you, my God, I love you such as you are and wherever you are, and I am going to you wherever you are because you alone have the words of life. More than that, because you are yourself, because you are my Saviour and my God. *Rabboni, Abba, pater! Nolite timere, ego sum.*' Go to confession. Converts never fail to receive the grace of soon finding a suitable confessor; I have experienced it, like Huysmans, and many others. Go to Communion as often as possible. Take and eat. Drink life at its source and all your doubts will appear poor and empty.

Abase yourself, practise the humblest of devotions, the Stations of the Cross, the Scapular, and above all the rosary, an admirable exercise. Partake every day in the sublime drama of the Mass. Finally force yourself bodily to accomplish works of charity, although this may be hardest of all for men like you or me: for instance, join the St Vincent de Paul Society. Therein lies the secret of a rich inner life.

In ending my letter, I believe it to be a good thing to give you the list of books that have been most helpful to me in my four years of preparation for a Christian life. *Elevations sur les Mystères* and *Méditations sur les Evangiles*, by Bossuet; the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, by Catherine Emmerich and the visions of the same collected by a Redemptorist Father; the *Purgatorio* of Dante; and *Angela* of Foligno. Later I came to know that great feast of reason, the two *Summae* of St Thomas Aquinas. Get started as soon as you can, without being discouraged by the vocabulary which, after all, is fairly easy to remember. It is a prodigious exercise for one's mind as well as an incomparable source of light. You will find in it sublime pages about the soul, about matter and form, about the beatific vision, that is, about the 'informed' soul, transformed by God himself in order to enjoy him face to face.

Goodbye, my dear friend. Let me know in your next letter that you have accomplished something in order to conquer and to possess the mysterious treasure of limitless joy we carry within us. Trust the desperate cry that comes from our innermost self towards the Absolute. We are meant for happiness; man has but one duty in the world, which is to possess it; and this happiness can only be found in joining with its source.

P. CLAUDEL

20 January, 1904.