

THE NIGHT COMETH *

JESUS told us that the night cometh when no man can work. He, the dayspring from on high who came to give light to them that sit in darkness and the shadow of death, who was proclaimed as the light come to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of his people, told us—what?—that the night cometh. Others had told us before of this night. *Nox est perpetua una dormienda*, 'there is one everlasting night in which we must sleep,' but it was not the same message. Catullus knew not the dayspring from on high, nor of the world where there is no sun, for the Lamb is the light thereof. He knew only of the earthly day with its changeable sun in a cloudy heaven. In his soul there was only the pale light of reason amid the clouds of passion. All that he saw would be swallowed up in that one everlasting night of death, where there would be no loneliness and no fellowship, for there would be nothing. Our last night will not be like that; it will be followed by a day and 'the Lamb is the light thereof.' It will not be a night of annihilation, an end of all things, but a night of refreshment, of preparation, of vigil, a night, though, most certainly, dark and when no man can work. It will, too, be a night of suffering.

Man indeed will not be able to work in that night, but God will work. Man's time of work is in this life on earth,

* The leading ideas in this article are taken from or suggested by *The Divine Crucible of Purgatory* (Burns, Oates and Washbourne; 6s.) by the late Mother St. Austin, of the Helpers of the Holy Souls. She speaks of singing in a childlike way the words and airs of theologians, and reveals in fact the mature grandeur of an active life which was also one of intense prayer and study. The fruits of her contemplation should be a help to many.

and the task set him is to work out his own salvation. Every man must bear his own burden, says St. Paul. Truly it is too heavy for our own shoulders; at the bottom of our hearts we feel that we are not fit to be trusted even with the responsibility of ourselves. Yet it is a responsibility that we cannot escape. We can and do try to shift it—onto the world perhaps, and so we go into a cloister, but the burden is still with us there. Adam said, 'The woman tempted me,' but he did not escape the responsibility for himself. How, then, can we complete the work? It was the carpenter's son with two beams upon his shoulder who told us. He who foretold the night, told us also how we could get through the preceding day without coming to irremediable grief. 'Cast your care upon God, for He careth for you.' This was more than a command or a piece of good advice; it was an invitation, for the speaker was himself God. In those words He who gives us the burden to bear stretches out both hands and says, 'We will share it. Give it me.' And in that invitation join all those who share His life, all those other Christs who are one with Him. 'Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ,' says St. Paul again.

That is the first day. How shall we be at the end of it? Suppose that with the help of our Lord, of Christ and our brothers and sisters in Him, we have carried the load till He bids us set it down, dropping it sometimes perhaps, certainly often stumbling with it, knocking it here, scraping it there, how shall we be?

Travel-stained, tired and weak, certainly. Stained by too close contact of heart and mind with things of earth when we were made for things of heaven. Tired, too tired and weak to soar to the company of God who is so far above us in His almighty power and the freshness of His inexhaustible, self-renewing life. Too tired to be vivacious in His company; too weak to thrill to Him. Tired and weak because we have refused to draw our strength from God who is the only source of life. So we shall have debts

to pay, too, before we can settle down at home. God has lent us His creation to help us there, and we have squandered the loan, misused it. Thus we come to the end of one day, and are not ready for the next. A night must intervene and that night is Purgatory.

After death we cannot work out our salvation any longer. Strictly speaking, we are for the time being no longer 'we' to do it. A part of ourselves remains, but not the whole. The part that is temporarily lost to us, our body, is that part which enables our soul to turn this way and that so as to cleave to God or reject Him, in its seeking for knowledge of the multitude of things that surround us, and in its love of the manifold goods about us. When it leaves the body the soul is fixed on God or turned away from Him beyond possibility of return. Suppose, then, that it is fixed on God but that it is not yet ready for the light of His sun, how is it with the soul in that state? It desires to be united to God in the blissful vision of Him, and there is now no possibility of distraction or falling away from that desire. The soul is in 'the silence of created things.' No longer is it drawn by the colours and sounds which now delight us; no more do the changes of the seasons or the thronging crowds fill its horizon; the joys and sorrows of friends no more raise it up or cast it down. It has no senses with which to gain knowledge of these things. Emptied of the imagery and pageant of creation the mind is set free for the light of Eternal Truth which it cannot yet possess. It lies in a great darkness, the shadow of God. But that absence of the sight of God causes no anxiety, for we know by then that we are sure of Him in the end, beyond possibility of disappointment. The soul, benighted, rests in perfect trust. Daily in the Holy Mass we pray for those who 'sleep in the sleep of peace,' those, that is, who are waiting in Purgatory to be granted the 'eternal rest' of Heaven. For their condition in the silence of created things, in the silence of truth, in the silence of perfect trust, is not one of beatific repose. It is partly a

condition of not-God, and since their tending is all towards God to Whom they are now very close, the privation of the one thing they desire is a torture to them. In this privation and the hurt they suffer from it they are one with our divine Lord on the Cross when He cried, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' It is only in His name, and as being other Christs, that we can be saved. The mysteries of His earthly life will not be fully worked out in us till we sit with Him at the right hand of the Father. In Purgatory we have to continue to fill up the measure of His sufferings.

Why did He suffer? Why do the Holy Souls have to suffer with Him? Because of sin. By sin the divine life-flow in us is interrupted; it has to be restored. In sinning we go what we imagine to be our own way, though it is not really nearly so much our own true way as is God's way which we reject. A sort of violence is needed to make straight the path which we have turned crooked, the powers which we have deflected from their true object. This suffering which is contrary to our natural will, and even more contrary to our sinful will, has the power of bringing us to our senses again after the madness of sin. It is educative, drawing us out of our ignorance and blindness and malice, back to knowledge and sight and goodness. It helps us to take a new and truer view of life. Cardinal Newman has a sermon on suffering in which he remarks on the bad effects it can have on us, bringing with it fretfulness, selfishness and despair. If we let it do that we are wasting an opportunity. Perhaps we have no grave sins to repent of. That is the case with the Holy Souls, for having died in the love of God they have repented of all their sins. They will still have to become convinced through and through of the evil character of even the lesser faults to which they have been prone, and of the worthlessness of themselves who have been able to offend God, perhaps without much thought of what that means, in so many ways. Their suffering will teach them all that, not

superficially, for one receives no mere smattering of education in the school of Purgatory, but they will learn the lesson in the very centre of their being. It will be made especially obvious to them because the cause of their pain will be the immediate influence on them of God Himself. All that they have ever known has been a dim reflection of His Truth. Now they are all desire for the straight vision of that Truth, but are kept away by the remains of their own untruth. By the infused knowledge with which God endows them they come to see their own true worth, which in relation to His fullness of Truth, Goodness and Being is very, very little. In God's Truth they gain humility, and the gaining will hurt them. But they will see the fitness of their punishment as they understand more and more His perfect Righteousness and come to hate sin more nearly as He hates it. They will understand the meaning of the Crucifix better, and, sorrowing for their past ingratitude to their Father in heaven, will become more closely knit to the Son who suffered to appease the divine justice and acknowledge the divine love.

So far we have been concerned with the darkness of the night of Purgatory, with the painful work of expiation and payment of debt, a work of undoing. It needs to be seen along with the work of doing, God's doing done on the soul, which goes on at the same time. It is all one work. But the whole night of Purgatory is only necessary because we have misused the day before. Having erred in our ways we have to be punished and we have to be healed. That double function of the sufferings of the soul in Purgatory is what differentiates them from those of Hell. In Hell the lost soul, unchangeably obstinate in evil, is stifled by the order of divine justice and goodness which it has rejected for ever. Dying in grave sin the unrepentant man has placed himself beyond the power even of the divine healing. There is nothing left for him but to suffer hopelessly. He has dropped his burden at the end, instead of carrying it across to the new life and laying it at the feet

of God. But the purgatorial state, as its name implies, is different. And what is more, we can forestall it, not only by a more ardent love of God and avoidance of sin in this life, but also by expressing that love in making satisfaction on earth for the sins we do fall into. Our union with Christ crucified does not begin after death; it begins with our Baptism. He is God's showing of Himself to us. Longing for God—and there is this longing somewhere in everyone—it is to His incarnate Son that we must go if we would see Him. 'Sir, we would see Jesus,' we say with the Greeks in the Gospel, and Jesus has put Himself in a high place where we can see Him. On the Cross and on the Altar, He is lifted up so that we cannot miss Him. In those two places which are one place, for the sacrifice of the Mass is one with the sacrifice of Calvary, we can meet Him if we will, and offer our sorrows and pains in union with His in satisfaction for sins, to fulfil God's justice and acknowledge His love. In this accepted union with God on the Cross we are not only converted, turned more and more towards God by suffering, but at the same time become more deeply penetrated by His goodness and justice and truth. The more His love absorbs us as we grow in union with His suffering Son, so much the more we shall advance in loving Him. Like the souls in Purgatory we shall suffer anew as we do this. The shadow of God's brightness will reveal us to ourselves as very dark; the greater our love the more piercing will be our pain at the absence of Heaven. These sufferings, too, can be turned to the same account as those we started with. Like Purgatory, the state of one on earth who is united with Christ crucified is a mingling of joy and sorrow, both untold. May Mary, Queen of Sorrows, who stood beneath the Cross, teach us how to conduct ourselves in both as she taught her Son.

In this path of suffering here, by which we can do the work of satisfaction and purgation in ourselves which will otherwise have to be done after death before we are fit to

enter Heaven, we can also help the souls of the faithful departed. Though we can make reparation for the sins of others who are still alive, and thus call down God's blessings on the world, we cannot help the living in such a direct way as we can the dead. For the living can bar the way to the grace God offers them, and refuse to repent, but the will of the souls in Purgatory is fixed immovably on Him and yet they can no longer merit for themselves. Because of our common union with Christ, however, we can satisfy on their behalf and so shorten their Purgatory through our participation in the saving pains of the Redeemer. In this path of suffering Christ is both an example and a living guide; an interior guide, moreover, who reaches us through our partaking of His Flesh and Blood in the Blessed Sacrament. That pledge of salvation is Itself a witness to the work of God in the soul which we are considering. In It the 'attributes of God are united with their contraries: nothingness with Infinity: humility with supreme Grandeur: littleness with Immensity: weakness with All-Power: passivity with Action: silence with the Word of God: annihilation with Him Who is' (*loc. cit.*, p. 47). In It is contained the Body of Christ sacrificed for us on the Cross to repair our defaults. It is also the great source of healing and growth in the God-life which is ours. By It we are admitted to the hidden, silent, vast expanses of God in which alone we can truly know ourselves, express ourselves, and find ourselves. By It we enter into that Sabbath, that rest, which St. Paul says awaits the people of God. On the Altar, as on the Cross, we find God's hiddenness, the hiddenness of the transcendent God which is revealed to us in this way, just as the presence of the all-present God is also revealed to us in this way. In that hiddenness the humbled soul is exalted, the poor soul is enriched, the hungry soul is fed and satisfied. But before that can take place the soul must be made humble, hungry and poor, and that too will be brought about most perfectly by God's hiddenness, the hiddenness

of His Nature, His hiddenness in suffering, Christ's and ours. On the Altar, as throughout His Passion, our Lord was silent, the Word Who was begotten in silence by the Father Who communes with Himself in silence. That silence calms the turbulent babbling of our passions and our ignorance, and reduces us to speechlessness, so that we may take part in the infinite life of the Trinity in which the Word is spoken and the Father and the Son love.

The Holy Souls, too, are admitted to the peace of God through this silencing and noughting of themselves in the presence of His hidden infinity. Meditating on their lot, its causes, nature and purpose, we are all the time made more conscious of what must be our own response to the call of God. Heaven is begun in us and set before us as a goal when we first receive sanctifying grace in Baptism; there is a work of perfecting and development to be done in our souls. If it is marred or not completed during life it will be finished with peculiar intensity after death. To consider the souls in Purgatory is to put ourselves in the presence of God and helps us to understand the operations of His power. It reveals the path by which He would lead us to union with Himself, which is none other than the Saviour Who said: 'I am the Way.' The departed soul is purified for the vision of God by union with the suffering soul of God made Man. Our purification is brought about by no other means.

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