

THE SINNER WHO LOOKS LIKE A SAINT

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*L*E pécheur est au cœur même de la chrétienté. . . . 'The sinner stands at the very heart of Christendom. No one is more competent than he to say what it all means—no one unless it be the saint.' These words of Péguy might form a text for a great many contemporary Catholic novels: you think not only of Greene, but of Waugh too, of Mauriac. And as you follow the unfolding drama of the lives created by them you sometimes find that in the end the sinner comes to look suspiciously like a saint. Are the novelists justified? Can the sinner be a saint?

We shall perhaps find an answer if, to begin with, we examine Péguy's words more closely. Why is the sinner the central figure? Why is he more competent than others to say what Christianity is about? Because Christianity is the religion of redemption, of rescue, of mercy, of the tenderness of God: because Christianity means the coming of light from darkness, of life from death: the dry bones live again. And it is the sorrowing sinner who knows this process, knows it in his heart, far more than the ninety-nine who need not penance: it is the sinner who knows the need of a Saviour by more than hearsay: it is the sinner who knows the grace of God not as an empty term in a textbook or a sermon but as a reality longed for, fled from, gained and lost again, known as a blinded man knows light and colour.

Clearly we are using the word sinner, when we speak thus, in a special sense. Mary, who was a sinner in the city, Peter, who denied, out of cowardice, the Christ he loved, all the millions of human beings who fail from weakness to keep the law of God: yes, you can call them sinners, but they are sinners in a very different sense from those who deliberately turn their love into hate, who coldly deride God and his law, who blandly ignore the reality they have once known. These others sin, but they struggle; they disobey God, but they love God or they long to love God; and so it is that in fact their love can become a deep and consuming fire in them, in a way that is unimaginable to the externally pious Christians to whom these buffetings are quite unknown and who perhaps are complacent about their success in keeping the law.

So we begin to understand more clearly why Christ was the friend of sinners; we begin to see a deeper truth in Aquinas's dictum that the sins of the flesh are less grave than the sins of the mind, than pride and hatred and despair. Father Vincent McNabb once said: 'When our Lord looks on a sinner, he isn't a sinner: he used to be'. But does that mean that his sinful habits fall away like a garment, that he is suddenly and completely free? It may, for indeed there are plenty of examples of the sudden conversion which does bring about a sudden and complete change of character; but it may not, it may mean a different sort of change: a change from being a sinner in the deeper and more real sense of one who hates God to being a sinner in this other more technical and superficial sense of one who loves God but is not yet wholly free.

'The flesh lusteth against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh. . . . The good which I will, I do not, but the evil which I will not, that I do.' The more one studies human behaviour the more one realises the degree to which it is determined. We have free will, we can choose, we can make up our own minds, yes, but not always, and certainly quite often not completely: there are conditions of mind and body in which freedom is in fact impossible, as in obsessional states; but quite apart from that, there are all the situations in which freedom is not wholly destroyed but diminished, there are all the 'enemies of the voluntary' of which we read in the moral theologians; and among these is the *habitus retractatus*—the habit which has been repented of but is not yet eradicated. The sin goes on; but it is sin *à contrecœur*, it represents not the deepest but only a superficial direction of the will; and that means more than that the guilt involved is considerably diminished.

We must not think too exclusively in terms of warring impulses: the hoped-for issue of the struggle is not just light in place of darkness but light out of darkness: the light will be the greater for the preceding darkness because it is in darkness that the light is engendered; the love will be the greater for the preceding betrayals, because, as with Peter, it is in the sorrow for the betrayals that the greatest love is born. Sorrow is creative.

The sinner then, in this sense of the word, is indeed at the heart of Christendom because it is in him preeminently that the Christian mystery is achieved, the divine alchemy is achieved; the sinner

knows better than others what Christianity is about because to him sin and grace, mercy, forgiveness, are not words learned in a catechism but realities known in the immediacy of bitter experience; and the sinner, finally, may indeed come to look very like a saint because this process that is going on in him all the time, this constant struggling towards the light and constant recession into the darkness, is a process in which love, though he may not believe it, is always increasing and increasing until in the end it may lead him to martyrdom.

Are we then to sin in order that all this may come about in us? Obviously no; not only because in any case the end cannot justify the means; not only because in any case sin is a violence against the nature of God and of truth, which no good result to ourselves could begin to justify; but because we should then not be sinners in this sense at all: we should be throwing ourselves into sin instead of struggling against it. And that very fact may correct us if we allow ourselves to think that perhaps then after all our sins do not matter much, or even to pride ourselves on them.

It can never be true to say, *Pecca fortiter*: Sin away as hard as you can and then you'll become a saint. If we do we are in fact moving in precisely the opposite direction: we are not hungering and thirsting after justice even while failing to achieve it; we are turning our backs on it. If we deliberately and coldly choose evil, or if we begin to take a lenient view of our sins and to tell ourselves that they do not matter, we are necessarily turning further and further away from God, not struggling towards him. And that hardening of the mind to evil has a sequel very far removed from sanctity: for it can end logically only in a freezing of the will in evil which ultimately becomes immovable, and the soul is then in hell.

What we can and must say is that, provided the struggle is really going on, provided the longing for God is really increasing, then however many the failures continue to be, even though to seventy times seven times, still there is hope because the light and the life are at work beneath the surface and they will shine forth *in novissimo die*, there will be the music and the feasting for the prodigal's return in the end.

If all this is true it provides us in passing with an answer which is not always adverted to in dealing with the question: If all that

is said of divine grace is true, how is it that Catholics are so often no better than their neighbours? There are two answers which are often given to the question: first, that it is easy to see the sins and miss the virtues, which is true; and secondly that grace is not magic and, no matter what its power to transfigure a personality, it will not do so and cannot do so unless it is used and used to the full: a purely external and formalist frequenting of the sacraments will never make us saints; and that also is true.

But there is this third thing: that we tend necessarily to judge by externals—for only God knows the secrets of men's hearts—and therefore to confuse the two senses of the word sinner: the whole of this deep creative process may completely escape us. Two people may act externally in the same way, be guilty externally of the same sin: but in one the process of petrification may be going forward, and in the other the power of love may be growing to such proportions that in the end it will turn all to gold.

It is unwise to try to judge men in terms of character alone—a mistake that has been made by more than one moral philosopher. Character is the sum of many habits; it is a part of that training of the will which in turn is part of the aim of education. But only a part. It is possible to have a good character, which means to act habitually in ways which are morally good, and yet at the same time fail to be a complete human being, to fail in spiritual vitality, to lack something which is revealed by its very absence to be essential, a pearl of great price. The ethic of duty for duty's sake is dead and depressing for just this reason: you are taking right action out of the sphere of vital action because away from joy and pleasure and love.

The sort of morality which in fact is no more than a thin-lipped human respectability is but a degradation of the same sort of thing. And there are the same elements, there is the same poison, in any moral life which is no more than a self-conscious and self-reliant striving after the right for its own sake or for the sake of some reward, some complacency, some *réclame*, which it brings. A character may indeed, if you dig down deep enough, reveal itself to be no more than a façade built to impress either the world or its own maker. That is why it is of little avail to train the will to choose the right and resist the wrong unless at the same time you are training the whole personality to see and to love. The

pursuit of the right can be as sterile as remorse; what is creative and life-giving is the vision and therefore the love of truth and goodness and beauty. Augustine said, not 'Too late have I found the clue to right action', but 'Too late have I loved Thee, O Beauty ever old and ever new'.

In other words, we shall never understand Christianity so long as we see it exclusively in terms not of poetry but of prose. There are indeed numberless lives which could be called prosaic in no pejorative sense: simple lives which follow an even course, free of struggles and crises and tensions, and which, always faithful, always devoted, end by achieving great sanctity though it is probably the sort of sanctity which remains unsung. These are already at an infinite distance from the pure character-builders: for it is God, and therefore love, they serve, and a life which looks externally very humdrum may in fact be very precious precisely because it is so simple in the philosophical sense also, so unswayed, so single-minded, so sterling, so pure.

But there are the poetic lives also; and perhaps they too are legion. There are the 'wrestlers with Christ' we have been thinking of; the lives whose poetry is dramatic and perhaps epic. There are the men and women—and perhaps still more the children—whose poetry is lyrical: their whole lives a constant outpouring of love expressing itself in ways which seem sometimes to defy the categories of a reasoned philosophy, for indeed not reason but the Holy Spirit moves them and makes them so unpredictable to more earth-bound minds. *Organum pulsatum a Spiritu Sancto: to be the perfect instrument for God's fingers, producing divine music; to be so completely one with God, so completely filled with his life, that you can say 'I live now not I, but Christ liveth in me'*: that is the consummation of the Christian life, and it is there that character becomes wholly transfigured into holiness, the virtues wholly taken up into that higher life we call the Gifts of the Holy Ghost, the prose wholly transmuted into poetry.

Because this is the consummation, it is to this that all the different kinds of Christian life come in the end: not only the lyrical children of God, not only the wrestlers who come to him through much agony of spirit and the morass of sin, but the ones also who at the first were so prosaic, the good and faithful servants who have been faithful in little things, they too enter, in the end, into the joy of their Lord.

There is one further question we must consider. If it is true that the sinner, more than others, can know the true meaning of Christianity; and if on the other hand it is true that the Christian may not for that reason sin, what is he to do?

For most of us the question is very quickly answered. We tend to think of sinners in terms of people whose sins have had some dramatic quality about them, a notoriety perhaps, or a physical or mental disintegration: but why should we? The constant sins of the tongue, the petty vanities and cruelties, the narrow-mindedness and lack of vision, the vacillations of faith and hope, the small dishonesties, the sloth and self-centredness of many a respectable life: these are sins enough in all conscience; these are material enough for any exploration of the depths if only we will not blind ourselves to their true character. What we need is not more sin but more sense of sin.

But there are, thank God, the others, the golden-hearted ones who are always very close to God's will: what of them? Perhaps we need say no more than that one of the Gifts is called Understanding: it enables the soul to penetrate the inner meaning of ultimate realities—and if of love, of redemption, then certainly of the sin which the love redeems. There is no love without sympathy; but sympathy means experiencing directly in oneself what another is suffering. You could not be a saint without a sense of sin; and indeed it is one of the most strikingly obvious things about the saints that their awareness of sin is such that they sorrow over a peccadillo imperceptible to us far more than we over our gravest betrayals. Saints, unlike sinners, are never shocked.

Le pécheur est au cœur même de la chrétienté. It should give us new heart, not only for ourselves but for the world as a whole. For the world as a whole, whether it admits it or not, is the Christian world, is the world for which Christ died, the world in which the redemptive process is being worked out to its fulfilment, the world which remains in travail even until now, so that it is wrong for us to despair. However great the mass of evil in the world it is wrong to despair: only if all struggle against that mass of evil had ceased would it be right to despair: and we know that in fact the struggle will not cease.