

Towards Holiness

We are deeply moved, and our hearts profoundly shaken, when we listen attentively to that cry of St Paul: 'This is God's will for you, your sanctification.' Today, once again, I set myself this goal and I also remind you and all mankind: this is God's Will for us, that we be saints.

In order to bring peace, genuine peace, to souls; in order to transform the earth and to seek God Our Lord in the world and through the things of the world, personal sanctity is indispensable. In my conversations with people from so many countries and from all kinds of social backgrounds, I am often asked: 'What do you say to us married folk? To those of us who work on the land? To widows? To young people?'

I reply systematically that I have only 'one stewing pot'. I usually go on to point out that Our Lord Jesus Christ preached the good news to all, without distinction. One stewing pot and only one kind of food: 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work.' He calls each and every one to holiness; he asks each and every one to love him: young and old, single and married, healthy and sick, learned and unlearned, no matter where they work, or where they are. There is only one way to become more familiar with God, to increase our trust in him. We must come to know him through prayer; we must speak to him and show him, through a heart to heart conversation, that we love him.

Talking with God

'Call upon me and I shall hear you.' The way to call upon him is to talk to him, turn to him. Hence we have to put into practice the Apostle's exhortation: *sine intermissione orate*; pray always, no matter what happens. 'Not only with your heart, but with all your heart.'

You may be thinking that life isn't always easy, that we all have our share of bitterness, sadness and sorrow. I tell you again, with St Paul, that 'neither death nor life, no angels or principalities or powers, neither things present nor things to come, no force whatever, neither the height above us nor the depth beneath us, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which comes to us in Christ Jesus Our Lord'. Nothing can take us away from the charity of God, from Love, from keeping up a constant relationship with our Father.

In recommending this unbroken union with God, am I not presenting an ideal so sublime that it is unattainable by the majority of Christians? Certainly the goal is high, but it is not unattainable. The path that leads to holiness is the path of prayer; and prayer ought to take root and grow in the soul little by little, like the tiny seed which later develops into a tree with many branches.

We start with vocal prayers which many of us have been saying since we were children. They are made up of simple, ardent phrases addressed to God and to his Mother, who is our Mother as well. I still renew, morning and evening, and not just occasionally but habitually, the offering I learned from my parents: 'O my Lady, my Mother! I offer myself entirely to you, and in proof of my filial love, I consecrate to you this day my eyes, my ears, my tongue, my heart...' Is this not, in some way, a beginning of contemplation, an evident expression of trusting self-abandonment? What do lovers say when they meet? How do they behave? They sacrifice themselves and all their possessions for the person they love.

First one brief aspiration, then another, and another... till our fervour seems insufficient, because words are too poor...: then this gives way to intimacy with God, looking at God without needing rest or

feeling tired. We begin to live as captives, as prisoners. And while we carry out as perfectly as we can (with all our mistakes and limitations) the tasks allotted to us by our situation and duties, our soul longs to escape. It is drawn towards God like iron drawn by a magnet. One begins to love Jesus, in a more effective way, with the sweet and gentle surprise of his encounter.

‘I will release you from captivity, wherever you may be.’ We shake off slavery, through prayer: we know we are free, borne on the wings of a lover’s nuptial song, a canticle of love, which makes us want never to be parted from God. It is a new mode of going about this earth, a mode that is divine, supernatural, marvellous. Remembering oft-repeated phrases of the Spanish Golden Age, we may like to taste for ourselves that truth: ‘I am alive; or rather, not I; it is Christ that lives in me!’

One gladly accepts the need to work in this world and for many years, because Jesus has few friends here below. Let us not turn away from our duty to live our whole life — to the last drop — in the service of God and his Church. And all this, freely: *in libertatem gloriae filiorum Dei, qua libertate Christus nos liberavit*; with the freedom of the children of God which Jesus won for us by dying on the tree of the Cross.

It may be that, even from the beginning, dark clouds will appear and, at the same time, the enemies of our sanctification may employ techniques of psychological terrorism so vehement and well orchestrated — it is a real abuse of power — that they drag in their absurd direction even those who for a long time had behaved in a more reasonable and upright manner. Yet though their voices sound like cracked bells, that have not been cast from good metal and have a very different tone from the shepherd’s whistle call, they so distort speech, which is one of the most precious talents ever bestowed on men by God, a most beautiful gift for the expression of deep thoughts of love and friendship towards the Lord and his creatures, that one comes to understand why St James says that the tongue is ‘a whole world of malice’. So great is the harm it can do: lies, slander, dishonour, trickery, insults, tortuous insinuations.

The Sacred Humanity of Christ

How can we overcome these obstacles? How can we strengthen our initial resolve, when it begins to seem a heavy burden? Let us take inspiration from the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary, our Mother. She shows us a wide and open road, which necessarily passes through Jesus.

In order to draw close to God we must take the right road, which is the Sacred Humanity of Christ. This is why I have always advised people to read books on the Lord’s Passion. Such works, which are full of true piety, bring to our minds the Son of God, a Man like ourselves and also true God, who in his flesh loves and suffers to redeem the world.

Take the Holy Rosary, one of the most deeply rooted of Christian devotions. The Church encourages us to contemplate its mysteries. She wants to engrave upon our heart and our imagination, together with Mary’s joy and sorrow and glory, the spellbinding example of Our Lord’s life, in his thirty years of obscurity, his three years of preaching, his ignominious Passion and his glorious Resurrection.

To follow Christ — that is the secret. We must accompany him so closely that we come to live with him, like the first Twelve did; so closely, that we become identified with him. Soon we will be able to say, provided we haven’t put obstacles in the way of grace, that we have put on, have clothed ourselves with Our Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord is then reflected in our behaviour, as in a mirror. If the mirror is as it ought to be it will capture Our Saviour’s most lovable face without distorting it or making a caricature of it; and then other people will have an opportunity of admiring him and following him.

I have distinguished as it were four stages in our effort to identify ourselves with Christ: seeking him, finding him, getting to know him, loving him. It may seem clear to you that you are only at the first stage. Seek him then, hungrily; seek him within yourselves with all your strength. If you act with determination, I am ready to guarantee that you have already found him, and have begun to get to know him and to love him, and to hold your conversation in heaven.

I beg Our Lord to help us make up our minds to nourish in our souls the one noble ambition that matters, the only one that is really worthwhile: to get close to Jesus, like his Blessed Mother and the Holy Patriarch St Joseph did, with longing hearts and self-denial, without neglect of any kind. We will share in the joy of being God's friends — in a spirit of interior recollection, which is quite compatible with our professional and social duties — and we will thank him for teaching us so clearly and tenderly how to fulfil the Will of Our Father who dwells in heaven.

But do not forget that being with Jesus means we shall most certainly come upon his Cross. When we abandon ourselves into God's hands, he frequently permits us to taste sorrow, loneliness, opposition, slander, defamation, ridicule, coming both from within and from outside. This is because he wants to mould us into his own image and likeness. He even tolerates that we be called lunatics and be taken for fools.

This is the time to love passive mortification which comes, hidden perhaps or barefaced and insolent, when we least expect it. They can even go so far as to strike the sheep with the very stones that should have been thrown at the wolves: the follower of Christ experiences in his own flesh that those who have a duty to love him, treat him instead in ways that range from mistrust to hostility, from suspicion to hatred. They look upon him with misgiving, as if he were a liar, because they do not believe it is possible to have personal dealings with God, an interior life; and all the while, with atheists and those who are indifferent to God (people who are usually impertinent and rude), they behave in a most amicable and understanding manner.

Our Lord may even allow his followers to be attacked with a weapon that never does honour to its user, the weapon of personal insult; or to be subjected to a smear campaign, the tendentious and indictable result of a massive campaign of lies: for not everyone is endowed with a sense of fairness and good taste.

When people favour a doubtful theology and an easygoing 'anything goes' morality, and engage in dubious liturgical practices following their own whims, with a 'hippie' discipline which is answerable to no authority; then it comes as no surprise if they spread envy, suspicion, false allegations, insults, ill-treatment, humiliations, gossip and all kinds of outrage against those who speak only of Jesus Christ.

This is the way Jesus fashions the souls of those he loves, while at the same time never failing to give them inner calm and joy, because they are fully aware that, even with a hundred lies, the devils are incapable of making a single truth; and he impresses on them a living conviction that they will only find comfort when they make up their minds to do without it.

When we really come to admire and love the most sacred Humanity of Jesus, we will discover each of his Wounds, one by one. When we undergo periods of passive purgation, that we find painful and hard to bear, periods when we shed sweet and bitter tears, which we do our best to hide, we will feel the need to enter into each one of his most Holy Wounds: to be purified and strengthened, rejoicing in his redeeming Blood. We will go there like the doves which, in the words of Scripture, find shelter from the storm in the crevices in the rocks. We hide in this refuge to find the intimacy of Christ. We find his conversation soothing and his countenance comely, because 'those who know that his voice is gentle and pleasing are those who have welcomed the grace of the Gospel, which makes them say: You have the words of eternal life.'

Let us not think that because we are on this road of contemplation our passions will have calmed down once and for all. We would be mistaken if we thought that our longing to seek Christ, and the fact that we are meeting him and getting to know him and enjoy the sweetness of his love, makes us incapable of sinning. Though your own experience will tell you, let me nevertheless remind you of this truth. Satan, God's enemy and man's, does not give up nor does he rest. He maintains his siege, even when the soul is ardently in love with God. The devil knows that it's more difficult for the soul to fall then, but he also knows that, if he can manage to get it to offend its Lord even in something small, he will be able to cast over its conscience the serious temptation of despair.

If you want to learn from the experience of a poor priest whose only aim is to speak of God, I will tell you that when the flesh tries to recover its lost rights or, worse still, when pride rears up and rebels, you should hurry to find shelter in the divine wounds that were opened in Christ's Body by the nails that fastened him to the Cross and by the lance that pierced his side. Go as the spirit moves you: unburden in his Wounds all your love, both human and... divine. This is what it means to seek union, to feel that you are a brother to Christ, sharing his blood, a child of the same Mother, for it is She who has brought us to Jesus.

The Holy Cross

Be eager to adore, yearn to make reparation, suffering quietly and calmly. Then Jesus' words will come alive in your lives: 'he who does not take up his cross and follow me, is not worthy of me'. Our Lord becomes more and more demanding with us. He asks us to make reparation, to do penance, and the time comes when he makes us experience a fervent desire to want 'to live for God, nailed on the Cross with Christ'. But 'we have this treasure in vessels made of clay', which is fragile and brittle, 'to show that the power that shines through us is not ours but God's'.

'We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not without hope,' or sustenance; 'we are persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; we carry about continually in our bodies the dying state of Jesus.'

We may even imagine that Our Lord does not hear us; that we are being deluded, that all we hear is the monologue of our own voice. We find ourselves, as it were, without support on earth and abandoned by heaven. Nevertheless, we have a real and practical horror of sin, even venial sin. With the stubbornness of the Canaanite woman, we go down on our knees as she did, adoring him and imploring 'Lord, help me.' The darkness will vanish, vanquished by the light of Love.

The time has come to cry to him, Remember, Lord, the promises you made, filling me with hope; they console me in my nothingness and fill my life with strength. Our Lord wants us to rely on him for everything: it is now glaringly evident to us that without him we can do nothing, whereas with him we can do all things. We confirm our decision to walk always in his presence.

With God enlightening our intellect, which seems to be inactive, we understand beyond any shadow of doubt that, since the Creator takes care of everyone, even his enemies, how much more will he take care of his friends! We become convinced that no evil or trouble can befall us which will not turn out to be for our good. And so, joy and peace become more firmly rooted in our spirit, and no merely human motive can tear them from us, because these 'visitations' always leave us with something of himself, something divine. We find ourselves praising the Lord Our God, who has worked such great wonders in us, and understanding that God has made us capable of possessing an infinite treasure.

The Blessed Trinity

We started out with the simple and attractive vocal prayers that we learned as children, prayers we want never to abandon. Our prayer, which began so child-like and ingenuous, now opens out into a broad, smooth-flowing stream, for it follows the course of friendship with him who said: 'I am the way.' If we so love Christ, if with divine daring we take refuge in the wound opened in his Side by the lance, then the Master's promise will find fulfilment: 'Whoever loves me, keeps my commandments, and my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our dwelling in him.'

Our heart now needs to distinguish and adore each one of the divine Persons. The soul is, as it were, making a discovery in the supernatural life, like a little child opening his eyes to the world about him. The soul spends time lovingly with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and readily submits to the work of the life-giving Paraclete, who gives himself to us with no merit on our part, bestowing his gifts and the supernatural virtues!

We have run 'like the deer, longing for flowing streams'; thirsting, our lips parched and dry. We want to drink at this source of living water. All day long, without doing anything strange, we move in this abundant, clear spring of fresh waters that leap up to eternal life. Words are not needed, because the tongue cannot express itself. The intellect grows calm. One does not reason; one looks! And the soul breaks out once more into song, a new song, because it feels and knows it is under the loving gaze of God, all day long.

I am not talking about extraordinary situations. These are, they may very well be, ordinary happenings within our soul: a loving craziness which, without any fuss or extravagance, teaches us how to suffer and how to live, because God grants us his wisdom. What calm, what peace is ours once we have embarked upon 'the narrow road that leads on to life'!

Asceticism? Mysticism? I don't mind what you call it. Whichever it is, asceticism or mysticism, does not matter. Either way, it is a gift of God's mercy. If you try to meditate, Our Lord will not deny you his assistance. Faith and deeds of faith are what matter: deeds, because, as you have known from the beginning and as I told you clearly at the time, the Lord demands more from us each day. This is already contemplation and union. This is the way many Christians should live, each one forging ahead along his own spiritual path (there are countless paths) in the midst of the cares of the world, even though he may not even realise what is happening to him.

Such prayer and behaviour do not take us away from our ordinary activities. In the midst of our noble human zeal they lead us to Our Lord. When men offer up all their cares and occupations to God they make the world divine. How often have I reminded you of the myth of King Midas, who turned all he touched into gold! We, despite our personal failings, can turn all we touch into the gold of supernatural merit.

This is the way our God does things. When the prodigal returns, having squandered his fortune in riotous living and, worst of all, having forgotten about his father, his father says: 'Quick! Bring out the best robe, and clothe him in it; put a ring on his finger, and shoes on his feet. Then bring out the calf that has been fattened, and kill it; let us eat, and make merry.' Our Father God, when we come to him repentant, draws, from our wretchedness, treasure; from our weakness, strength. What then will he prepare for us, if we don't forsake him, if we go to him daily, if we talk lovingly to him and confirm our love with deeds, if we go to him for everything, trusting in his almighty power and mercy? If the return of a son who had betrayed him is enough for him to prepare a banquet, what will he have in store for us, who have tried to remain always at his side?

Far be it from us, therefore, to remember who has offended us or the humiliations we have

endured — no matter how unjust, uncivil or unmannerly they may have been — because it would not be right for a son of God to be preparing some kind of dossier, from which to read off a list of grievances. We must never forget Christ's example; besides, our Christian faith is not something to be put on and off like a suit of clothes: it can grow weak or more robust or be lost. With this supernatural life our faith grows strong and the very thought of how wretchedly naked man is without God is enough to terrify the soul. And so one forgives and gives thanks. My God, when I look at my own poor life, I find no reason to be vain and still less to be proud: all I see are abundant reasons why I should be always humble and contrite. I know full well that a life of service is man's noblest calling.

Living prayer

'I will arise and go through the city; through its streets and squares I will seek my love.' And not only through the city; I will run from one end of the world to the other — through all nations and peoples, through highways and byways — to find peace of soul. And I discover this peace in my daily occupations, which are no hindrance to me; quite the contrary, they are my path, my reason to love more and more, and to be more and more united to my God.

And if we are waylaid, assaulted by the temptation of discouragement, opposition, struggle, tribulation, a new dark night of the soul, the psalmist places on our lips and in our minds these words: 'I am with him in the time of trial.' Jesus, compared to your Cross, of what value is mine? Alongside your wounds, what are my little scratches? Compared with your Love, so immense and pure and infinite, of what value is this tiny little sorrow which you have placed upon my shoulders? And your hearts, and mine, become filled with a holy hunger and we confess to him — with deeds — that 'we die of Love.'

A thirst for God is born in us, a longing to understand his tears, to see his smile, his face... The best way to express this, I would say, is to repeat with Scripture: 'Like the deer that seeks for running waters, so my heart yearns for thee, my God!' The soul goes forward immersed in God, divinised: the Christian becomes a thirsty traveller who opens his mouth to the waters of the fountain.

Along with this self-surrender, our apostolic zeal is enkindled and grows day by day; it also sets others on fire with its desire, because goodness is diffusive. It is not possible for our poor nature to be so close to God and not be fired with hunger to sow joy and peace throughout the world, to spread everywhere the redeeming waters that flow from Christ's open side, and to begin and end everything we do for Love.

I was speaking before about sorrow and suffering and tears. Without contradicting what I said then, I can affirm that the disciple who lovingly seeks the Master finds that sadness, worries and afflictions now taste very differently: they disappear as soon as we truly accept God's Will, as soon as we carry out his plans gladly, as faithful children of his, even though our nerves may seem to be at breaking point and the pain impossible to bear.

Ordinary life

I would like to confirm once more that I am not talking about an extraordinary way of living as Christians. Let each of us meditate on what God has done for him and how he has responded. If we are courageous in examining our behaviour, we will perceive what still needs to be done. Yesterday I was very moved when I heard that a Japanese catechumen was teaching the catechism to others who did not yet know about Christ. I felt ashamed. We need to have more faith, much more faith and, with faith,

contemplation.

Go over, calmly, that divine admonition which fills the soul with disquiet and which at the same time tastes as sweet as honey from the comb: *redemi te, et vocavi te, nomine tuo: meus es tu*; I have redeemed you and called you by your name: you are mine! Let us not steal from God what belongs to him. A God who has loved us to the point of dying for us, who has chosen us from all eternity, before the creation of the world, so that we may be holy in his presence; and who continually offers us opportunities to purify our lives and give ourselves to him.

If there were still the slightest doubt in our minds, we receive yet another proof from his own lips: 'It was not you that chose me, it was I that chose you, to go out and bear fruit, fruit which will endure,' the fruit of your work as contemplative souls.

What we need, therefore, is faith, supernatural faith. When faith weakens men tend to imagine that God is far away and hardly cares for his children. They come to regard religion as a kind of appendage, something to have recourse to when there's no other remedy; they expect, with what justification one cannot say, spectacular manifestations, unusual happenings. But when faith is really alive in the soul, one discovers instead that to follow Christ one does not have to step aside from the ordinary pattern of everyday life, and also that the great holiness which God expects of us is to be found here and now in the little things of each day.

I love to speak of paths and ways, because we are travellers, journeying to our home in Heaven, our Father's land. But don't forget that, though a path may have some particularly difficult stretches, and may occasionally involve wading across a river or passing through an almost impenetrable wood, as a rule it will be quite passable and hold no surprises for us. The danger lies in routine, in imagining that God cannot be here, in the things of each instant, because they are so simple and ordinary!

There were two disciples on their way to Emmaus. They were walking along at a normal pace, like so many other travellers on that road. And there, without any fuss, Jesus appeared to them, and walks with them, his conversation helping to alleviate their tiredness. I can well imagine the scene, just as dusk was falling. A gentle breeze was blowing. All around were fields ripe with wheat, and venerable olive trees, their branches shimmering in the soft glowing light.

Jesus joins them as they go along their way. Lord, how great you are, in everything! But you move me even more when you come down to our level, to follow us and to seek us in the hustle and bustle of each day. Lord, grant us a childlike spirit, pure eyes and a clear head so that we may recognise you when you come without any outward sign of your glory.

The journey ends when they reach the village. The two disciples who, without realising it, have been deeply stirred by the words and love shown by God made Man, are sorry to see him leaving. For Jesus 'made as if to go on further.' This Lord of ours never forces himself on us. He wants us to turn to him freely, when we begin to grasp the purity of his Love which he has placed in our souls. We have to hold him back ('they pressed him') and beg him: 'Stay with us; it is towards evening, and it is far on in the day,' night is coming on.

That's just like us. Always short on daring, perhaps because we are insincere, or because we feel embarrassed. Deep down, what we are really thinking is: 'Stay with us, because our souls are shrouded in darkness and You alone are the light. You alone can satisfy this longing that consumes us.' For 'we know full well which among all things fair and honourable is the best: to possess God for ever.'

And Jesus stays. Our eyes are opened, as were those of Cleophas and his companion, when Christ breaks the bread; and, though he vanishes once more from sight, we too will find strength to start out once more — though night is falling — to tell the others about him, because so much joy cannot be kept

in one heart alone.

The road to Emmaus: our God has filled this name with sweetness. Now the entire world has become an Emmaus, for the Lord has opened up all the divine paths of the earth.

With the Holy Angels

I ask Our Lord that, during our stay on this earth of ours, we may never be parted from our divine travelling companion. To ensure this, let us also become firmer friends of the Holy Guardian Angels. We all need a lot of company, company from Heaven and company on earth. Have great devotion to the Holy Angels! Friendship is a very human thing, but it is also very much a thing of God; just as our life is both human and divine. Don't you remember what Our Lord says? 'I no longer call you servants, but friends.' He teaches us to have a lot of confidence in those friends of God who are already in Heaven, and also in the people who are living with us on this earth, including those who seem to be far from the Lord, so as to attract them to the right path.

I would like to end with some words of St Paul to the Colossians: 'We have been praying for you unceasingly. Our prayer is that you may be filled with that closer knowledge of God's will which brings all wisdom and all spiritual insight with it.' Wisdom, which is the fruit of prayer, of contemplation, of the infusion of the Paraclete in the soul.

'May you lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in your knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, for making us fit to share in the inheritance of the saints in light, for rescuing us from the power of darkness, and transferring us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.'

May the Mother of God and our Mother protect us, so that each one of us may serve the Church in the fullness of faith, with the gifts of the Holy Spirit and with our contemplative life. May each one of us joyfully honour the Lord by carrying out his own duties, those which are properly his; each one of us, in his job or profession and fulfilling the obligations of his state in life.

Love the Church; serve the Church with the conscious gladness of one who has committed himself to this service for Love's sake. And if we should see anyone travelling without hope, like the two men on the road to Emmaus, let us approach them full of faith — not in our own name but in Christ's name — to reassure them that Jesus' promise cannot fail, for he is always watching over his Spouse and he will never abandon her. The darkness will pass away, because we are children of the light and have been called to life everlasting.

'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death, or mourning, or cries of distress, no more sorrow; those old things have passed away. And he who sat on the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. He said to me, Write it down, for these words are most sure and true. And he added, It is done. I am Alpha, I am Omega, the beginning of all things and their end; those who are thirsty shall drink — it is my free gift out of the spring whose water is life. He who wins the victory shall possess all this; I will be his God, and he shall be my son.'