

SPIRITUAL STAMINA

By JAMES WALSH

As children we were taught that one of the seven capital sins was Sloth. The word meant then, as it does currently, a chronic laziness and fecklessness. In traditional spiritual writing, however, its meaning is rather different. There its name is *acedia*, a spiritual boredom and paralysis, a strong distaste for the things of God. The Fathers often conceive of it as entering the soul through sadness and bitterness born of weariness and discouragement in the struggle to live according to the pattern of Christ. They speak of this sadness as the *taedium vitae*, the onslaught of the noon-day devil from which the man of God is protected by the Divine presence: 'he shall overshadow thee with his shoulders, and in the shelter of his wings thou shalt hope'.¹ They are emphatic that this sadness and discouragement form one of the great temptations of the interior life.

Many of us are familiar with the beginnings of *acedia*. The priest, recalling the apostolic fervour and enthusiasm of the first years of ordination, the religious, looking back on the fervent prayer and easy familiarity with God which marked the novitiate or the years of first profession, will admit that discouragement and dissatisfaction with their lack of progress has led them to lower their spiritual standards, to set themselves a more limited target of achievement in the life of union with God. Consciously or unconsciously, they have introduced into their lives a distinction between salvation and perfection, and they have settled for the former, reluctantly perhaps, but with a certain sense of relief. They persuade themselves that perseverance, in their circumstances, must mean a more or less agonising and joyless endurance, which, at its worst, is a blind and minimising conformity to external law. Liberty of spirit, they feel, is not for the likes of them. And wherever their conscience forces them to reflect, discouragement is apt to be doubled and redoubled. They see their lives as an alternation between ineffectual remorse and that form of presumption which expresses itself in the thought 'I'm not so bad as I might be'.

There are, certainly, saving qualities in this settled attitude of

¹ Ps 90.

despondency. There is the basic Christian good-will, the desire, no matter how faint-hearted it may be, to refer all to God and to cling to Him against the odds. With the religious, there is often the habit of essential conformity to rule; with the priest, the will to continue to strengthen the faithful. There is, above all, a realisation of having been chosen, of having been, at some time in the past, enlightened. And the mind cannot prevent itself longing for the prior, the better state of things. It cannot entirely reject the belief that the glimpse it was once given of Christ, was given as a measure of true destiny, an experience of the Divine Love which was to serve as a standard of its growth. But equally certainly this state is one of ignorance and error. In its assessment (partially true) of its own inadequacy and inertia in the way of God, the mind has falsified the nature of christian perseverance.

Salvation, for each member of Christ's body as for the whole Church, is to reach His perfection, the maturity of the completed growth of Christ'.¹ Salvation is the consummation of the redemptive work of Christ in each one who is called to share the inheritance of the saints in His light.² Salvation is eternal life, the term of a process of assimilation to Christ and of permanent union with Him; for 'God became man that man might become God'. Salvation is participation to the fullness of our powers, natural and supernatural, in the perfect love of Christ; it is to know the one true God and His Son Jesus Christ, not through a mirror, and obscurely, but face to face: to know as I am known, to possess God even as I am possessed by Him.³ If we are to know what perseverance is, we must rehearse to ourselves what it is we believe in, and what is the object of our hope. For christian perseverance is travelling in the surety of hope, to salvation: to the Father in and with Christ who is at once the way and the destination. 'No man can come to me', he says, 'unless the Father draw him', and 'no man comes to the Father except by me'.⁴ The constant moral effort which true perseverance demands seems beyond the strength and capacities of the man pre-occupied with his own failures and spiritual lassitude, largely because he is unaware that Christ himself is the way, and also the power of movement which both attracts and propels towards the perfection of charity, salvation.

The revelation of God in Christ makes it plain that no matter

¹ Eph 4,13. ² Col 1,2. ³ Jn 17,3; 1, Cor 13,12; Phil 3,12.

⁴ Jn 6,44; 14,6.

how frequent or how long the halts along the way may have been, no matter how seemingly impenetrable the obstacles, every inertia can be overcome in the consciousness of God with us. Once a Christian (already by baptism alive in Christ) has been committed in earnest to the love of God, a renewal of this conversion to Christ is feasible at any moment, with the consequent re-kindling of the light of Christ in his heart, the stirring-up of Christ's power in his will. 'It is already the hour for you to arise from sleep. Salvation is closer to us now than when we first believed'.¹ The grace of Christ enables him, in any and every moment, to make light of the burden of his past, to turn away from it to Christ: 'I forget about what is behind and reach out for what is ahead'.²

The Church in her Liturgy proclaims the same message precisely. Aware of the sinfulness and infidelities of so many of her members, she openly confesses her urgent need for Christ's power and presence. In Advent, at Septuagesima, and again at the beginning of Lent, she seizes on the present moment and makes it a moment of decision, a new beginning in the way of salvation, a fresh turning to Christ. It is a decision that takes full account of sin and failure, weakness and discouragement. When Paul spoke to his Ephesians of the meaning of salvation in Christ's Church, of God's union with man and the consequent transformation of man's nature by the all-powerful Spirit of God, he added: 'He whose power is at work in us is powerful enough, and more than powerful enough, to carry out his purpose beyond all our hopes and dreams'.³ The perfect antidote to the paralysis of discouragement is the understanding of the divine gift of Hope as this communication to and operation in us of the infinite power of the God who loves each one of us and delivered himself for each one of us. It is this power and this love which makes true perseverance possible and feasible, in this present moment of the Church's life in Christ. 'We are members of Christ's household if only we persevere in holding fast to our confidence and to the hope in which we glory'.⁴

At the root of spiritual despondency is frequently a disappointment with self, a reluctance to exert ourselves further because of a settled belief that our efforts will again come to nothing. We have a chronic dislike of being humbled, even in secret. At the same time, we cannot rid ourselves of a sense of expectancy that our conditions and circumstances will, one day, so be re-arranged that

¹ Rom 13,1. ² Phil 3,13. ³ Eph 3,20. ⁴ Heb 3,6.

we shall be able to live again in the Lord's service with fervour and joy; and this, even whilst we tell ourselves that such expectations are illusory. Again, there is often a saving quality in this state of mind. In spite of the blindness and the weary cynicism, there is a half-recognition that, stripped as we are, the Lord may do something with us yet. The Psalmist, in a similar state of weariness and despondency, has complained that he has striven to lead the good life, to keep himself from sinful ways, and all for nothing; for he sees the wicked flourish and the children of God without succour. He is tempted to conclude, as we are tempted, that the struggle is not worth-while. He, too, has been 'reduced to nothing'. But when he enters the sanctuary and turns again to his God, he confesses that his analysis of the situation is without reason, without sense: 'I was all ignorance, standing there like a brute beast in thy presence. Yet thou art always with me. Thou holdest my right hand. It was thy will to lead me . . . What does heaven hold for me but thee, and what should I desire on earth, except thee? Though my heart and my flesh should waste away, God is the rock of my heart, and my eternal inheritance'.¹

For us, as for the Church who makes the Psalmist's prayer her own, this being reduced to nothing, this humiliating realisation of our impotence is a purification. With the realisation comes the assurance that the strength of Christ enshrines itself in our weakness.² Our first mistake has been, perhaps, to accept the time of our first fervour, or any moment of special grace and ease in God's service, as an ideal level of attainment which would always be ours, if only we had corresponded with grace. The sense of expectancy which we condemn in ourselves as illusory, is, at bottom, a desire for the permanent possession of Christ. But we want the reward without the strife, the prize without the contest, or at least without this particular contest in which we find ourselves repeatedly bested. St. Paul reminds us that Christ has surrounded himself with our infirmities, has passed through the same trials and humiliations, has permitted himself to be bested. He has even made himself sin for us, that we might turn to him, take our standard from him, and so share the fruits of his victory.³

The Church constantly returns, with the patience of Christ, to the task of re-formation, calling us to share Christ's sufferings, that we might be patterned according to his death and achieve

¹ Ps 72. ² Cor 12,9-10. ³ Heb 2,17-18; 4,15; 2 Cor 5,21; Heb 12,2-3.

resurrection with him.¹ So she endures through Lent, the preparation for the *transitus Domini*, a suffering and dying according to the pattern of Christ's humiliation.² We are to possess our souls in a patience born of Christ's meekness, one which bears with our own impotence, with despondency and repeated disappointment. In her liturgy the Church confesses repeatedly the sinfulness and infidelity of her members. Christ offers himself daily for our unnumbered sins, offences and negligences. This turning to the Lord is an admission that 'we have turned, everyone, repeatedly, to his own way'.³ Each Lent the Church calls upon us to rend our hearts and not our garments, to accept the ashes of humiliation implied in the sincere confession of our infidelity and fecklessness. But in the depths of our humiliation and despondency she reminds us that we are the chosen children of God, called to walk according to the love which he shows for us in his passion and death.⁴ In the daily renewal and return to Christ in the liturgy we can achieve, in faith and hope, a *conversatio*, a growing acquaintance with eternity, a gradual transformation into Christ, a transfiguration into his likeness.⁵ In this seeking in and with the Church for salvation, for the face of God, there is the firm acceptance of every situation, no matter how unpromising, as one in which we can grow according to Christ's stature. In spite of the limitations of our many weaknesses, even when these are the direct result of past folly and stupidity, we can still exercise the liberty of the sons of God. Though we are often beset by a cloud of motives which appear so compulsive – our own comfort and convenience, our dislike of hardship, hard work and monotony, our fear of others' disapproval, Christ can still be our compelling motive. Because he has made the choice of us, and we have never revoked our acceptance of the choice, every conscious turning to Christ makes of the moment the acceptable time and the day of salvation, and each act becomes an exercise of the self-determining spirit of Christ in us.

The Church would have us realise, then, that these times of self-disgust and discouragement can have a real value for our growth in Christ, and for his redemptive work now being accomplished through us in the Church. The wounds and scars of our weakness and humiliations become those marks of Christ's dying, which 'we carry about in our bodies, so that the living power of Jesus may be

¹ Phil 3,10. ² Phil 2,7-8. ³ Isai 53,6. ⁴ Eph 5,1-3.

⁵ Phil 3,20; 2 Cor 3,18.

manifested in our bodies'.¹ We can only realise the nature of the treasure we carry about in proportion as we are aware of the flaws in the vessel. We learn to expect from ourselves nothing but weakness, incapacity and the bitterness of failure. But we come to hope for and confidently to expect a constant renewal of interior strength, the power of the Spirit of Christ who dwells in us. A time comes when we do not even pray that the weight of this burden of self should grow less; for it is the nature of the Christian vocation to demonstrate that the divine power finds its full scope in human weakness.

In her prayer, the Church turns constantly to 'the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of all consolations, who consoles us in all our trials'.² The Church perseveres because He strengthens her always, because in the extremes of her weakness and peril she keeps her eyes fixed on Him, the source of her life and holiness. It is this looking on Christ which purifies her, illumines her, and fashions her according to His likeness. During Lent the accents of the Church at prayer often re-echo the weariness, heaviness and grief manifested in His own prayer in agony. She is the mourner, the persecuted, the sick, the exile, the sinner in process of being reconciled. But she is also the beloved, the bride of Christ, who is to be hallowed and purified by His redemptive love, to be summoned in all her beauty to His presence.³

The Church is weary with our weariness, sinful with our sins. But Christ's love for the Church is also His love for each of us. So, with the Church, we are to 'pass through' what He himself endured: the *transitus Domini* which purifies and sustains His Church, in us. We can see how the Church's love for God is purified and freed by suffering and sacrifice. The Church can offer her prayers of joy, of praise and thanksgiving, of love in the midst of weakness within and persecution from without. She is conscious that these hymns are sung in an alien land. But her sorrows are lightened as she passes with Christ through suffering and death to resurrection. There are moments when she forgets her exile, in the joy of receiving a pledge of the consummation of the Divine power and love. Here is true perseverance: to be inspired by His glorious power with full strength to be patient and to endure with joy.⁴ The Church's liturgy is the great act common to God and man in the Person of Christ, when human nature becomes the vehicle, the centre of

¹ 2 Cor 4,10. ² 2 Cor 1,3. ³ Eph 5,26-7. ⁴ Col 1,11.

operations, as it were, of the Divine power. It is the explanation and manifestation of life in Christ, where in our faith we come to find the face of God. Here we experience and understand true piety – *pietas*, the perfection of the relationship between Father and child. Here alone the creature can pay the perfect homage to the Creator in the sacrificial obedience of the God made man. Here the incredible love of Christ for the Church, His Bride, the *inaestimabilis dilectio caritatis*, is renewed and made effective from day to day. Our daily life in Christ consists in the experience, in faith, of this three-fold relationship; there is no aspect of living, of growth, which cannot be expressed in these terms. Hence our participation in the Liturgy is the unmistakable way to salvation and the mirror of christian perseverance.

Spiritual stamina, then, is the effective power of the Divine life within us which enables us to endure and to endure joyfully. To have it means an awareness in our daily lives of our living union with Christ. To acquire it and to build it up means a constant turning to Christ. It finds its characteristic expression in that confidence and daring of which St. Paul speaks so lucidly: 'I can do all things in him who gives me strength'.¹ The real problem of the spiritual life is not how we can return to a first fervour, to some ideal state in our past, which may well be the product of our own imagination. It is simply how we can so cling to our Lord in his Church that his power becomes increasingly operative and effective in us. Growth can never be a return to a former state, any more than a grown man could find happiness if it were given to him to return to his boyhood and youth which he looks back upon with such nostalgia. Equally, growth has little to do with imagined success or failure in seeking out our faults, dominant or otherwise. Nor does it depend on the sensible consolation which we find or fail to find in meditation or in various devotions or pious practices. There is but one measure of progress, the strength of our attachment to Christ, from whom all power, which in us is virtue, flows. Nor is it possible, normally, to gauge the strength of this attachment, since the stronger the bond, the clearer we see our neediness and poverty. But the awareness, in faith, of living union with Christ brings with it a contentment in the midst of (but never complacency with) our weaknesses, faults and discouragements. It eventually confers on the beholder a measure of true devotion, which is a certain facility

¹ Phil 4,13.

in finding God, as well as perseverance in seeking Him. From time to time he will forget, with the Church, where he is, and approximate, in his living, to the state of eternity. When the soul really begins to desire the Lord with all her strength, when the choice of the Lord against all else becomes effective, then, in her turning to the Lord, 'the veil is removed', and she becomes transfigured into His likeness.¹

If a deeper awareness of our relationship with Christ in His Church is the effective remedy for the sickness of spiritual despondency, it can be equally effective as a preventive. It would appear that there comes a moment in the lives of very many who have dedicated themselves to God, when they cease to find any satisfaction in spiritual things. Often enough this loss of taste has a natural explanation. It may merely be that what was once new and intriguing has now become routine, and the mind is seeking fresh distractions. It may be that the minimum of recollection required for fervent prayer and its consolations becomes seriously interfered with by pressure of work, mental strain, ill-health of one kind or another. The cause may also be negligence or unwise indulgence in material satisfaction which the mind instinctively prefers to the consolations of prayer. And it is natural that, if these consolations recede, the mind will become increasingly absorbed in the lesser but sensibly keener pleasures, the *fascinatio mugacitatum*.² It also happens, and certainly more often than we are wont to suppose, that God is calling a soul to a life of more intimate union; in which case she herself grows restive in her search for a more penetrating knowledge.

But whatever the explanation (and prompt diagnosis is clearly essential), there is no really effective remedy except a more intimate sense of responsibility to and awareness of Christ in His Church. It is not always possible to relieve external pressures and psychological strains; whilst attempts to restore a surface recollection will be at best, a temporary measure. Spiritual growth demands a constant detachment from lesser goods (in the context the satisfactions of sensible consolations), so that knowledge and love of God may be purified and strengthened. Here is the mortification, the suffering and the dying which is the normal pattern of life in Christ. There is never any moment in which the Christian can be absolved of the necessity to seek salvation. Stamina is an essential

¹ 2 Cor 6,17. ² Wis 4,12.

requisite for every soul in darkness; the causes of the desolation are always secondary. 'Night', says an English spiritual theologian of the fourteenth century, 'signifies adversity, and the lack of consolation, both sensible and spiritual, when it seems that grace is withdrawn and the soul left in darkness. But blessed is the man who has the courage to stay firmly where he is, in his darkness, showing God's justice, trusting well in him, not poisoned by fears and doubts or any resentment against God. This is what the just man does; because when he is conscious that grace is in some way withdrawn, and he is deprived of devotion and compunction, when his sweet affections and his special consolations seem to be lost, and he is left as naked and poor as a man whom thieves have stripped to the skin, when it seems as if God has forsaken him and forgotten him, still he does not turn back to the love of the world, for he cannot do this, and does not want to do it: he could find no pleasure there, no rest of heart. He is not angry with God, does not impute cruelty to Him; and he does not despair because of his own wickedness, for that is all forgiven. But he continues in this dark night, and he shows to the Lord the Lord's own faithfulness in perfect trust. There is much light in this night, but it does not shine. It will shine when the night is over, and the broad day appears.'¹

This passage illustrates exactly the dispositions of the soul which possesses spiritual stamina. And it can be applied not only to the state of 'contemplative darkness', but to that of spiritual blindness, paralysis, or simple despondency. When St. Paul reminded his Thessalonians that the Lord would keep faith with them and strengthen them, he prayed that the Lord would direct their hearts in the love of God and in 'steadfast endurance'.² It is no coincidence that the word used by St. Paul here, *hypomone*, signified, in the early Church, Christ's own endurance, and the endurance of Christ's chosen. In the vocabulary of St. John it is clearly associated with the word *mone*, which is God's dwelling, God's home in the hearts of the man who loves God and keeps his word.³ The Apostle reminds us that our life on earth is a constant opportunity to practise the patience of the saints.⁴ For when a man strives to hold fast to Christ, even the weight of sinful self, heaviest of all human burdens, becomes easy and light.⁵

¹ Walter Hilton: a Commentary on Ps 91.

² 2 Thess 3,5. ³ Jn 14,23. ⁴ Apoc 3,10; 13,6; 14,12. ⁵ Mt 11,28-9.