CRUCIFYING THE FLESH

By DAVID KNOWLES

THE STARK title of this article is drawn from the vocabulary of St Paul. He is, as we have realized in recent years more clearly than ever, the apostle who outlined for the people of God, his converts, the teaching which had surely come directly to him from the holy Spirit, of the indwelling of Christ, the Head, in his body, the Church, and in every baptized and believing christian. That teaching has been rightly emphasized, and is familiar, so far as words go, to all. What is not so familiar to the world of today, though christians of former ages have known it well, is the other side of the coin of our salvation, the insistence of St Paul on the warfare of the christian life, which is the only way to the peace that passes all understanding. In this strife, this tension, between the human and the divine, or in St Paul's terms, between the flesh and the spirit, and between sin and grace, our life as christians is necessarily spent.

Traditionally this lifelong warfare, this journey towards the peace of God, has been divided into two parts or aspects, the ascetical and the mystical. The ascetic is the visible, active part in which our planning and effort seem all in all, though in fact they are guided and aided by the indwelling Spirit of God. The mystical is the invisible, but real and recognizable, work of the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ who, if all goes well, works more and more powerfully in and with us. The two are in fact inseparable throughout the christian life, the life of grace. Our Lord, who experienced the warfare, but not the inner struggle, spoke often of his victory over the world and the spiritual powers of evil. St Paul, speaking as a man, sees the struggle as one within himself between flesh and spirit, between the weak and perishable part of man and his activities, and the rational, spiritual element, the soul, which alone is capable of receiving the Spirit of Christ and of giving itself in return. Both these elements, body and soul, must be reckoned with in the christian life.

Beyond and behind the struggle of weakness to accept the call and help of grace, there is the further struggle and tension of spiritual evil which, in the ultimate analysis, is the love of self, the satisfaction in self, as opposed to the acceptance of God as the only object of our

thought and love. This is the consequence, the essence, of original sin, and it remains in greater or less strength according to the measure of our spiritual life of grace. Grace alone, the light and strength of the God-given new life, can turn our self-centred existence into one centred upon God. Only in the blessed in heaven, and in rare saints on earth, is this life in God complete. In others, as St Francis of Sales said, the 'old man' dies a quarter of an hour after the man himself. This struggle, this contest, with evil and self is an unavoidable experience of christian life. It has received its definition and its scope in the inspired words of St Paul: 'For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of the present darkness'.[1] And elsewhere: 'Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air, but I pommel my body and subdue it'.[2] Our Lord had given the same teaching, with a different emphasis. He knew well enough that the flesh is weak however willing the spirit may be, and in his parables he gives many examples of this weakness; but his teaching looks rather to the abandonment of all creatures and of one's own self for his sake, rather than to the struggle that this may entail.

For the first three centuries of the christian Church the fulness of christian life seemed to be attainable within the visible, neighbourly, community of the people of God. There were, however, two ways of life that were held in particular esteem. For men, it was the service of a sacrificing and ministering priesthood; for women, dedicated virginity and widowhood. Above and beyond both, as a recurring and ever-admired attainment, lay martyrdom, the crown of a christian life.

With the conversion of Constantine all was changed. The dangers and aspirations of a persecuted community had gone for ever, the hierarchy became powerful and wealthy, and thousands flocked to the Church as to a successful social group. Almost simultaneously came the unpredictable flight to the desert, and the growth of a detailed programme both for an organized monastic community and for the individual's growth in holiness. It was at this time, during a little more than fifty years, that the hermits and monks of Egypt and

[1] Eph 6, 12. [2] 1 Cor 9, 24.

Syria gave answers covering the whole range of christian asceticism that were to remain classic for centuries. The basic purpose of monasticism was the abandonment of 'the world' by the three renunciations that our Lord had proposed: of possessions; of personal and family relationships, especially that of marriage; and of personal direction of one's external activity. These were expressed in the 'evangelical counsels' of poverty, chastity and obedience. But if these were lasting 'power-ideas', the background of the age was unique, never to be repeated. It was the desert of Egypt and Syria, the hinterland of over-populated cities and highly exploited countryside. The first monks, who would have been called anchorets or hermits in later ages, were followed by many disciples, and finally by a multitude who, in the words of a contemporary, made the desert a city. What could not have been expected was the genius for organization displayed by St Pachomius and others, and the charisma of spiritual wisdom shown in the living words and the writings of the solitaries of the desert. Within a few decades every type of the monastic life was in existence, and every topic of the monastic life – prayer, asceticism, contemplation, the virtues, community life, temptation and the Eucharist – had been set out on lines that have never since been entirely replaced. In particular, the reports collected by John Cassian (c. 400) and published to his monks at Marseilles, became classical sources.

The very large bulk of the sayings of the Fathers, added to the *Conferences* and *Institutes* of Cassian, covers every subject; but two branches of teaching can be distinguished. There is, first, the peculiar type of asceticism nourished on the life of the egyptian desert, and there is the more normal and less physically exacting spiritual teaching of the leading abbots in Cassian.

The former, which persisted in the east for two centuries, is unique in the history of the Church. In its extreme form it is a kind of spiritual athletics, with record performances in fasting, watching and praying, reaching a climax in the pillar-saints of the following century. The extremities of physical and psychological endurance, and the quasi-competitive character of some of the feats, were the admiration of their age, and more recently have been criticized and even ridiculed. It is only fair to say that in the spiritual advice given by many of these athletes there was often a caution against confusing spiritual advance with exhibitions of physical endurance. The fathers of the desert, indeed, provided almost all the arguments used against them by modern critics. It was the great Antony who said:

'Some wear down their bodies by fasting. But because they have no discretion, it puts them further from God'. Abba Joseph asked Abba Poemen: 'How should we fast?' And Abba Poemen said: 'I would have everyone eat a little less than he wants, every day'. Abba Joseph said to him: 'When you were a young man, did you not fast for two days on end?' And the old man said to him: 'Believe me, I used to fast three days on end, even for a week. But the great elders have tested all these things, and they found that it is good to eat something every day, but on some days a little less'. Elsewhere it is related that two monks asked advice of Abba Pambo. The one said: 'I fast for two days, and then eat two large buns'. The other said: 'I make two vegetable stews every day, and I keep a little for food, and give the rest away in alms'. After a long silence Pambo wrote upon the ground: 'Pambo fasts for two days and eats two large buns: do you think this make him a monk? No'. He continued: 'And Pambo makes two vegetables stews every day and gives them away to the poor: do you think this makes him a monk? Not yet'. Then, after a silence, he added: 'These works are good. But if you act according to your conscience to your neighbour, that is the way to be saved'. And on occasion their sayings are devastating in their eternal topicality. 'An old man said: All this talking is unnecessary. Nowadays everyone talks: and what is needed is action. That is what God wants, no useless talking'. It would indeed be against all the evidence to suppose that these great saints of the desert, whose words were a prelude to the age of the fathers, lacked either wisdom or discretion in their lives and teaching. Yet it is true that the message, the 'image', of the fathers of the desert is one of physical hardship – solitude, poverty, fasting – which is severe even to heroism or, some would say, extravagance. This was partly due to the circumstances of the age, when the christian Church had for the first time come to terms with a rich and in many ways luxurious and immoral society. The flight to the desert was undoubtedly a protest, a revolt. It was partly, also, due to the social and climatic conditions in the countries bordering on the eastern Mediterranean, especially Egypt. Much also may have been due to the physical and psychological make-up of the egyptians of that epoch, who have not survived as a race. For our purpose, all we can say is that they gave an example, never since imitated on a large scale in the Church, of extreme physical asceticism in a highly sophisticated and literate society, and that their sanctity and wisdom is as apparent as their physical prowess. Their protest against luxury and relaxation was prophetic

in its vehemence. It was, in common practice, inimitable, but it created in the Church a formal divsion that has remained ever since, between the christian *tout court*, and the christian who has declared himself an aspirant to follow to the end the counsels as well as the commandments of Christ.

The wisdom and the monastic legislation of the east spread over the roman empire and beyond its limits like an incoming tide over the sands. The spirit of the first monks was mediated to the west in gentler tones by Cassian, who in Constantinople and Rome had come into contact with the life of the Church in the polished circles of capital cities. In the centuries that followed there were two schools, almost two climates, of spirituality. There was that of monasteries that sprang up in the mediterranean coastlands between the straits of Messina and Gibraltar. Here the ideal was a christian community life, in which singularity and extreme physical austerity were avoided. In the celtic west of the British Isles, however, a monasticism not unlike that of the desert took root, in which penances and fasting played a large part and a greater individuality prevailed, though irish monasticism differed from that of the desert in being the nurse of literature and art, and in being at the heart, rather than at the periphery, of society and culture.

Of these two types the italian was the ultimate victor, and its code was the Rule of St Benedict, which made its way on its merits and supplanted other types of monasticism, including that brought back to Europe by the irish. The Rule, as has been shown by recent scholarship, draws heavily upon the sayings of the fathers and Cassian, and there is general agreement that St Gregory was justified in claiming that its greatest merit was its discretion. Though the frequent fasts (then the discipline of the Church) and the regime of the single meal late in the day, together with the midnight office and the frugal and primitive conditions, would appear penitential to a modern monk, the regulations for food, sleep and for the sick and aged are moderate and elastic. Poverty is seen primarily as the simple life, with all sense of proprietorship removed, and obedience is directed towards order and the abandonment of self-seeking, not as a series of tests. St Benedict's monastery is neither a racecourse nor a penitentiary; it is a family in which fatherly and brotherly love lead the monk to the perfect service and love of Christ. To that extent, therefore, it is an unspoken criticism and amendment of the practice of the desert.

The later middle ages saw two great waves of reform. In the

first, that of the eleventh century, the cistercians and their allies aimed at a return to primitive monachism, based on an exact observance of the Rule, which was already felt as more severe than it had been in the century and region of its origin. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when riches and inequality were becoming common in Europe, St Francis and others saw in poverty – 'the naked following of the naked Christ' – the royal way of holiness. Later generations were to recognize that poverty in the material sense, though normally a safeguard of spiritual poverty, is no substitute for it, and that here, as in other forms of asceticism, it is impossible to push material abandonment up to the vanishing point. Beyond penury, beyond nakedness, lies the self that can cling to the affections and desires. Christian spirituality can never be materialistic. It was the achievement of the great saints of the catholic counter-reformation that they saw clearly that self-love and the desires were the true sphere for self-denial. Certainly the carmelites, friars and nuns, lived an austere life, but the teaching of St John of the Cross was that poverty consisted in the absence of desire for possession, not in the physical want, and St Ignatius made of obedience the main purifying element of mind and will. There was to be one dazzling example of the spirit of the desert, La Trappe (1664) under Armand de Rance; and its influence was long-lived and, on the whole, beneficial. But the general conclusion must be that christian tradition abandoned the spectacular, physical feats of monks of the desert and of the celtic church, and turned more and more to the inner abandonment of desires and ambitions, while retaining a respect for the moderate fasts and the short nights of the monastic tradition, as also of voluntary abstinences in daily life.

What shall we say, then, of crucifying the flesh?

First of all, that physical penances or deprivations of any kind are not and cannot of themselves have any spiritual value or effect. And secondly that, quite apart from their intrinsic lack of spiritual worth, their potential value may easily be spiritually negatived by a faulty intention. They can only be profitable if they are sincerely practised according to the discipline of the Church or a religious rule or by the decision of an individual guided in some way by the holy Spirit. At the same time, physical 'penances' must not be despised. Our Lord fasted, and though he did not order his disciples to fast when with him, he recognized the place of fasting in the life of his followers after his death. We are made up of flesh and spirit, and physical means are sometimes the best way of 'conditioning' the

flesh into obedience to the spirit. In the ideal 'pre-lapsarian' existence, when the body, guided by the reason and will, could not rebel or be misused, an individual would have been able, let us say, in the matter of food to know the exact amount and nature of the food essential and sufficient for an active human life. As it is, we do not know exactly, and instinctively most of us take more than is necessary, and have various whimsical likes and dislikes. Medical statistics show that a majority of the population over-eats and over-drinks. If we always choose what we like best and consistently eat more than we need, we shall insensibly become self-centred, and others besides ourselves will suffer. On a deeper level, unless in small things we have of set purpose practised a reasonable self-restraint, we shall not have the reserve of self-control necessary to deal with the crucial situations where a moral decision is vital. Martyrs such as St Thomas More are not made in a day. All this is obvious, not to say platitudinous, but it is easy, though in the long run disastrous, for christians to think that common sense or good manners will meet all demands, and that we shall be able to stand up to a real sacrifice or severe pain and discomfort as easily, for example, as we can stand up to a tough mountain-climb.

Psychology within the past eighty years has opened a new dimension in our knowledge of ourselves, and has made common property what were before rare insights. It has done much to separate purely psychological experiences and inborn or ingrained behaviour and reaction, sometimes even morbid in character, from judgements and actions that are fully ethical. It has been for many a liberating and invigorating agency. At the same time we must realize that psychology, even depth psychology, is not a pure science such as chemistry, biology or physics, nor has it the certainty of analytical mathematics. All these deal either with perceptible subject-matter or with abstract quantities, which can be confirmed by experiment or logical thought. But though the best modern psychology does indeed derive largely from observation, assisted by medical and biological science, it deals ultimately with an extremely complicated and unpredictable activity, that of a free human individual. Moreover, it rests upon assumptions that are not all capable of proof by experiment. The existence of a spiritual, deathless principle which we call the soul, answerable to its divine Creator and raised under certain circumstances by that Creator to a higher life and with higher powers – all this is not only outside the range of even the deepest psychology (save for its accidental phenomena) but is even flatly rejected by

some of the greatest practitioners and theorists of psychology.

Christians therefore have to look very hard at psychology and psychiatry when it rises from the examination and analysis of human behaviour, and of conscious or subconscious mental activity, to consider right conduct and moral or spiritual issues. The end aimed at by the doctor, the psychiatrist and the spiritual director may seem identical, such as psychological calm and peace of mind, but it is attained by different means and on different levels – by chemical sedation, by psychological relief (which may or may not be approved by traditional christian morality), and by advice which might be considered medical or psychological folly. An identical form of self-inflicted pain or discomfort, let us say wearing a hair-shirt, may be a form of masochism, or (as in some religious orders) a regular and common act of penance or, in a person of spiritual stature, a self-chosen vicarious suffering. On a more ordinary level, psychologists, professional as well as amateur, may confuse their principles with their emotions, or expose individuals to what they mistakenly consider to be universal experience as, for example, in theories of punishment or judgment on abortion. A doctrinaire and atheistic psychology may even on occasion be less wise than traditional christian lore. It is true that law, obligation and authority are, or can be, clumsy, materialistic and infantile agencies of moral ends when compared with reason and love (which casts out fear); but for those of limited mental or spiritual capacity (and we all have our limitations), they may be the only, or at least temporarily the best, way of securing conformity to right conduct. For a christian, the law and will of God, the expression to our reason of his love and care, are always ascertainable, and have their origin and their sanction outside ourselves.

Human society in all ages is schizophrenic, but never more than at the present time, when science and technology are proving to be deities of ambiguous character. We live and think and talk on two utterly different levels. As forward-looking moralists and theologians, we live in a brave new adult world of freedom and insight, in which compassion and love abound, and all men are the gracious children of a single Father; while at the same time the tortured world around us rocks with explosions and seethes with crime and licence, a prey to poverty and ignorance. The old and simple truth is ignored: that human nature is of itself blind and sinful, but has the capacity to be sanctified in and by Christ and enabled to climb upwards if it accepts and works with divine help. But this truth implies that life is

not the instinctive career of a splendid animal, but a fight against weakness within and without. In this fight the flesh, our bodily activities, must be disciplined and even flouted. We cannot go to heaven on feather-beds.

There is, finally, the classical teaching of St Paul. Training is normally needful in every human skill or endeavour, however great the natural genius or the gift of grace may be. In all training the trainee must go through hoops and over hurdles. Even the inspired extravagances of the saints were necessary preparations for spiritual trials. Today, within a long lifetime, sixty-odd days of fasting and abstinence have come down to two, and the eucharistic fast from eight or nine hours to one. It may be that many have suffered little spiritual loss; but for others the practical reminder of our Lord's passion, the occasional physical or social inconvenience, or the mere fact of standing to be counted as a catholic was a salutary experience. And all who have had to do with training young people as religious or future priests will be aware that the self-denial, for spiritual reasons, of small alleviations of fatigue or *ennui* is often the best and sometimes the only way of overcoming minor neurasthenic apprehensions which otherwise would cling throughout life to a potentially generous soul. Nor is fasting the only valuable discipline. The statistics of the consumption of alcohol, tobacco and the 'benign' drugs, analgesics and stimulants among the affluent nations are evidence enough of the inability of so many to face the normal course of life and its rubs with human (or spiritual) courage. All these, once used beyond moderation or real medical necessity, are a more serious impediment to a life of christian virtue than a more seeming-serious occasional outbreak of unpremeditated passion. There is, then, good reason for not abandoning the traditional practice of physical penance as a source of moral strength. That it may on occasion, as our Lord knew well, be a cloak of hypocrisy or an exhibition of self-love, is no reason for throwing it entirely away. *Abusus non tollit usum.*

There is also a more basic reason, often neglected in our age. The follower of Christ is called, pledged and enabled to live on a higher level and with standards other than those of mere human wisdom. The Sermon on the Mount, Christ's constant teaching and invitation, the gifts of sanctifying grace and the sacraments, take us once and for all into a new, demanding and rewarding life, called by our Lord himself to follow him. The christian life is never negative. It flees from nothing that is beautiful and good. Renunciation and

pain are never ends in themselves. But they are an inevitable part of life and must be met with resolution and firm courage. Beyond this, God chastises those whom he loves. Sorrows, hardships and sufferings that come without our fault are for good christians the best of all calls to the love of God. But we must not forget that in the life of Christ and his saints the cross desired and accepted, in his case for our sake and in their case for his, is the supreme evidence of love, beyond human experience and beyond the experience of most christians, save in faith. But it is the highest, even if to us all but incomprehensible, proof that our Lord has conquered death and all other evils.