

From the Ignatian Tradition

NOVA ET VETERA

Informal Meditations for Times of Spiritual Dryness

George Tyrrell

George Tyrrell was born in 1861 in Dublin, and raised as an Anglican. He converted to Roman Catholicism, and joined the English Province (as it was then known) of the Jesuits in 1880. In his writings he argued for an understanding of the Christian faith that took account of contemporary historical and scientific research. This position did not fit easily with the scholastic theology dominant in the Roman Catholic Church at the time, and mounting controversy led to his expulsion from the Jesuits in 1906. The next year he was excommunicated, having attacked a papal encyclical which rejected his viewpoint. He died two years later, so 2009 marks the centenary of his death. The extracts below are taken from *Nova et Vetera*, a book of short scriptural meditations first published in 1897, which went through four editions before the author's death. Many of the ideas of the Modernists, as those who held views similar to Tyrrell's were labelled by their opponents, would be accepted six decades later by the Second Vatican Council.¹

Meditation LVI: Serving in Fear

Ut sine timore de manu inimicorum nostrorum liberati serviamus illi.

‘**T**HAT SAVED FROM OUR ENEMIES we may serve Him without fear.’ *Servite in timore, et exultate cum tremor*—‘Serve God in fear and rejoice with trembling’. ‘Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.’ Without fear indeed, so far as the enemies of our soul are

¹ Excerpts reprinted from *Nova et Vetera: Informal Meditations for Times of Spiritual Dryness*, third edition (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1900), 60–61, 392–393 and 396–397.

concerned; namely, the powers of darkness, whose assaults are restrained and tempered to our strength by the guiding hand of God's supreme providence; the world, of which it is said, 'Fear not, I have overcome the world'; our own frailty and changeableness—the most frequent source of anxiety and fear—of which it is written: *Non ego, sed gratia Dei mecum*—'Not I, but God's grace in me', and *Omnia possum in eo qui me confortat*—'I can do all in Christ who strengthens me'. What we have to fear is, before all, the just judgments of God; first of all His proximate judgments in the present withdrawal of richer grace; in the rod of temporal chastisement, trouble and affliction of body and soul; and secondly, the torments of future punishments, temporal or everlasting. Without this fear we can have no true reverential love of God. If we do not feel His majesty and His wrath, we cannot feel His humility and meekness; or understand what a love that must be which brings the Almighty down so low. That the fear of God's judgments is not only a preamble to love, but its outwork and safeguard, which can never be too strong, is the doctrine of St Ignatius, in his meditation on Hell. Lastly, there is that fear which is but love under its reverential aspect; which follows it step by step; the craving for union, viewed as a dread of separation; the same aspiration which can be expressed as: *Fac me tuis semper inhaerere mandatis*—'Make me ever cling to Thy commandments', or as: *A te nunquam separari permittas*—'Never let me be separated from Thee'.

Meditation CCCXXI: Mid-life

*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura.*

'In the midway of this our mortal life, I found me in a gloomy wood astray.' It was at the point of mid-life, that the poet found himself involved in the deepest obscurity, mental and moral; tempted to despair of himself and of Church and State; to turn and flee back into the dark and pathless thicket; to abandon all hopes of the sun-clad heights. It takes half our life to make us realise and acquiesce in the truth, that this world is designed to disappoint, to raise our aspirations higher and higher, yet never to satisfy them; that in disappointing us and making us turn elsewhere, it fulfils its design most admirably. We have to descend from the *selva oscura*—the gloomy wood, to the very depths of Hell, before

we can again behold the stars; or dispose ourselves to ascend to them, or subject ourselves to the Love that moves them. This crisis of life is a dangerous time to those who do not understand it, or have not some Lucy or Beatrice or Virgil interested in their guidance. One stands tottering on the narrow ledge that divides the deepest faith and hope and love, from the deepest agnosticism, pessimism, cynicism. Prior to this our inner life is but embryonic, formative, and uterine. Now it is that we are brought to the birth; either to begin to live, or to be strangled in the process; either *à rivider le stele*, or *à rovinare in basso loco*; to see the stars once more; or to plunge back into the dark wood.



George Tyrrell

Meditation CCCXXV: Peter's Ship

Ita ut pene mergerentur.

'So that they were on the point of sinking.' We much misunderstand the difference between the promise of assistance and the promise of inspiration. Christ never told us that the Church was to be spotless and sinless in all her members; or that they should be individually free from a thousand errors in faith and morals. In saying that the gates of Hell should never prevail, He implied that they should ever strive and at times all but prevail. Peter's ship is always tempest-tost; often all but overwhelmed. Yet we are surprised to see how *nearly* on various occasions Rome has committed herself to error; how *nearly* unity has been destroyed and the other notes obliterated; how frightfully close she has been to utter destruction. 'Assistance' means the minimum of interference with the natural process of evolution, and God's wisdom is



Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee, by
Rembrandt

more glorified thereby, than by a dispensation of miraculous cataclysms. For the most part, and up to the last extremity, our Lord, slumbering, leaves winds and waves to themselves to rage as they will. What we do see is exactly what we should expect to see did we understand the promise aright. 'Satan has greatly desired to have us', and he is ceaseless in his machinations, working sometimes from outside; but always and most successfully from within as a corrupting influence. Evil men are his rough, everyday tools; but his most delicate and deadly work is done through the instrumentality of the good, through the blindnesses and stupidities of those who mean well. Wherever he sees good work on foot he at once lends a hand, that eventually he may take the lead. Yet 'He that watcheth over Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep'; for in Him there is neither sleeping nor waking nor vicissitude of any kind, who makes and rules all things by one restful, unbroken gaze upon, the face of the Word in His bosom. Satan is suffered for a little while that he may in spite of himself work out the glory of God, sifting the wheat—grain from chaff; light from darkness; truth from lie; reality from sham.