LETTERS AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

By JAMES V. SCHALL

> *As you know very well, there are many sorts of letter. But there is one unmistakable sort, which actually caused letter writing to be initiated in the first place, namely, the sort intended to give people in other places any information they ought to know for our or their sakes. . . . There are two other sorts of letter which I like very much, one intimate and humorous, the other serious and profound.*[1]

THAT SO MANY basic documents of Christianity belong to the genre of the letter has always struck me as more than odd. How much of our faith we should miss were we to lack those marvellous introductions and warm salutations addressed by Paul to his friends in Rome, Corinth, or Philippi, not to mention his writings to Titus and Timothy. It is now platitudinous to cite Paul's request to Timothy to pick up the cloak he left with Carpus at Troas as an instance that not every word or phrase in the pauline letters must be taken as revealed religion, the central object of inspiration. Or when the same Paul admonished Euodia and Synthyche 'to agree in the Lord', he was not the mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit on the subject of feminine bickering. Yet the very meaning, the very format of a letter is that we can chat about small, trifling things, which may well fall within the ambit of providence. Any letter touches what human lives are mostly about. If our Scripture neglected the ordinary and insignificant, concentrating only on doctrine, proclamation and solemnity, one feels that the mystery of the redemption of the Incarnate Word, which such letters reveal, might be less than human.

With such thoughts as background, I have been more than usually consoled when I read, for example, John Henry Newman's blunt remarks written to his sister Harriet on 4 June 1823:

> Pusey took orders Sunday last, and is to be married next week. His book has been out about ten days. It is sadly deformed with Germanisms: he is wantonly obscure and foreign — he invents words.[2]

Newman, of course, liked Pusey and his book, but were he not writing to his sister familiarly, we should not know so well his reaction, or even that a Newman could so react to germanisms and obscurity and neologisms.

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[1] Marcus Tullus Cicero to Gaius Scribonius Curio, 53 B.C.

[2] *Letters and Correspondence of John Henry Newman During His Life in the English Church* (London, 1911), p 163.

And how delightful it is to come across this letter which Teresa of Jesus wrote to Father Gratian in Madrid on 26 April 1678:

> Jesus be with you, Paternity, you who are both my father and my superior as you say, which causes me no little laughter and pleasure. In fact, whenever I recall your words I am amused at the solemn manner in which you declared that I must not judge my superior. Oh, my father! How little need there was for you to swear, even like a saint, much less like a muleteer, for I thoroughly realize that fact.[3]

Maybe nuns do not write like this any more, but it is nice to know that Teresa of Jesus knew how a muleteer might swear and cuss. The very thought of the twinkle in the eye of the famous doctor of mysticism, as she is solemnly advised not to judge her male superior, reminds us of the universality of the adage, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

The letter, then, as a form of communication somehow transcends our formality, however necessary it may be, so as to reach that 'correspondence' between two persons in their very particularity, in that inner place where they most are. The letter presupposes both intimacy and distance, even though we can also write quite nasty little notes to our next-door neighbours. People who are actually living together, seeing one another daily, do not for the most part, as Iris Murdoch observed, write letters. Soldiers away at war write endlessly, but become almost illiterate when they return to their loved ones. And this is as it should be. In a real sense, we do not desire what we already have. Sometimes, too, we may have to write 'official' letters of record or receipt, and these may also be personal. But usually 'real' letters are not 'official', nor are they handed to the person we are looking at.

Letters, consequently, depend on a certain apartness. They are the stuff of the metaphysics of distance. They also presuppose and require a privacy that has a kind of sacredness about it. There is something absolute in not opening a letter addressed to someone else. Postal systems that cannot assure either security or some regularity attack the very roots of our culture. Probably it is acceptable to read the letters of persons already dead; even though delicacy is required here also. This is why archives usually require us to wait fifty or seventy-five years before using the correspondence of famous figures. Yet how deprived should we be had we no private letters of other men and women from the ages of our past! At the same time, we should never have had such letters at all were the correspondents not secure in the belief that the letters sent would arrive unopened and be treated as quite confidential by the recipient. It is no accident that we call a state totalitarian when it censors our mail as a matter of course.

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[3] *The Letters of Saint Teresa* (London, MXMXXII), vol III, p 82.

Mutual consent, I suppose, justifies publication of letters. Often, we can cite wise or witty remarks from our letters which do not betray confidence or authorship. Some letters are designed to be 'circulated'; encyclical, as the papal usage has it: writings to be passed around. The eighteenth century was, to our delight, full of such letters in circulation, which form part of our literature. Yet I am sure that that great letter writer of antiquity, Marcus Tullius Cicero, was quite correct in the indignation he showed to Anthony in his *Second Philippic:*

> Who, with the slightest knowledge of decent people's habits, could conceivably produce letters sent him by a friend and read them in public, merely because some quarrel has arisen between him and the other? Such conduct strikes at the roots of human relations; it means that absent friends are excluded from communicating with each other. For men fill their letters with flippancies which appear tasteless if they are published — and with serious matters which are quite unsuitable for wide circulation.

Letters, consequently, can contain our flippancies along with our faults, ponderings, contorted notions, and vanities, things we can bear and even delight in at times, but things which are not, in fact, our 'public' selves.

One of the reasons why Christianity was taken to be revolutionary was because it held that our 'private' selves were not to be identified with our public reputation and estimation before the world. God alone scrutinized the heart. We could not know simply by the looking who were the saints, who the sinners. There was a private reality to each person that, to some degree, might be revealed to friends, yet over which personal control had to be retained. To be sure, we do not even know with certainty how we stand before God, except that we know that we are also sinners. But without the literal sanctity of this privacy, there can be no authentic spiritual life and, consequently, no public life either. When Aristotle delineated in *The Politics* the nature of the absolute tyrant, he saw that the goal of tyranny lay essentially in the destruction of all private communication and friendship, something all subsequent totalitarian régimes to this day have tried to imitate. At various periods in my life, I have had friends living in eastern Europe. Invariably, with complete earnestness, as if I somehow could be expected to understand, they told me to remember that every line I wrote to them would be read by state censors. So we corresponded about the weather and scenery: anything except the normal stuff of human communication. I also tried to figure out just what I might possibly know or say that could be dangerous. Here was the point: the uncertainty, the destruction of confidence in private correspondence. So letters in such circumstances became nothing more than signs of existence. I have a chinese friend who has many brothers and sisters in China. Correspondence between them ceased several years ago, because the fact of receiving letters could put the family in danger.

Most religious orders and seminaries, I suppose, have had some form of censorship over correspondence: 'voluntary', to be sure; but still a reality that reduced letter-writing from an art form and mirror of personality to a mechanical reporting designed to reveal nothing but the edifying. Thankfully, most of these unpleasant customs have now disappeared, so that the sanctity of the personal letter can be rigidly presumed and respected. Doubtless, letters can be dangerous, unsettling, waste of time. Yet, I think that they are so important to spiritual life and general sanity that their peculiar import needs more specific recognition.

I must confess that I am, by and large, an anti-telephone person, even though my brother works for a telephone company. The telephone, next perhaps to the cigarette and the pet, is the most 'impolite' of our technological inventions, in that it feels itself justified to interrupt our reveries, conversation, thoughts, prayer, and studies at any hour of the day or night.[4] The letter, on the other hand, is the most civilized of our ways to reach one another when we are not already mutually present. This has something to do with the fact that, as Aristotle said, man is that being in the universe with a hand and a brain. Hence it is that our hand, both the physical organ and our script, touches, reveals almost immediately who and what we are.

The letter, then, comes unexpectedly some morning or afternoon in the post. It bears that element of surprise, which belongs to the deepest of our spiritual concepts. We can read a letter, read it again, set it aside, answer it in a week or a month; or sometimes, not at all. And even though we can now tape 'phone calls, and ultimately, I suppose, 'phone-vision calls — God forbid! — nobody thinks of listening again to a 'phone conversation in the way in which we re-read a letter. There is a profound reason for this, I think. The 'phone makes us 'present' to the other; the letter is designed to touch us in our privacy, our aloneness. And this is where we are most ourselves, most protected from the blare and glare of the world that tempts our vanity and engulfs our meek, half-hearted efforts to be good.

When we write to someone, then, we necessarily imagine that our correspondent reads our letter when he too is alone. I am not arguing here that ideally we should be partitioned off so that we can be most ourselves in some eremitical cell. This approach has often been tried, but not always successfully. We need the world, the privacy of friends — even of enemies. But there are times to write and to be written to. 'Prayer', Iris Murdoch wrote, 'is properly not petition, but simply an attention to God which is a form of love. With it goes the idea of grace, of a supernatural assistance to human endeavour which overcomes empirical limits of personality'.[5] The letter of Paul, I think, shows this expression of attention to God to be mostly occasioned by attention to those to whom we write:

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[4] Cf the author's 'On the Christian Love of Animals', in *Vital Speeches*, 15 November 1976.
[5] *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York, 1971), p 55.

> Paul, an Apostle of Christ by command of God our saviour and of Christ Jesus our hope, to Timothy, my true child in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus, that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine. . . .

This is solemn, to be sure, and affectionate, and hard-hitting too. In it there is place, time, personality, along with the Father, grace, mercy, and peace. A letter can do this.

Yet letters are usually off-hand, familiar and funny even, when serious. The letter remains the closest reflection of how we see ourselves: it pays direct attention to someone who is outside us, for whom we are concerned just because they exist and are who they are. The limits of our own personality are most clear to us in apartness, in absence. The letter seeks to transcend this separation, to 'keep in touch'. In this sense too, our letters will reveal to us soon enough the very boundaries of our happinesses. Christianity believes that God transcends our happiness precisely in the happy experiences we do have. The letter reveals how we want to be with, in the presence of, others with whom we do not want to lose contact. Cicero begins his Third Book of the *De Officiis* with the famous line: '(Scipio) was never less idle than when he had nothing to do, and never less lonely than when he was by himself'. Letters arise out of this context, I think. Thus, the letter is a kind of a defiance of space and time, even in space and time, a defiance of loneliness when we are lonely. This is why somehow, I think, letter writing lies close to the divinity, to incarnation, to word.

Ignatius of Antioch was killed in A.D. 107 under the Emperior Trajan. Before he died, he wrote a famous letter to the Romans, a letter which reveals how the early Christian looked at this new faith of his:

> I am writing to all the Churches to let it be known that I will gladly die for God if only you do not stand in my way. I plead with you, show me no untimely kindness. . . . No earthly pleasures, no kingdoms of this world can benefit me in any way. I prefer death in Christ Jesus to power over the farthest limits of the earth. He who died in place of us is the one object of my quest. He who rose for us is my one desire.

Suddenly here, we have a revelation of the private life and belief of an early second-century man, his values, his beliefs, his charm. We know that our 'calling' may not be exactly his, though there are martyrs in our time too. Still, our faith is no other except that we think about kingdoms and resurrection in the same way; that we are also to be concerned when we find other doctrine being taught.

On 29 April 1605, Robert Bellarmine wrote to a jesuit Provincial about an imminent papal election. Belloc once remarked that as we get older, we begin to have doubts about the human side of the supernatural faith. Bellarmine seems to have also had such worries. So, when we read his letter now, we realize that even saints worry about the Church — that our own age is not so unique after all.

> Here we are, then, once more preparing to enter the conclave, and we need prayers more than ever because I do not see in the whole sacred college one who possesses the (proper) qualifications. . . . What is worse, the electors made no effort to find such a person. It seems to me a very serious thing that, when the Vicar of God is to be chosen, they should cast their votes, not for one who knows the will of God, one versed in Sacred Scriptures, but rather for one who knows the will of Justinian, and is versed in the authorities of the law. They look for a good temporal ruler, not for a holy bishop who would really occupy himself with the salvation of souls. I, for my part, will do my best to give my vote to the worthiest man. The rest is in the hands of providence, for, after all, the care of the Church is more the business of God than men.[6]

We have access to private letters, of course, because somebody kept them. I doubt if Robert Bellarmine went around the conclave telling all his fellow cardinals that none was worthy. Only a letter could record how he really felt. And because of this, we know something of how saints looked on the human side of the Church.

Letters, then, are a fundamental part of spiritual lives: to write them, to receive them, to read them. I do not wish here to restrict the spiritual life to so-called spiritual topics. Often our best letters cannot be called strictly 'spiritual'. Yet, all letters are expressions of our spirit. They are an effort to share what we are, to hope for a correspondent, a word back, a sign that the words we throw into the world are received and come back from another. To be sure, letters can be bitter and unfortunate and even senseless. This too says something about our condition. We are to know what goes on in the human heart, even though it be not always perfect virtue.

Somewhere around the turn of this century, Robert Hugh Benson wrote these curious bits of counsel to one of his penitents. I cite them both for their quaint charm and their delightful advice:

> I am really sorry for writing as I did about my life here [probably Rome]. I hadn't at all realized what yours was like; and the dreariness of it, externally. I wish I could say something; but what can I say except what would be threadbare by now — if that were possible — of the marks of the Cross? And with nerves it must be nearly intolerable. Personally, I believe that *the* cure for nerves is an attempt at contemplation. I hope

[6] In *Letters from the Saints* (New York, 1967), pp 171-72.

> this does not sound absurd. But it seems to me that the one thing that does cure that maddening soreness of spirit that we call nerves is to *sit still*, in body, mind, and soul, and exclude every thought but that of God as he is in himself. But it is foolish to say all this. . . . [7]

This is a cure for nerves we do not come across too often any more. I am not at all sure it would not work, even though Benson himself worried that it might be foolish and absurd, something he could easily do in a letter.

Yet, whatever we might say for it as a cure for nerves, there is no doubt that Benson's advice is at the heart of Christianity: the need at times to sit still in mind, body, and soul, to exclude every thought but that of God as he is in himself. Such advice, it seems to me anyhow, is the more effective because it was given in a casual letter, never really intended for everyone's eyes. To write a letter, we must also sit still, we must be 'attentive'. And we must read a letter in the same way. Letters should be written and read in silence; in privacy, I think, for they stand close to what we are to ourselves and to each other. Like prayer, letters should cause us to retire behind closed doors for a spell.

Christianity insists that we are but pilgrims and strangers on this earth. This is not perhaps such a popular doctrine today, when so much social spirituality strives to convince us that we really ought to make our home here. But Scripture does not talk this way. So it is that the writing and receiving of letters can be continual reminders of our essential homelessness in this world. The very fact that letters are 'attentive' to someone, from someone, reminds us of our destiny. Further, when we reflect that creation and redemption are conceived as Word, we are convinced that the inadequacy of our correspondence, its very root in absence, is itself a promise.

John Henry Newman wrote to his mother from Falmouth, on 5 December 1832, after a night stage journey through Devonshire and Cornwall, a trip I have taken a couple of times, though by train, as I have a cousin who lives near St Ives. 'The night was enlivened', the young cleric wrote:

> . . . by what Herodotus calls a night engagement with a man, called by courtesy a gentleman, on the box. The first act ended by his calling me a d——d fool. The second by his insisting on two most hearty shakes of the hand, with the protest that he certainly did think me very injudicious and ill-timed. I had opened by telling him he was talking great nonsense to a silly goose of a maid-servant stuck atop the coach; so I had no reason to complain of his choosing to give me the retort uncourteous. . . . He assured me he revered my cloth. . . . It is so odd, he thought I had attacked him under personal feelings. I am quite ashamed of this scrawl, yet since I have a few minutes to spare, I do not want to be otherwise employed than in writing (*Ibid* pp 249).

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[7] *Spiritual Letters* (London, 1915), p 95.

There is, then, no small consolation to know that the future author of the *Essay on the Development of Doctrine* was once called a damned fool for sticking up for a silly goose of a girl against a man, called by courtesy a gentleman, on a night stage-coach in Devonshire.

Letters, to recall Cicero, give information, they can be humorous and intimate, serious and profound. They attend to others in their uniqueness. They are the means by which God in his own uniqueness was in large part revealed to us. A letter, preferably 'writ by hand', as Al Capp used to have his characters say, reveals that there is spirit in the world, that deep within our friends lies a spiritual life that we glimpse, if we are lucky. Yet letters exist only because of distance and absence. They are the symbols of our ultimate earthly status as wayfarers and pilgrims, reflections of what we see, what is in us as we pass by.

'The mail must go through' was once the motto of the postal system of the United States: through all kinds of weather and hardship, a service first. I have often thought, however, that the phrase seemed more than just the duty and efficiency of the postal system, which has lost much of its lustre, now that it seems more like an employment agency. A postal system is, however, near to the heart of civilized life. The mail must go through because our letters, almost more than anything else, reveal how we are when we are alone, in our privacy. The function of the public service is to protect, make possible, guarantee the private. And it is in our private selves that we respond to each other. Precisely in our privacy are we most open to God, where we sit still, body, soul, and mind, to account both for the fact that we all are damned fools and that God is as he is.

Chesterton once observed that the posting of a letter is almost the most romantic thing we can do, for it is an absolute act that cannot be recalled. In this, it reveals how we are to someone else; and such revelation enables us to know ourselves. Aquinas was not wrong in insisting that we know ourselves only by first observing and knowing something, someone else. And how we are before our friends and before the Lord, how we 'co-respond' in our letters, is, ultimately, what the adventure of human life is about in the first place. So in our spiritual lives, let us be flippant, sit still for our nerves, denounce germanisms, and cuss like muleteers. Let us do this, because we are never less alone than when we are idle, when we finally write because someone half-way across the world or around the corner, someone not present, is realized to be absent. And we attend to our friends in that chaotic, amazing order of our lives, alone in our cells and our privacy. We attend to others, and thereby, astonishingly, we discover ourselves, where we are from and where we are going. The letter, then, is indeed at the heart of our civilization and of our spiritual lives.