

## **Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, The three Ways of the Spiritual Life**

### **SECOND CONVERSION**

#### **THE DEFECTS WHICH RENDER IT NECESSARY**

In the 60th and 63rd chapters of her Dialogue, St. Catherine shows that what happened in the case of the Apostles, our models formed immediately by the Saviour Himself, must happen, after a certain manner, in the case of each one of us. Indeed, we may say that if even the Apostles stood in need of a second conversion, then still more do we. The Saint emphasizes especially the faults which make this second conversion necessary, in particular self-love. In varying degrees this egoism survives in all imperfect souls in spite of the state of grace, and it is the source of a multitude of venial sins, of habitual faults which become characteristic features of the soul, rendering necessary a veritable purging even in those who have, as it were, been present on Mount Thabor, or who have often partaken of the Eucharistic banquet, as the Apostles did at the Last Supper. In her Dialogue St. Catherine of Siena speaks of this self-love, describing it as 'the mercenary love of the imperfect,' of those who, without being conscious of it, serve God from self-interest, because they are attached to temporal or spiritual consolations, and who shed tears of self-pity when they are deprived of them. It is a strange but not uncommon mixture of sincere love of God with an inordinate love of self. The soul loves God more than itself, otherwise it would not be in the state of grace, it would not possess charity; but it still loves itself with an inordinate love. It has not yet reached the stage of loving itself in God and for His sake. Such a state of soul is neither white nor black; it is a light grey, in which there is more white than black. The soul is on the upward path, but it still has a tendency to slip downwards. We read in this 60th chapter of the Dialogue (it is God who speaks). 'Among those who have become My trusted servants there are some who serve Me with faith, without servile fear, it is not the mere fear of punishment, but love which attaches them to My service (thus Peter before the Passion). But this love is still imperfect, because what they seek in My service (at any rate to a great extent) is their own profit, their own satisfaction, or the pleasure

that they find in Me. The same imperfection is found in the love which they bear towards their neighbour. And do you know what shows the imperfection of their love? It is that, as soon as they are deprived of the consolations which they find in Me, their love fails and can no longer survive. It becomes weak and gradually cools towards Me when, in order to exercise them in virtue and to detach them from their imperfection, I withdraw spiritual consolations from them and send them difficulties and afflictions. I act in this way in order to bring them to perfection, to teach them to know themselves, to realize that they are nothing and that of themselves they have no grace. Adversity should have the effect of making them seek refuge in Me, recognize Me as their benefactor, and become attached to Me by a true humility.... to become perfect, it is impossible that they should not turn back.' This is what the Fathers have so often asserted: 'In the way of God he who makes no progress loses ground.' Just as the child who does not grow does not merely remain a child but becomes an idiot, so the beginner who does not enter upon the way of proficients when he ought to, does not merely remain a beginner, but becomes a stunted soul. It would seem, unhappily, that the great majority of souls do not belong to any of these three categories, of beginners, proficients or perfect, but rather to that of stunted souls! At what stage are we ourselves? This is often a very difficult question to answer, and it would perhaps be vain curiosity to inquire at what point we have arrived in our upward path; but at least we must take care not to mistake the road, not to take a path that leads downwards. It is important, therefore, to reach beyond the merely mercenary love, which often we unconsciously retain. We read in this same 60th chapter: 'It was with this imperfect love that Peter loved the good and gentle Jesus, my only begotten Son, when he experienced the delights of sweet intimacy with Him (on Mount Thabor). But as soon as the time of tribulation came all his courage forsook him. Not only did he not have the strength to suffer for Him, but at the first threat of danger his loyalty was overcome by the most servile fear, and he denied Him three times, swearing that he did not know Him.' St. Catherine of Siena, in the 63rd chapter of the same Dialogue, shows that the imperfect soul, which loves God with a love which is still mercenary, must do what Peter did after his denial. Not infrequently Providence allows us, too, at this stage to commit some very palpable fault, in order to humiliate us and cause us to take true measure of ourselves. 'Then,' says the Lord, 'having recognized the grievousness of its sin and repented of it, the soul begins to weep, for fear of punishment; then it rises to the consideration of my mercy, in which it finds satisfaction and comfort. But it is, I say, still imperfect, and in order to draw it on

to perfection... I withdraw from it, not in grace but in feeling. This I do in order to humiliate that soul, and cause it to seek Me in truth... without thought of self and with lively faith and with hatred of its own sensuality.' And just as Peter compensated for his threefold denial by three acts of pure and devoted love, so the enlightened soul must do in like manner. St. John of the Cross, following Tauler, gives us three signs which mark this second conversion: 'The soul finds no pleasure or consolation in the things of God, but it also fails to find it in anything created.... The second sign... is that ordinarily the memory is centred upon God, with painful care and solicitude, thinking that it is not serving God, but backsliding, because it finds itself without sweetness in the things of God.... The third sign... is that the soul can no longer meditate or reflect in its sense of the imagination.... For God now begins to communicate Himself to it, no longer through sense, as He did a foretime, by means of reflections which joined and sundered its knowledge, but by an act of simple contemplation, to which neither the exterior nor the interior senses of the lower part of the soul can attain.' Progressives or proficientes thus enter, according to St. John of the Cross, 'upon the road and way of the spirit, which... is called the way of illumination or of infused contemplation, wherewith God Himself feeds and refreshes the soul.' While St. Catherine of Siena does not give so exact an analysis, she insists particularly upon one of the signs of this state: an experimental knowledge of our poverty and profound imperfection; a knowledge which is not precisely acquired, but granted by God, as it was granted to Peter when Jesus looked upon him immediately after his denial. At that moment Peter received a grace of enlightenment; he remembered, and going out he wept bitterly. At the end of this same 63rd chapter of her Dialogue we find a passage of which St. John of the Cross later gives a full development- 'I withdraw from the soul,' says the Lord, 'so that it may see and know its defects, so that, feeling itself deprived of consolation and afflicted by pain, it may recognize its own weakness, and learn how incapable it is of stability or perseverance, thus cutting down to the very root of spiritual self-love; for this should be the end and purpose of all its self-knowledge, to rise above itself, mounting the throne of conscience, and not permitting the sentiment of imperfect love to turn again in its death struggle, but, with correction and reproof, digging up the root of self-love, with the knife of self-hatred and the love of virtue.' In this same connection the Saint speaks of the many dangers that lie in wait for a soul that is moved only by a mercenary love, saying that souls which are imperfect desire to follow the Father alone, without passing by the way of Christ crucified, because they have no desire to suffer.

## THE MOTIVES WHICH MUST INSPIRE THE SECOND CONVERSION

The first motive is expressed in the greatest commandment, which knows no limits: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and with thy whole soul and with all thy strength and with all thy mind.' This commandment requires the love of God for His own sake, and not from self-interest or attachment to our own personal satisfaction; it demands, moreover, that we love God with all our strength in the hour of trial, so that we may finally arrive at the stage of loving Him with our whole mind, when our love will be unaffected by the ebb and flow of sensibility and we shall be of those who 'adore in spirit and in truth.' Furthermore, this commandment is absolute and without limits: end for which all Christians are required to strive is the perfection of charity, each in his own condition and state of life, whether it be in the state of marriage or in the priestly or the religious life. St. Catherine of Siena emphasizes this in the 11th and 47th chapters of her Dialogue, reminding us that we can only perfectly fulfil the commandment of love towards God and our neighbour if we have the spirit of the counsels, that is to say, the spirit of detachment from earthly goods, which, in the words of St. Paul, we must use as though we used them not. The great motive of the second conversion is thus described in the 60th chapter: 'Such souls should leave their mercenary love and become sons, and serve Me irrespective of their own personal advantage. I am the rewarder of every labour, and I render to every man according to his condition and according to his works. Wherefore, if these souls do not abandon the exercise of holy prayer and their other good works, but continue with perseverance to increase their virtues, they will arrive at the state of filial love, because I respond to them with the same love with which they love Me; so that if they love Me as a servant loves his master, I pay them their wages according to their deserts, but I do not reveal myself to them, because secrets are revealed to a friend who has become one thing with his friend, and not to a servant.... ' But if My servants, through displeasure at their imperfection and through love of virtue, dig up with hatred the root of spiritual self-love, and mount to the throne of conscience, reasoning with themselves so as to quell the motions of servile fear in their heart, and to correct mercenary love by the light of holy faith, they will be so pleasing to Me that they will attain to the love of the friend. And I will manifest Myself to them, as My Truth said in these words- "He who loves me shall be one thing with me and I with him, and I will manifest myself to him and we will dwell together." These last words refer to the knowledge of Himself which God grants by a special inspiration. This is contemplation, which

proceeds from faith enlightened by the gifts, from faith united with love; it is a knowledge which savours mysteries and penetrates into their depths. A second motive which should inspire the second conversion is the price of the blood of the Saviour, which St. Peter failed to realize before the Passion, in spite of the words: 'This is my blood which is shed for you,' which Christ pronounced at the Last Supper. It was only after the Resurrection that he began to comprehend this. We read in the Dialogue 1 on this subject. 'My creatures should see and know that I wish nothing but their good, through the Blood of My only begotten Son, in which they are washed from their iniquities. By this Blood they are enabled to know My truth, how in order to give them life I created them in My image and likeness and recreated them to grace with the Blood of My. Son, making them sons of adoption.' This is what St. Peter understood after his sin and after the Passion of Christ; it was only then that he appreciated the value of the Precious Blood which had been shed for our salvation, the Blood of Redemption. Here we have a glimpse of the greatness of Peter in his humiliation; he is much greater here than he was on Thabor, for here he has some understanding of his own poverty and of the infinite goodness of the most High. When Jesus for the first time foretold that he must go to Jerusalem to be crucified, Peter took his Master aside and said to Him: 'Lord, be it far from thee, this shall not be unto thee!' In speaking thus, he had, all unconsciously, spoken against the whole economy of Redemption, against the whole plan of Providence, against the very motive of the Incarnation. And that is why Jesus answered him. 'Get behind me, Satan; thou savourest not the things that are of God but the things that are of men.' But now, after his sin and after his conversion, Peter in his humiliation has an understanding of the Cross, and he sees something of the price of the Precious Blood. And so we can understand why St. Catherine constantly speaks in her Dialogue and in her Letters of the Blood which gives efficacy to Baptism and to the other sacraments. At every Mass, when the priest raises the Precious Blood high above the altar, our faith in its redemptive power and virtue ought to become greater and more intense. A third motive which ought to inspire the second conversion is the love of souls which need to be saved, a love which is inseparable from the love of God, because it is at once the sign and the effect of that love. This love of souls ought in every Christian worthy of the name to become a zeal that inspires all the virtues. In St. Catherine it led her to offer herself as a victim for the salvation of sinners. In the last chapter but one of the Dialogue we read 'Thou didst ask Me to do mercy to the world... Thou didst pray for the mystical body of Holy Church, that I would remove darkness and persecution from it, at

thine own desire punishing in thy person the iniquities of certain of its ministers.... I have also told thee that I wish to do mercy to the world, proving to thee that mercy is My special attribute, for through the mercy and the inestimable love which I had for man I sent into the world the Word, My only begotten Son.... ' I also promised thee, and now again I promise thee, that through the long endurance of My servants I will reform My Spouse. Wherefore I invite thee to endure, Myself lamenting with thee over the iniquities of some of My ministers.... And I have spoken to thee also of the virtue of them that live like angels.... And now I urge thee and My other servants to grief, for by your grief and humble and continual prayer I will do mercy to the world.' The fruit of this second conversion, as in the case of Peter, is a beginning of contemplation by a progressive understanding of the great mystery of the Cross and the Redemption, a living appreciation of the infinite value of the Blood which Christ shed for us. This incipient contemplation is accompanied by a union with God less dependent upon the fluctuations of sensibility, a purer, a stronger, a more continuous union. Subsequently, if not joy, at all events peace, takes up its dwelling in the soul even in the midst of adversity. The soul becomes filled, no longer with a merely abstract, theoretical and vague persuasion, but with a concrete and living conviction, that in God's government all things are ordained towards the manifestation of His goodness. At the end of the Dialogue God Himself declares this truth: 'Nothing has ever happened and nothing happens save by the plan of My divine Providence. In all things that I permit, in all things that I give you, in tribulations and in consolations, temporal or spiritual, I do nothing save for your good, so that you may be sanctified in Me and that My Truth be fulfilled in you.' It is the same truth which St. Paul expresses in his epistle to the Romans: 'To them that love God all things work together unto good.' This is the conviction that was born in the soul of Peter and the Apostles after their second conversion, and also in the souls of the disciples of Emmaus when the risen Christ gave them a fuller understanding of the mystery of the Cross: 'O foolish,' He said to them, 'and slow of heart to believe in all things which the prophets have spoken. Ought not Christ to have suffered these things and so to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets he expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things that were concerning him.' They knew Him in the breaking of bread. What happened to these disciples on the way to Emmaus should happen to us too, if we are faithful, on the way to eternity. If for them and for the Apostles there had to be a second conversion, still more is such a conversion necessary for us. And under the influence of this new grace of God we too shall say: 'Was not our heart

burning within us whilst he spoke in the way and opened to us the Scriptures?' Theology, too, helps us to discover the profound meaning of the Gospel. But the more theology progresses, the more, in a sense, it has to conceal itself; it has to disappear very much as St. John the Baptist disappears after announcing the coming of our Lord. It helps us to discover the deep significance of divine revelation contained in Scripture and Tradition, and when it has rendered this service it should stand aside. In order to restore our cathedrals, to set well hewn stones into their proper place it is necessary to erect a scaffolding; but when once the stones have been replaced the scaffolding is removed and the cathedral once more appears in all its beauty. In a similar way theology helps us to demonstrate the solidity of the foundations of the doctrinal edifice, the firmness of its construction, the proportion of its parts; but when it has shown us this, it effaces itself to make place for that supernatural contemplation which proceeds from a faith enlightened by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, from a faith that penetrates and savours the truths of God, a faith that is united with love. [80] And so it is with the question with which we are dealing, the truly vital question of our interior life in God.

### **FRUITS**

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