

85. *The captive girl-child*

A pastor had invited me to preach the Holy Week services in his mountain village. In administering the sacrament of reconciliation to his parishioners, I discovered that quite a few of them had a spiritual formation of rare quality. There was a family resemblance among these souls. Their relations with God were filled with filial trust, peace, and cheerful generosity. I concluded that under his rough mountaineer exterior, the pastor concealed an extraordinary interior life, and was an awakener of souls.

However, our conversations at meals and during the evening were very disappointing, restricted to very general theological and pastoral problems. I refused to be satisfied with this, and obstinately tried to reach the wellspring through the brambles.

On Easter day, both at the Masses and at Vespers, a vibrant and controlled fervor was clearly perceptible in the assembled parish community. At supper that evening, a deep inner joy emanated from the pastor's austere countenance. And yet, our final conversation was about to assume the impersonal tone of the earlier ones. A comment on my part, however, turned our talk in an unexpected direction, allowing me a glimpse into a singularly profound priestly soul. I recently came across the few notes I scribbled down after returning to my room that Easter night. I am sending them to you. They are a faithful, if not complete, record of the good pastor's remarks.

"For so many people, the Christian life is synonymous with effort, tension, contention, performance, records. [To stress and give nuances to his thought, the pastor seemed to take pleasure in this accumulation of words.] But it is really much less muscular, visible, external. It is something in the depths of one's being, something tenuous, delicate, subtle, relaxed, an act of the soul, an acquiescence of our interior freedom.

"Below, far below our religious acts, our clumsy generousities, our sensible fervors, our vehement desires, and our short-winded aspirations, there lies within us a zone of freshness, innocence, virginity. The harshnesses, anxieties, meannesses and impurities of life cannot touch it, pollute it, contaminate it. That is where our child's soul lives—young, fresh, pure, intact, inviolate. But among practically all people, the girl-child is shut away.

“To be a Christian is first of all to liberate the captive girl-child, to bring her to the light, to untie her fetters. And then she breathes and begins to sing a limpid, crystalline song.

How I wish we could cry out to so many church-going men and women:

‘You’ll never get to heaven with your self-important airs, your moralistic reasoning, your stuffy virtues, your spiritual bookkeeping and spiritual in vestments. You’ll be obliged to throw all that overboard. But with the soul of a child, yes. Led by this little girl-child, if you consent to take her by the hand, you will enter the kingdom of heaven reserved for young children and for those who resemble them.

‘It never ceases to astonish you—and no doubt to scandalize you in secret—that Christ promised heaven at so small a price to the public sinner, to the adulterous wife, to the thief who hung on the cross next to him. The reason is, that when they came into contact with him, the child-soul of each of them was suddenly liberated, and murmured this very simple word, this word of love, this “Yes!” that orientates a destiny.’

“It’s really so simple to be saved—but that’s just it! One must consent to its being simple. Our eternal destiny unfolds not at the level of edifying actions, conformist virtues, or great undertakings, but within the innermost recesses of the soul. It seems to be only a breath, a modulation. It seems insignificant, but in fact nothing is more powerful, more efficacious. Our eternity is decided by a certain childlike smile of our soul—candid, pure, trusting, boldly confident. That’s it. I think a certain unique quality of smile wrested the Son of God from the Trinitarian Life, and drew him irresistibly into the womb of a young girl named Mary.”

Then I asked my pastor-friend, “How can we recover our child-soul and restore its gusto for life, for song and for smiles?”

“I know of nothing more effective than mental prayer,” was his answer. “Provided, of course, that the adult stops talking, and becomes the pupil of the emancipated girl-child. But if we were to make inquiries....”

With that the speaker definitively closed our conversation, which I was so eager to prolong.