Random Reflections

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Summary: Reflects on the enduring struggle to understand suffering love, penance, the joy and pain of our bodies, the beauty of a woman's body, and the example of the saints. Mentions numerous books she loves and some she doesn't care for. (DDLW #401).

We are all oppressed these days by a sense of guilt, of sin. Arthur Koestler brings this out in his latest book, *Arrival and Departure.*Abbott Marmion advised one of his penitents to cultivate a sense of compunction. St. Augustine talked of the wickedness, the turning toward evil that exists even in little children. We must all do penance, and the desire for penance is instinctive in every human breast.

I think it is in the encyclical of Pope Pius XI, quoted in the Breviary for the lessons on the feast of the Sacred Heart, that the Holy Father brings this out. One desires to share in the sufferings of Christ. One desires to share in the sufferings of the beloved–hunger, cold, thirst, vigils–and, since in times like these, we here in this country are so far removed from the scene of combat, then it is necessary to do it by self-imposed deprivations, mortifications.

To some the word mortification is repellent. But it is dying to self, in order to live for others. St. Paul wrote, "always bearing about in our body the mortification of Jesus that the life also of Jesus may be made manifest in our bodies." It is love that gives these desires and love is a glowing, happy thing, a radiant warming fire. We want to strip ourselves to clothe others. We want to fast because of the hunger of others, and if we cannot feed them, we will share their sufferings.

The very instinct that propels people into war, that makes them accept conscription like sheep, is a profound feeling that we must suffer with one another. It is as perverted, however, as that desire of some heretics in the middle ages to cast themselves over cliffs, a religious revival which led to mass suicide in an effort to escape from matter, from flesh, from life, from what they conceived as evil.

Today there is this preoccupation with pain, with suffering. The very publication of such books as Jan Valtin's *Out of the Night,*as Koestler's, as Vicki Baum's *Weeping Wood*with their detailed description of torture, attests to this. When such details are mentioned by hagiographers, the world accounts the martyrs psychopaths for enduring such evils for so slight a cause. Oh, God! so unknown, so unrecognized.

Folly of Love

This blindness of love, this folly of love–this seeing Christ in others, everywhere, and not seeing the ugly, the obvious, the dirty, the sinful–this means we do not see the faults of others, only our own. We see only Christ in them. We have eyes only for our beloved, ears for His voice.

This is what caused the saints to go to what writers like Aldous Huxley (not to speak of our own Catholics) called repulsive extremes. Perhaps hagiographers were too prone to dwell on the physical detail–one gets it too in Hemingway–in some of the writers of this present war. But it is all "to make their point," as Peter Maurin would say. The saints rose above the natural, the human, and became supernatural and superhuman in their love. Nothing was difficult to them, all was clear, shining and beautiful on the pathway of love.

There is that prayer of thanksgiving after Communion, written by St. Bonaventure. There is that chapter from the *Following of Christ, Book III,* chapter five.

What mother ever considers the ugliness of cleaning up after her baby or sick child or husband? These things are not mentioned by critics. But to the saints everyone is child and lover. Everyone is Christ.

Bodily Infirmities

I have been reading Newman's sermons and one of them is on bodily infirmities. When you are ill you meditate on our enemy the flesh, which is also our dear companion on this our pilgrimage–our body, through which we receive our greatest joys of body and spirit. Our senses convey to us knowledge of the truth, we hear of the faith with our ears, we see and understand things invisible through things visible; we speak words of earthy and eternal love with our lips. And alas, words of ugliness and hate.

Our dear flesh, our good bodies, which God made and which begin to die even as we begin to live–ever dying, ever renewing and finally decaying and being put into the ground like grains of wheat to rise again with new life at the last day. "I believe in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting." "Brother Ass," St. Francis called his body and what burdens of joy and sorrow it must bear, what torrents of pleasure pass over it, into what an abyss of pain it can fall!

A woman contemplates her body, "that earthen vessel," that temple of the Holy Spirit, and young or old it is always holy. Young it is as fresh and fragrant as flowers. Old it is worn and stale–there is the smell of age and corruption. If a woman is a wife and mother she rejoices that her flesh is used and worn. If she is virgin, a single woman, if she has willingly cast herself into the arms of the Lord, then blessed are those who have not seen but believed in this love, this terrible overwhelming, demanding love of the living God.

One does not dwell upon the pleasures of the body, nor talk of them. There is barracks-room talk of wine, woman and song, the talk of starved men, seeking an anodyne from pain. This is not the kind of remembrance even the most gross woman wishes of herself in the memory and conversation of those she loves. Pin-up girls, flesh in the abstract, tempting the memory to gloat on the grossest and most fruitless of pleasures, to still the fearful expectation of the most useless pain. The disassociation of the flesh from the spirit is evil and a bitter fruit in the mouth.

As with pleasure, so in regard to pain, to sickness. We are so subject to our bodies. At their slightest bidding we make ourselves warm, cool, fed, refreshed, and we count ourselves most spiritual when we are never conscious of them because they have been so well satisfied. They are so well cared for that they are perfectly comfortable and never bother us. When we are ill we are humiliated at being so subject to the flesh.

The bourgeois, the materialist, fights for abstractions like freedom, democracy because he has the material things of this life. (Which he is most fearful of being deprived of.) The poor fight for bread, for increase in wages, for time to rest, for warmth, for privacy, these things are holy.

Reading

One of the reasons I love Dickens is that he writes so much of the poor. I had always avoided reading *Old Curiosity Shop,* hearing that it was most mournfully sentimental. But one of our CATHOLIC WORKER readers in New England, I don't know who, sent me a copy with my own name in it. It had belonged to some other Dorothy Day in Massachusetts, back in 1909. But when I read it this winter, I enjoyed it much. I have read somewhere that Dostoievsky read much of Dickens, and he must have been profoundly moved by the story of this old man who shared his vice of gambling and sacrificed his nearest and dearest to it. *Old Curiosity Shop* reminded me of *The Insulted and Injured.* And Little Nell's joy in the graveyard at the end was strongly reminiscent of the closing pages of Bloy's *The Woman Who Was Poor.* I read Saroyan, too, this winter. "Unless ye become as little children." Some of his work I liked. Some I found too stupidly sentimental, such as *The Time of Your Life.* I did like *Love's Old Sweet Song* and *My Heart's in the Highlands* and also *Human Comedy.* A reaction against *Grapes of Wrath* and *Tobacco Road.*

This last month I have been enjoying Maisie Ward's *Chesterton.* It is an engrossing work, filled with quotations from letters, conversations, articles and from his books. You feel that you begin to know the man, his wife and his friends, his London, his England. You get a glimpse of a mind that always, even before having gone through what the world calls a conversion, "sees all things new" and is trying to get others to see the upside-down world of Christianity and the tremendous joy of it.

The following quotation started me off on a whole chapter in the novel I have been writing off and on for some years. It will probably start those of you who read this on a discussion that will last the night. It made me think of Peter Maurin's "Labor is a gift, not a commodity," and the Communist slogan of the depression, "Work, not wages."

"If a machine were used on a farm employing fifty men that would do the work of forty, it means forty men become unemployed. 'But it is only because they were employed that they became unemployed. Now you and I, I hope to heaven, are not trying to increase employment. It is about the only thing that is as bad as unemployment.' In other words, he did not want men to be employees. Men working for themselves, men their own employers, their own employees, that was the object of Distributism."