

“It’s stifling...” (from the ‘Anneau d’or’)

“It’s stifling in your Christian families! And the more Christian they are, the more the air is unbreathable”. How often have I heard this remark from non-believers or half-believers!

- “You’re telling me!”, I reply. They look at me surprised, thinking they would shock me; but I add “Do not say: ‘the more Christian they are’...”.

So many couples, in fact, believe themselves to be genuinely Christian and yet only practise a truncated Christianity. Their whole religion is reduced to the practice of virtues. Even the sacraments are, for them, only means of achieving them. What energy they spend to acquire and safeguard their virtues! They are dedicated, unshakeably dedicated: you can knock at their door at any time. They are anxious to ‘be committed’ and ‘to bear witness’ (have we not spoken about that often enough in the past twenty years!). But, above all - it is so true - they are deadly boring. And although no one fails to admire them – for there is greatness in such lives – no one however is tempted to imitate them.

In their presence, Péguy’s words irresistibly come to mind: “Morality was invented by puny people; and the Christian life was invented by Jesus Christ”. In fact, if we are not careful, all religious life is subject to the law of degradation of energy. Of the Christian life, we soon only remember Christian morality; and Christian morality itself soon degrades into a kind of natural morality that produces austere and inflexible Puritans. In such an atmosphere of moralism, we are literally stifling.

But Christianity is not, first of all, morality; it is not the worship of the god ‘Duty’: a faceless divinity. It is a religion – and not any religion: a simple service of a distant god – but a life with God, a communion of love with Him. “I am standing at the door, knocking. If one of you hears me calling and opens the door, I will come in and share his meal, side by side with him” (Rev 3: 20). “If anyone loves me he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make our home in him” (Jn. 14: 23). Christian life is even more than that: it is a communion. Through faith – a living faith, of course – the Christian enters into communion with the mind of God: he shares, say theologians, in the knowledge that God has of himself. And through charity, the Christian loves with the very Heart of God: he is vitally associated in the act by which God loves himself. How far this takes us from the Spartan moralism of some or the middle-class moralism of others!

But we are so ‘familiar’ with all these expressions learnt from the catechism that the great reality that they conceal no longer surprises us.

There are Christians, nevertheless, who take these supernatural realities seriously and who live by them.

Their faith is a passionate desire to know God and his mind. They endeavour to keep it alive and growing, both by meditating the divine Word and by being attentive to what God wants to say to them through events of daily life. Their young and alert faith penetrates ever deeper into the “inexhaustible riches of Christ”. Its elation explodes in these words of Saint John that faithfully express this feeling of elation: “We ourselves have known and put our faith in God’s love towards us” (1 Jn. 4: 16).

They work at loving God – all love is work before it is possessed. This love gradually becomes the impetus for all their actions, their reason for living. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ”, wrote Saint Paul, “Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or

famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Rom 8: 35, 37).

The morality of these Christians – for they have a morality, but not that of the ‘puny’ – is the radiance of the divine life, of the Love that dwells in them. It comes from Christ’s admonitions: “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect... (Mt. 5: 48); “Be merciful as your Father is merciful (Lk. 6: 36). Saint Paul defines it in these words: “Be imitators of God, as beloved sons”.

In the company of these Christians you are not liable to be stifled. They are not prisoners of moralism, of legalism. They are free: free of the freedom of children of God. With them you breathe the open air of the sea, the open air of God. They give you a desire for God.

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