

1904

Feast of the Holy Family 24 January, 1904

Today I have been looking back over my progress this month to see how my spiritual life is faring.

'Few and brief.' I have made progress, to be sure, but very little. In fact I am still a sinner, and very slow to reform. My pride in particular has given me a great deal of trouble, because of my unsatisfactory examination results. This, I must admit, was a real humiliation; I have yet to learn nay A.B.C. in the practice of true humility and scorn of self. I feel a restless longing for I know not what-it is as if I were trying to fill a bottomless bag.

I pray rather hurriedly, by fits and starts, without composure or serenity of mind. I have become more remiss in the practice of self-denial, and self-indulgent when faced with little opportunities for it. Although I mean to make the most of every scrap of time, I waste hours without achieving anything. I am less reserved in my speech and more effusive, and also a little less cautious in my criticism. In general I need to live more intensely and virtuously, in a finer spiritual atmosphere, and be more determined in my character and resolutions.

I am getting down to work again, all the wiser for my own experience. Most important of all is holy meditation. The essential is that my thoughts should be well occupied during those precious moments: if the subject set does not appeal to me, I may think of the Passion of Jesus, of the state of my soul, and be frankly sorry for my sins; I may dwell on my love for Jesus, or make practical resolutions for the day.

In the class room I must constantly exercise the strictest control over my tongue; my doing this would give Jesus so much pleasure, every day.

In conversation, great reserve in what I say and how I say it. I must beware of speaking ill of anyone, even indirectly. I must always preserve a natural, not an affected, dignity. Above all, I must be extremely careful when I am talking about our Superior. It would also be very wise to avoid effusions about my own affairs: I Must not pour out my feelings about everything, to everyone. My first concern must be to make the most of every moment of tune available for study, and not to read anything; irrelevant. I mean to be very strict in this respect just as if every evening before going to bed I had to give Jesus an account of what I had learnt and how much time I lead wasted.

For the rest, close loving communion with the Sacred heart and with the Immaculate Virgin in my invocations, thoughts and aspirations. I will not let my mind be so much disturbed by distracting thoughts of pride, but attend wholeheartedly to whatever I am doing, without thinking of anything else.

'In thee, Lord Jesus, have I trusted.'

Triduum Exercises of Holy Week
28-29-30 March 1904

In order not to repeat the usual lamentations, the swine things I have said over and over again, I will only dwell on the special significance of these brief days of holy retreat.

What is past is past: there remain only shame for my infidelities and eternal gratitude for the extraordinary graces which God has showered upon me.

The blessed day of my ordination to the priesthood approaches and I already enjoy a foretaste of its indescribable happiness. On the eve of such a solemn event I feel it behoves me to redouble all my efforts, so as to prepare myself for it as worthily as I can, because sacramental grace is imparted once only: he receives most who is most capable of receiving it.

I will try therefore to pass these last months in great recollection of soul, concentrating every thought and action on that event where Jesus awaits me. I will repeat all those dear religious practices of my early years in the seminary, in order to keep my fervour fresh, pure and fragrant; I feel a pleasure in being a schoolboy once more, as I return to the simple but ingenious piety of those happy years. I shall then, as far as my new occupations allow, take a delight in repeating those tiny but tender devotional exercises in honour of my very dear patron saints: the three youths, Aloysius, Stanislaus and John Berchmans, St Philip Neri, St Francis de Sales, St Alphonsus Liguori, St Thomas Aquinas, St Ignatius Loyola, St Charles Borromeo etc.

Jesus Mary Joseph!

*1-10 August 1904. Notes written during the retreat in
preparation for my ordination as a priest. Made in the
Retreat House of the Passionist Fathers of St John
and St Paul on the Caelian Hill*

(1) I have not achieved much during these first days. But the place I am staying in and the people I see arouse the finest feelings in me and give me much food for serious thought. I have meditated much on holy detachment, to which I have paid attention in other retreats also, but as far as its practice goes I am still at the starting line. God preserves me from falling into grave sins, which otherwise I might very easily commit. I profess to aim at perfection but in practice I like the way of perfection to be mapped out by me and not by God. In truth, all my fears and anxieties about my studies this year and about the danger of being recalled from Rome, and the reasons which I adduced for this, confirm the fact. Words are one thing, deeds another. Holy detachment ought to spring from a great simplicity of soul, a readiness for any sacrifice, and very little philosophizing; above all, prayer and trust in God.

I must be careful, especially when things are not going well for me, not to unburden myself to anyone, except my spiritual director or someone else who might be able to help me. In talking with others I lose all the merit I might

otherwise acquire. And I must never lose holy joy, because whatever may happen "in him we live, and move, and have our being " and I must not be concerned with any other matter than the task in hand: Age quod agis. What will become of me in the future? Shall I be a good theologian or a famous jurist, or shall I have a country parish or be just a simple priest? What does all this matter to me? I must be prepared to be none of all these, or even more than all these, as God wills. My God and my all. After all, it is easy for Jesus to scatter to the four winds my dream of cutting a brilliant figure in the eyes of the world.

I must get it into my head that, just because God loves me, there will be no plan for me in which ambition plays a part; so it is useless for me to rack my brains about it.

I am a slave; I cannot move without my master's consent. God knows my capacities, all that I can or cannot do for his glory, for the good of the Church and for the salvation of souls. So there is no need for me to give any advice to him, through his representatives here, my Superiors.

Is it not true that the saints, in their early years, appeared to set out on a road quite different from the one which their natural gifts and brilliant qualities had seemed to indicate? Yet they became saints, and such saints! Reformers of society, founders of famous Orders! They practised holy detachment: they were willing to listen to the voice of God who spoke to them as he speaks to me; they did not measure what they had to do by considering their pride, but cast themselves blindly into all that God wanted them to do. 'Look' then, my boy, 'look and make it according to the pattern,' and this means in everything. All my wanting to do and say is nothing but pride, there is no other word for it; if I go on in my own way I shall work and sweat over it . . . and in the end -what shall I be?- a wind-bag !

If I want to be really great, a great priest, I must be stripped of everything, like Jesus on his Cross; I must judge everything that happens in my life, and the decisions of my Superiors concerning me, in the light of faith. God forbid we should carry criticism into this field! O blessed simplicity!

(2) I come back to the subject of detachment because, when all is said and done, this is the hardest pill for me to swallow. Let us make a little survey: this year, generally speaking, my failings consisted in the lack of fervour, which even very solemn occasions did not arouse; in particular I must regret my aridity in prayer, especially during holy communion and meditation, and almost continual distractions, etc., as well as carelessness in reviewing my spiritual progress, etc. In short, a general lukewarmness. And the cause lay chiefly in my failure to achieve detachment. First of all, that craze for study, which was really with a view to cutting a dash in the examinations, before the worldly eyes of ecclesiastics; then the sheer intellectual effort prompted by pride, fearful and alarmed by the threat of being recalled from Rome, which would have meant the ruin of those rosy hopes conceived in happier days. All this work was excellent in itself but not without its weak side, at least as regards the way in which I went about it. God saw my heart becoming divided and

agitated and let me go on like this for a little while, and then, well, we know what happened. So, let the past be a lesson for the future. I must press on, not from day to day but from hour to hour. I must let myself be ruled by God, with a spirit of humility and self-denial, in order to have love and peace in my heart and snake real spiritual progress.

(3) My studies! What a great many preconceived ideas I have about these! I have ended by judging them as the world does. I have let my head be turned by current ideas. Learning is always a fine thing, a secondary ingredient of a useful priestly life and also a secondary means of saving souls in these modern times. God preserve me from underestimating study, but I must beware of attaching to it an exaggerated and absolute value. Study is one eye, the left eye; if the right one is missing, what is the use of a single eye, of study by itself? After all, what am I nosy that I have secured my degree? Nothing, a poor ignorant fellow-. What use am I to the Church with that alone? So I must revise my ideas about study. I Here also I need a sense of proportion and harmony between what I think and what I do. Of course I shall always go on studying, I shall never give it up, but `all according to order and measure; we must seek knowledge soberly'. I must be learned, but as St Francis do Sales was. After all, what are they worth, even these people who are said to be so clever? What do they know? Very little. Naturally I do not mean those who arc learned in the strict sense of the word. How wise the advice which our Holy Father Pius X gave to young seminarians: 'My sons, you must study, study Bard; but for charity's sake be good too, very good!'

In future I shall study with even more enthusiasm than before, but I shall call things by their right names; I shall be studying not so much for the examinations as for life itself, so that what I learn will become an integral part of me.

(4) The lay brother who cleans my room and serves me at table, good Brother Thomas, gives me plenty of food for thought. He is no longer young, his manners are refined, lie is quite tall and robed in a very long black habit ,which lie never refers to -without calling it "holy". He is always cheerful arid speaks only of God and divine love; he never raises his eyes to look anyone in the face. In church, before the Blessed Sacrament, lie prostrates himself oil the bare ground, as still as a statue. He came to Rome from Spain to join the Passionists and is ideally happy, at everyone's beck and call, as simple as a creature can be who has no alluring ambitions, no glowing mirages ahead, content to be a poor lay brother for the rest of his life. Before the goodness of Brother Thomas I feel my own nothingness I ought to kiss the hem of his habit and take him for my teacher. And yet I am almost a priest, the recipient of so many graces! Where is my spirit of penitence acid humility, my modesty, prayerfulness or true wisdom Ah, Brother Thomas, what a lot I am learning from you! So many of these humble little lay brothers, so many unknown religious, w ill one day shine with glory in the kingdom of heaven Acid why should not I too shine? O Jesus, give me the spirit of penitence, sacrifice and mortification.

(5) Our excellent father Director has begged me to take as my companion, during the time we spend on our walks, a young Protestant who has been given hospitality while being prepared for the abjuration of his former faith. Poor young man, I feel so sorry for him ! He is a good youth, but for the best nine years of his life-he is now eighteen-he has been thoroughly imbued with the instruction which the Protestants are so expert in giving. There is not a single prejudice against the Catholic Church that he does not know, not one article of heretical teaching that he has not learnt. His company, even if somewhat distracting, does me good, for it brings home to me another grave peril which is threatening the faith in Italy, now so beset with divers sects. Alas! the children of this world are wiser than the children of light.' Meanwhile this has convinced me of my tremendous obligation to thank God for the great gift of faith: one has only to talk to a Protestant for a few hours to understand all the importance of this. Therefore, forever, 'his praise shall be continually in my mouth' for this gift too, indeed for this gift above all else. As for these poor unfortunates outside the Church, we must feel sorry for them, poor children pray hard for them, and work with all our hearts and strength for their conversion.

(6) I must think of the priesthood, and think of it seriously. I am here in this holy retreat precisely for this purpose, for 'the work is great'; the most solemn act of my life. If from the heights of this mountain, whose peak I shall reach within a few days, I were to turn back on my steps . . .

At this point the modest notes made during those Spiritual Exercises were interrupted, but the holy impressions of those days, so full of blessings, did not end there. After a lapse of eight years (I am writing in 1912) they are still clearly in my mind and, please God, will never be forgotten.

Above all else, there was at that time ripening in my mind a lively desire and determination to annihilate the self completely in the presence of the Heart of Jesus, in order that when I had become quite stripped of all that was myself my divine Master would find me more obedient to his commands and a worthier tool for doing some good, some great good in the Church, not in places and ways chosen by my pride but in simple, blind abandonment to the will of my Superiors. To make my retreat more profitable I also heard some very fervent sermons preached to us by one of those good Fathers. There were about ten of us ordinands, from different lands and different colleges: among others a Florentine student from the Capranica, a Portuguese, Don Nicola Turchi, a former companion of mine at the Roman Seminary, another Roman student, etc. I found great help in the daily exercise of the Way of the Cross, which we all made together in the chapel, and in listening to the life of the recently beatified Gabriel of Our Lady of the Sorrows which we read in turn at mealtimes, in the evening service in the richly adorned chapel where lies the body of St Paul of the Cross (it was the Novena of the Assumption) and in the fine example of austere living given by the Fathers themselves. I still remember the impression made on me every night, when they rose for Matins, and I heard the sound of their footsteps and the trailing of their long black habits along the dark corridors. I was also particularly impressed by the solemn

Christian associations of that venerable place. From my window I could see the Colosseum, the Lateran and the Appian Way. From the garden could be seen the Palatine and the Caelian Hill, with its crown of Christian monuments, the church of St Gregory, etc. At the side of the house where I was staying was the basilica of St John and St Paul, and I went down to it every evening, as I said, for the Novena of the Assumption. Under the basilica, inside the Clivus Scauri was the martyrs' house; near my room was the room where St Paul of the Cross died. There every afternoon we practised saying Holy Mass. So everything up there breathed of holiness, nobility and sacrifice. O Lord, how I thank you for having sent me to that holy place for my immediate preparation for the priesthood!

Oil the eve of that blessed day of my ordination the good Father Luigi del Rosario who looked after the students following the course of Exercises, and who had shown me many kindnesses, was good enough to accede to my wish and accompany me to some of the most sacred places. So I went with him to St John Lateran, to pray in that basilica and to renew my act of faith; then I did the Holy Stairs oil my knees, and thence went on to St Paul's Without the Walls. What did I tell the good Lord that evening, over the tomb of the Apostle of the Gentiles? It is locked in my heart.

The dawn came of that most blessed feast of St Lawrence. My Vicerector, Fr Spolverini, came to fetch me from the monastery. I crossed the city in silence. The never-to-be-forgotten ceremony took place in the church of S. Maria in Monte Santo in the Piazza del Popolo. I still remember all the attendant circumstances. The ordaining bishop was His Grace Mgr Ceppetelli, Vicegerent; some students from the Capranica College served at the altar. When all was over and I raised my eyes, having sworn the oath of eternal fidelity to my Superior, the Bishop, I saw the blessed image of Our Lady to which I confess I had paid no attention before. She seemed to smile at me from the altar and her look gave me a feeling of sweet peace in my soul and a generous and confident spirit, as if she were telling me she was pleased, and that she would always watch over me—in short she sent a gentle calm and peace into my soul which I shall never forget.

The good Vice-rector took me back to the seminary, which was deserted, as everyone had gone into the country to Roccantica. My first duty was to write a letter at once to my Bishop, Mgr Guindani of blessed memory. I told him in a few words what at the feet of Mgr Ceppetelli, I had said to the Lord; and to him I renewed my vow of obedience and love. With what joy, eight years afterwards, I recall and renew that promise! Then I wrote to my parents, so that they and all the family should share in the joy of my heart, begging them to thank the Lord with me, and to implore him to keep me faithful. In the afternoon I was alone, alone with my God, who had raised me so high, alone with my thoughts, my resolves, the joys of my priesthood. I went out. Utterly absorbed in my Lord, as if there were no one else in Rome, I visited the churches to which I was most devoted, the altars of my most familiar saints, the images of Our Lady. They were very short visits. It seemed that evening as

if I had something to say to all those holy ones and as if every one of them had something to say to me. And indeed it was so.

So I visited St Philip Neri, St Ignatius, St John Baptist de Rossi, St Aloysius, St John Berchmans, St Catherine of Siena, St Camillus de Lellis and many others. O blessed saints, who in that hour were witnesses to the Lord of my good intentions, now you must ask him to forgive my weaknesses and to help me to keep ever alight in my heart the flame of that memorable day.

The next day it was again my dear Vice-rector who took me to St Peter's to celebrate my first Mass. The great square had much to say to me as I crossed it! I had often felt my heart moved when walking there, but never as on that morning And inside the majestic temple, among the venerable records of the history of the Church! I went down into the crypt near the tomb of the Apostle. There was a group of friends invited by the Vice-rector. I remember Mgr Giuseppe Palica, my Professor of moral theology, and Fr Enrico Benedetti, Fr Pietro Moriconi, Fr Giuseppe Baldi, Fr Enrico Fazi and others. I said the votive Mass of St Peter and St Paul. Ah, the joys of that Mass! I remember that among the feelings with which my heart was overflowing the most powerful of all was a great love for the Church, for the cause of Christ, for the Pope, and a sense of total dedication to the service of Jesus and of the Church, and of an intention, indeed a sacred oath, of allegiance to the Chair of St Peter and of unwearying work for souls. This oath, hallowed in such a special manner by the place where I was, by the act I performed and the circumstances which accompanied it, still lives and throbs within my breast, more alive than words can tell. I said to the Lord over the tomb of St Peter: 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.', I came out from the church as if in a dream. On that day the marble and bronze Popes aligned along the walls of the basilica seemed to look at me from their sepulchres with a new expression, as if to give me courage and great confidence.

Towards midday a new joy awaited me: the audience with Pope Pius X. My Vice-rector had arranged it for me-how grateful I am to him for all he did for me in those blessed days!-and went with me. When the Pope came to where I was, the Vice-rector presented me, and the Pope smiled and bent his head to hear what I said to him. I was kneeling before him, telling him that I was glad to be at his feet repeating to him the intentions which I had offered during my first Mass over the tomb of St Peter, and I told him of these briefly, as well as I could.

The Pope then, still bending down, placed his hand on my head, and speaking almost into my ear said: 'Well done, well done, my boy . . . this is what I like to hear, and I will ask the good Lord to grant a special blessing on these good intentions of yours, so that you may really be a priest after his own heart. I bless all your other intentions too, and all the people who are rejoicing at this time for your sake.' He blessed me and gave me his hand to kiss. He passed on and spoke to someone else, a Pole I believe; but all at once, as if following his own train of thought, he turned back to me and asked when I should be back at my home. I told him: 'For the feast of the Assumption.' 'Ah, what a feast that will be,' he said, 'up there in your little hamlet (he had earlier asked me

where I came from), and how those fine Bergamasque bells will peal out on that day!' and he continued his round smiling.

The evening of that blessed day found me at Roccantica, the villa belonging to the seminary. Father Giuseppe Piccirilli came to meet me at the station of Poggio Mirteto. I was most touched when I saw the villa, beautifully lit up; in the chapel the good students sang a fine 'Tu es sacerdos'. The next day wonderful celebrations. Everyone received holy communion. Mgr Bugarini, the Rector, guided me through the Mass and my kind spiritual director, Father Francesco Pitocchi, a Liguorian, preached the Gospel homily. That Father was too kind in what he said about me: his affection blinded him a little. And the happy rejoicings went on all day.

On the 13th I celebrated Holy Mass at the Santissima Annunziata in Florence. This was in fulfilment of an obligation of gratitude towards Our Lady, to whom, before beginning my military service, I had dedicated my purity. On the 14th I was in Milan, saying Mass over the tomb of St Charles Borromeo How much I had to tell him! And from then on the veneration and love which hind tile to hint have grown stronger.

On the 15th, the feast of the Assumption, I was at Sotto il Monte. I count that day among the happiest of my life, for me for my relations and benefactors for everyone.

Why have I written all thus down In order that these notes too may encourage me to keep faith with nay promises, grateful to the Lord for his goodness to me May I be reminded of my profession, should I ever be tempted to be unfaithful to it, and nay everything serve to make me a priest worthy of my noble calling and not unworthy of Christ, to -whom alone be the glory.

Jesus Mary, Joseph
4 November 1904. Triduum before the
beginning of academic year

As regards general resolutions I stand by all that I have written during the four courses of Exercises in preparation for my ordination. In order the better to control my conduct and to set up some solid props to support my spiritual progress, I intend to pay special attention to the f following resolutions, ` which I humbly place under the protection of St Charles Borromeo on this his precious feast day.

(1) Throughout the morning, from the first moment I awaken until some time after Mass, I will apply myself exclusively to spiritual thoughts and occupations: vocal prayers, spiritual reading, meditation, the recital of the Divine Office and so on.

(2) I shall be most scrupulous in making my particular examinations purposefully and profitably, five minutes before noon.

(3) My most important duty will be to pay nay daily visit to the Blessed Sacrament, with the greatest fervour. I owe everything to the Blessed Sacrament and to the Sacred Heart of Jesus: so I will have a most loving devotion to the Blessed Sacrament.

(4) I will never go to bed without having recited at least the three nocturns of the following day. Nothing else matters so much: the Breviary must always be given pride of place.

(5) I will be inflexible about making my monthly day of recollection, at least from the preceding evening until midday of the first Sunday of every month.

(6) I will obey all the rules of the seminary as scrupulously as if I were one of the youngest students, always bearing in mind that all my influence as a perfect over the young will entirely depend on the good example I set them.

(7) I renew more firmly my intention to behave with the greatest modesty during my walks. Being a priest does not give me immunity from grave sins. My concern for modesty will stand me in good stead in my efforts to maintain recollection and fervour in my soul.

(8) I must make the best use of my time, especially when studying. First of all the subjects set for this year and for the classes, then, with moderation, other things.

(9) In all things there must be humility, great spiritual fervour, mildness and courtesy towards everyone, continual cheerfulness and serenity of mind and heart.

Heart of Jesus, burning with love for us, inflame our hearts, with love for you.

8 December, 1904

*Fiftieth anniversary of the proclamation of the
dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary*

I shall remember this day as one of the most impressive of my life. Today I rejoiced with my heart full of the purest delight when I was present at the solemn triumph of Mary, celebrated in the Vatican basilica and in all the churches of the city.

In a spirit of affectionate rivalry all Rome was determined to make a further display of its love for the Blessed Virgin. In the great church, crowded with people, in the splendour of the magnificent ceremony in that place, the most venerated on earth, the image of Mary Immaculate high up in the apse, shining in a radiance of dazzling light, seemed to be smiling at the Pope, at all the majesty of pontifical pomp, at the imposing array of Cardinals and Bishops gathered in large numbers from every corner of the earth, at the ecclesiastical dignitaries and the lay folk. The sacred mysteries were accompanied by the music of Perosi which resounded like that of heavenly choirs along the immense aisles, and rose to find nobler echoes in the immense dome. What a spectacle of faith, what a triumph for Mary! I do not think it possible to imagine on this earth a greater or more wonderful honour. As for myself, swallowed up in the throng of young seminarians from every land, and yet near enough to the Apostle's tomb to be able to follow almost the whole course of the imposing ceremony [here these notes end].