

THE
INTELLECTUAL
LIFE

Its Spirit, Conditions, Methods

by A. G. Sertillanges, O.P.

translated from the French by
MARY RYAN, M.A.



THE NEWMAN PRESS
Westminster, Maryland
1960

Nihil Obstat: JACOBUS BASTIBLE, S.T.D.
Censor Deputatus

Imprimatur: ✠ DANIEL
Episcopus Corcagiensis

die 28 Septembris, 1946

First printing 1948, Second printing 1952
Third printing 1956, Fourth printing with
corrections 1959, Fifth printing 1960. All
rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

II

In the organization of our life, the essential point to safeguard, in view of which all the rest is necessary, is the wise provision of solitude, exterior and interior. St. Thomas is so deeply convinced of this that of sixteen counsels to the intellectual, he devotes seven to external contacts and to the retired life. "I want you to be slow in speaking and slow in going to the parlor." "Do not inquire at all about the actions of others." "Be polite to everyone" but "be familiar with none, for too much familiarity breeds contempt and gives matter for many distractions." "Do not busy yourself about the words and actions of those in the world." "Avoid useless outings above everything." "Love your cell, if you desire to be admitted to the wine-cellar."

THE ORGANIZATION OF LIFE

The wine-cellar mentioned here, in an allusion to the *Canticle of Canticles* and to the commentary of St. Bernard, is the secret dwelling-place of truth, of which from afar the perfume attracts the spouse, that is the fervent soul; it is the abode of inspiration, the radiant center of enthusiasm, of genius, of invention, of ardent search; it is the scene of the activity of the mind and its wise delight.

To enter into that dwelling, we must give up commonplace things; we must practice retirement, of which the monastic cell is the symbol. "In the cells, and along the great corridors," writes Paul Adam (*Dieu*, p. 67), "silence is like a splendid person, clad in the whiteness of the walls, keeping watch." What does she keep watch over, if not prayer and work?

Therefore, be slow to speak and slow to go to those places where people speak, because in many words the spirit is poured out like water; by your amiability to all, purchase the right really to frequent only a few whose society is profitable; avoid, even with these, the excessive familiarity which drags one down and away from one's purpose; do not run after news that occupies the mind to no purpose; do not busy yourself with the sayings and doings of the world, that is with such as have no moral or intellectual bearing; avoid useless comings and goings which waste hours and fill the mind with wandering thoughts. These are the conditions of that sacred thing, quiet recollection. Only in this way does one gain access to the royal secrets which

are the happiness of the Spouse; only by this mode of living does one hold oneself respectfully face to face with truth.

Retirement is the laboratory of the spirit; interior solitude and silence are its two wings. All great works were prepared in the desert, including the redemption of the world. The precursors, the followers, the Master Himself, all obeyed or have to obey one and the same law. Prophets, apostles, preachers, martyrs, pioneers of knowledge, inspired artists in every art, ordinary men and the Man-God, all pay tribute to loneliness, to the life of silence, to the night.

In the primeval night and its solemn emptiness the universe was shaped by the creative hand. He who desires the joy of creating must not be in a hurry to pronounce his *fiat lux*, nor especially to pass in review all the animals in the world; in propitious darkness let him take time, like God, to prepare the material of the stars.

The most exquisite songs in nature are heard at night. The nightingale, the crystal-voiced toad, the cricket, sing in the darkness. The cock proclaims the day, and does not wait for it. All who bear a message, all poets, all seekers also and those who are on the alert to pick up the truths that lie scattered round us, must plunge deep into the vast emptiness which is plenitude.

No great man has tried to escape this law. Lacordaire said that he had made for himself in his room between his soul and God "a horizon wider than the world"; and had procured for him-

THE ORGANIZATION OF LIFE

self "the wings of rest." Emerson proclaimed himself "a savage." Descartes shut himself up in his "heated room." Plato declared that he used "more oil in his lamp than wine in his goblet." Bossuet would get up at night to find the genius of silence and inspiration; great thoughts came to him only when he was far from futile noises and preoccupations. Has not every poet the impression that in his verses he is but translating the mysterious revelations of silence, which according to the formula of Gabriele d'Annunzio he hears as "a voiceless hymn"?

The things that count must set up a barrier between him and the things that do not count. Commonplace life and the *ludibria* that St. Augustine spoke of, the games and the quarrels of children ending in a kiss, must cease under the kiss of the muse, under the delight-giving and tranquilizing caress of truth.

"Why hast thou come?" St. Bernard asked himself about the cloister: *ad quid venisti?* And you, thinker, why have you come to this life outside the ordinary life, to this life of consecration, concentration, and therefore of solitude? Was it not because of a choice? Did you not prefer truth to the daily lie of a scattered life, or even to the noble but secondary preoccupations of action? That being so, will you be unfaithful to the object of your devotion by falling back into the grip of what you have freely given up?

If the Spirit is to lead us into the regions of interior solitude, as He led Jesus into the desert, we

THE INTELLECTUAL LIFE

must first offer Him the solitude we have created. Without retirement, there is no inspiration. But within the circle of the lamplight, the stars of thought gather above us, as it were in a firmament.

When silence takes possession of you; when far from the racket of the human highway the sacred fire flames up in the stillness; when peace, which is the tranquility of order, puts order in your thoughts, feelings, and investigations, you are in the supreme disposition for learning; you can bring your materials together; you can create; you are definitely at your working point; it is not the moment to dwell on wretched trifles, to half live while time runs by, and to sell heaven for nothings.

Solitude enables you to make contact with yourself, a necessity if you want to realize yourself—not to repeat like a parrot a few acquired formulas, but to be the prophet of the God within you who speaks a unique language to each man.

We shall come back later, at length, to this idea of an equipment special to each person, of a mental training which is education, that is, the drawing-out and unfolding of a soul: a soul that is unique, that has not had nor will have its like in all the ages, for God does not repeat Himself. But we must bear in mind that one can only unfold oneself in that fashion by first living with oneself, closely, in solitude.

The author of the *Imitation* said: "I have never gone amongst men without coming back less a man." Carry that idea further and say: without coming back less the man that I am, less myself.

THE ORGANIZATION OF LIFE

In the crowd one loses one's identity, unless one keeps firm hold of oneself, and this hold must first be created. In the crowd, one has no self-knowledge, being burdened by an alien self, that of the multitude.

"What is thy name?—Legion." That would be the answer of your spirit dispersed and scattered in the life outside you.

Hygienists recommend three things for the body: the bath, the air bath, and the inward bath of pure water; I should like to add for the soul the bath of silence; in order to tone up the organism of the spirit, to accentuate the personality, and to produce the active consciousness of it, as the athlete feels his muscles and prepares their play by the inner movements which are their very life.

Ravignan said: "Solitude is the homeland of the strong, silence is their prayer." What a prayer indeed there is to truth, and what a power of co-operation with its influence in prolonged recollection—frequently resumed at specified times, as it were for a meeting which will gradually become a continuous contact, a life in close community! One cannot, says St. Thomas, contemplate all the time; but he who lives only for contemplation, directs everything else towards it, and resumes it when he can, gives it a sort of continuity, as far as may be on earth.¹

Delight will be found in it, for "the cell, if you stay in it, grows sweet: *cella continuata dulcescit.*" Now the delight of contemplation is a part of its

¹ S.T. Ia 2ae, qu. 3, art. 2 ad 4m.

THE INTELLECTUAL LIFE

efficacy. Pleasure, St. Thomas explains, fastens the soul to its object, like a vise; it rivets attention and liberates the acquisitive faculties, which sadness or boredom would constrain. When truth takes possession of you and slips her downy wing beneath your soul to lift it gently and harmoniously in upward flight, that is the moment to rise with her and to float, as long as she supports you, in the upper air.

You will not thereby live in the isolation that we have condemned; you will not be far from your brethren because you have left their noise behind you—the noise which separates you from them spiritually, and therefore prevents true brotherhood.

For you, an intellectual, your neighbor is the person who needs the truth, as the neighbor of the good Samaritan was the wounded man by the wayside. Before giving out truth, acquire it for yourself; and do not waste the seed for your sowing.

If the words of the *Imitation* are true, you will be more a man and more with men when you are far from them. In order to know humanity and to serve it, we must enter into ourselves, where all the objects we pursue are together in contact, and get from us either our strength of truth or our power of love.

One can only achieve union with anything through interior liberty. To allow oneself to be possessed, to be pulled hither and thither, whether by people or by things, is to promote disunion. Out of sight, near the heart.

THE ORGANIZATION OF LIFE

Jesus shows us truly that one can be entirely recollected, and entirely devoted to others—entirely given to men and living entirely in God. He preserved His solitude: He touched the crowd only with a soul of silence, to which His words were like a narrow doorway for the interchanges of divine charity. What sovereign efficacy there was in that contact which reserved everything except the precise point through which God could pass and souls reach Him!

The fact is that there would be no place between God and the multitude, except for the Man-God and for the man of God, the man of truth, who is ready to give. He who thinks himself united with God without being united with his brothers is a liar, says the apostle; he is but a false mystic, and, intellectually, a false thinker; but he who is united to men and to nature without being hiddenly united to God—without being a lover of silence and solitude—is but the subject of a kingdom of death.