

## PART ONE

As a clear and untilled space thou madest the divine ear of corn to burst forth; hail, thou living table having space for the Bread of Life; hail, perennial fountain of living water.

THE AKATHIST HYMN





## EMPTINESS

That virginal quality which, for want of a better word, I call emptiness is the beginning of this contemplation.

It is not a formless emptiness, a void without meaning; on the contrary it has a shape, a form given to it by the purpose for which it is intended.

It is emptiness like the hollow in the reed, the narrow riftless emptiness, which can have only one destiny: to receive the piper's breath and to utter the song that is in his heart.

It is emptiness like the hollow in the cup, shaped to receive water or wine.

It is emptiness like that of the bird's nest, built in a round warm ring to receive the little bird.

The pre-Advent emptiness of Our Lady's purposeful virginity was indeed like those three things.

She was a reed through which the Eternal Love was to be piped as a shepherd's song.

She was the flowerlike chalice into which the purest water of humanity was to be poured, mingled with wine, changed to the crimson blood of love, and lifted up in sacrifice.

She was the warm nest rounded to the shape of humanity to receive the Divine Little Bird.

Emptiness is a very common complaint in our days, not the purposeful emptiness of the virginal heart and mind but a void, meaningless, unhappy condition.

Strangely enough, those who complain the loudest of the emptiness of their lives are usually people whose lives are overcrowded, filled with trivial details, plans, desires, ambitions, unsatisfied cravings for passing pleasures, doubts, anxieties and fears; and these sometimes further overlaid with exhausting pleasures which are an attempt, and always a futile attempt, to forget how pointless such people's lives are. Those who complain in these circumstances of the emptiness of their lives are usually afraid to allow space or silence or pause in their lives. They dread space, for they want material things crowded together, so that there will always be something to lean on for support. They dread silence, because they do not want to hear their own pulses beating out the seconds of their life, and to know that each beat is another knock on the door of death. Death seems to them to be only the final void, the darkest, loneliest emptiness.

They have no sense of being related to any abiding beauty, to any indestructible life: they are afraid to be alone with their unrelated hearts.

Such emptiness is very different from that still, shadowless ring of light round which our being is circled, making a shape which in itself is an absolute promise of fulfilment.

The question which most people will ask is: "Can someone whose life is already cluttered up with trivial things get back to this virginal emptiness?"

Of course he can; if a bird's nest has been filled with broken glass and rubbish, it can be emptied.

It is not only trivialities which destroy this virgin-mindedness; very often, serious people with a conscious purpose in life destroy it by being too set on this purpose. The core of emptiness is not filled by trifles but by a hard block, tightly wedged in. They have a plan, for example, for reconstructing Europe, for reforming education, for converting the world; and this plan, this enthusiasm, has become so important in their minds that there is neither room to receive God nor silence to hear His voice, even though He comes as light and little as a Communion wafer and speaks as soft as a zephyr of wind tapping on the window with a flower.

Zealots and triflers and all besides who have crowded the emptiness out of their minds and the silence out of their souls can restore it. At least, they can allow God to restore it and ask Him to do so.

The whole process of contemplation through imitation of Our Lady can be gone through, in the first place, with just that simple purpose of regaining the virgin-mind, and as we go on in the attempt we shall find that over and over again there is a new emptying process; it is a thing which has to be done in contemplation as often as the earth has to be sifted and the field ploughed for seed.

At the beginning it will be necessary for each individual to discard deliberately all the trifling unnecessary things in his life, all the hard blocks and congestions; not necessarily to discard all his interests forever, but at least once to stop still, and having prayed for courage, to visualise himself without

all the extras, escapes, and interests other than Love in his life: to see ourselves as if we had just come from God's hand and had gathered nothing to ourselves yet, to discover just what shape is the virginal emptiness of our own being, and of what material we are made.

We need to be reminded that every second of our survival does really mean that we are new from God's fingers, so that it requires no more than the miracle which we never notice to restore to us our virgin-heart at any moment we like to choose.

Our own effort will consist in sifting and sorting out everything that is not essential and that fills up space and silence in us and in discovering what sort of shape this emptiness in us, is. From this we shall learn what sort of purpose God has for us. In what way are we to fulfil the work of giving Christ life in us?

Are we reed pipes? Is He waiting to live lyrically through us?

Are we chalices? Does He ask to be sacrificed in us?

Are we nests? Does He desire of us a warm, sweet abiding in domestic life at home?

These are only some of the possible forms of virginity; each person may find some quite different form, his own secret.

I mention those three because they are all fulfilled in Our Lady, so visibly that we may be sure that we can look at them in her and learn what she reveals through them.

It is the purpose for which something is made that decides the material which is used.

The chalice is made of pure gold because it must contain the Blood of Christ.

The bird's nest is made of scraps of soft down, leaves and feathers and twigs, because it must be a strong warm home for the young birds.

When human creatures make things, their instinct is to use not only the material that is most suitable from the point of view of utility but also the material most fitting to express the conception of the object they have in mind.

It is possible to make a candle with very little wax and a lot of fat, but a candle made from pure wax is more useful and more fitting; the Church insists that the candles on the Altar be made of pure wax, the wax of the soft, dark bees. It is beautiful, natural material; it reminds us of the days of warm sun, the droning of the bees, the summer in flower. The tender ivory colour has its own unique beauty and a kind of affinity with the whiteness of linen and of unleavened bread. In every way it is fitting material to bear a light, and by light it is made yet more lovely.

The purpose for which human beings are made is told to us briefly in the catechism. It is to know, love, and serve God in this world and to be happy with Him forever in the next.

This knowing, loving, and serving is far more intimate than that rather cold little sentence reveals to us.

The material which God has found apt for it is human nature: blood, flesh, bone, salt, water, will, intellect.

It is impossible to say too often or too strongly that human nature, body and soul together, is the material for God's will in us.

There are many people in the world who cultivate a curious state which they call “the spiritual life.” They often complain that they have very little time to devote to the “spiritual life.” The only time that they do not regard as wasted is the time they can devote to pious exercises: praying, reading, meditations, and visiting the church.

All the time spent in earning a living, cleaning the home, caring for the children, making and mending clothes, cooking, and all the other manifold duties and responsibilities, is regarded as wasted.

Yet it is really through ordinary human life and the things of every hour of every day that union with God comes about.

Although human nature is the material which God has made for the fulfilling of His will in us, and although human nature is something we all share, and although we each have the same purpose of knowing and loving God, we do not all achieve that purpose in the same way or through the same experiences; in fact no two people have exactly the same personal experience of God; there seem to be rules of love like the rules of music, but within them each soul has her secret—with God.

Every person living is—besides being one of the human race—himself; and in order to make the raw material of himself what it is, innumerable different experiences and different influences have been used.

Here are some of the things which go towards making each human person what he is:

Heredity, environment, infant and child experience, opportunity, education or lack of education, friends or lack

of friends, and the countless unpredictable things that we misname accidents or chance.

We are often reminded that we have been chosen by God out of innumerable potential people whom He did not create. But very seldom do we think about the mystery of all the years and all the people and all the gathered memories, both of individuals and races, which have made us individually what we are.

Our life has been given to us from generation to generation, existing in each age in the keeping of other human beings, tended in the Creator's hands, a little flame carried through darkness and storm, burning palely in brilliant sunlight, shining out like a star in darkness, life in the brave keeping of love given from age to age in a kiss.

To some these ages of experience and memory have handed down gifts of health and sound nerves and a buoyant attitude to life; to others gifts of mind, talents, sensitivity. Some are endowed with a natural Christianity; others inherit dark and terrible impulses and crumbling weakness, fears, and neuroses.

It is a great mistake to suppose that those who have inherited the material for their life from suffering generations, and who have poor health and a timid approach or some vice or weakness, have not been designed and planned by God as much as others who seem luckier in the world's eyes.

Christ has said: "I am the Way," and He has been there in every generation, blowing with the Divine Breath of the Spirit on that little flame of life. He is the Way, but He is not limited as we are: He can manifest Himself in countless ways

we do not dream of. He can will to live in lives of suffering and darkness we cannot conceive of; He can choose what seems to us the most unlikely material in the world to use for a positive miracle of His love.

The tendency of our generation is to worship physical and material happiness, to set up types for the multitudes to emulate—hearty, healthy, insensitive types they are, as a rule, too; always young, usually aggressive.

These types are symbolic of the materialism of our age. They suggest a carefully camouflaged inferiority among the older people; for it is old people, frightened old people, who have set up this rather aggressive type. It is they who, in shelving their own responsibilities, their great obligation to be born again, are hoodwinking youth.

Christ is not restricted to any type: the glory of God is not more manifest in a strapping young man or woman marching behind the banner of Christianity than in one of the slaughtered innocents of Bethlehem or in the repentant thief dying on the cross.

The most striking example of the material God can and does use to manifest His glory is Lazarus.

Lazarus was not even alive; he was dead, and according to his chief mourners, stinking; but Christ used him as the material for showing forth the glory of God in a way surpassed only by His own Resurrection. The moment of His own Resurrection was secret, a secret between His Heavenly Father and Himself. But the raising of Lazarus dazzled the world.

Each one of us—as we are at the moment when we first ask ourselves: “For what purpose do I exist?”—is the material

which Christ Himself, through all the generations that have gone to our making, has fashioned for His purpose.

That which seems to us to be a crumbling point, a lack, a thorn in the flesh, is destined for God's glory as surely as the rotting bones of Lazarus, as surely as the radiance of Mary of Nazareth.

Our own experience, the experience of our ancestors and of all our race, has made us the material that we are. This material gives us the form of our life, the shape of our destiny.

Think again of the three symbols I have used for the virginal emptiness of Mary. These are each made from material which must undergo some experience to be made ready for its purpose.

The reed grows by the streams. It is the simplest of things, but it must be cut by the sharp knife, hollowed out, and the stops must be cut in it; it must be shaped and pierced before it can utter the shepherd's song. It is the narrowest emptiness in the world, but the little reed utters infinite music.

The chalice does not grow like the flower it resembles. It is made of gold; gold must be gathered from the water and the mud and hewn from the rock, it must be beaten by countless little blows that give the chalice of sacrifice its fitting beauty.

The twigs and fluff and leaves of the bird's nest are brought from all sorts of places, from wherever the brave careful mother alights, with fluttering but daring heart, to fetch them, from the distances and explorations that only the spread wings of love know. It is the shape of her breast that moulds the nest to its inviting roundness.

Thus it is with us—we may be formed by the knife, pared down, cut to the least, to the minimum of our own being; we may be marked indelibly by a succession of strokes, blows from the gold-beater's hammer; or we may be shaped for our destiny by the love and tender devotion of a devoted family.

These are but three examples. Each one can, when he has cleared out the rubble even for a day, look honestly at the material from which he is made, and ask the Holy Spirit to let It show him the way Christ wills to show Himself in his life.

Does He ask to be sung, to be uttered as the Word?

Does He ask to be sacrificed, to be lifted up and to draw all men to Him?

Does He ask to be fostered, swaddled, cherished, the little unfledged bird in the human heart?

How much can we do ourselves at this stage of contemplation? Not very much, for now, as always, most of it is done by God.

There is, however, one big thing we can do with God's help, that is, we can trust God's plan, we can put aside any quibbling or bitterness about ourselves and what we are.

We can accept and seize upon the fact that what we are at this moment, young or old, strong or weak, mild or passionate, beautiful or ugly, clever or stupid, is planned to be like that. Whatever we are gives form to the emptiness in us which can only be filled by God and which God is even now waiting to fill.



## FIAT

The Church keeps the Feast of the Annunciation on the twenty-fifth of March. There is still a touch of austerity upon the earth, there is still a silver emptiness in the skies, but expectation of spring is already stirring the human heart, the bud is beginning to break on the tree, the promise of blossom has quickened the spirit of man.

This is the season when we celebrate the wedding of the Holy Spirit with humanity, the wedding of the Spirit of Wisdom and Love with the dust of the earth.

I think the most moving fact in the whole history of mankind is that wherever the Holy Spirit has desired to renew the face of the earth He has chosen to do so through communion with some humble little human creature.

In the instances we know of, it has not been to great or powerful people that the Spirit has come but to the little or the frightened, and we have seen them made new, and known that the subsequent flowering of their lives was nothing else but Christ given to them by that sweet impact.

It is always a love story, a culmination of love between the Spirit of Light and the Bride of the Spirit.

This is something which can happen to everyone now, but it could not have happened to anyone but for the fiat

of the peasant girl in Nazareth whom the whole world calls Our Lady.

It is in Our Lady that God fell in love with Humanity.

It is upon her that the Dove descended, and the love of God for Humanity culminated in the conception of Christ in the human race.

When she surrendered herself to God, there was indeed a miraculous New Heaven and New Earth. The Spirit entered the world—light and wisdom and love, patience, fortitude, and joy entered the human heart and mind, and in the sight of God a springtime of loveliness woke in the world.

In the virginal emptiness of the girl, Mary of Nazareth, Christ was conceived; it was the wedding of God to a human child, and the wonder of it filled the earth for all time.

“He hath set His tabernacle in the sun: and He is as a bridegroom coming out of His bride chamber. His going out is from the end of heaven: and His circuit even to the end thereof” (Ps. xviii. Gradual of the Mass of Embe-Saturday in Advent).

Christ’s insistence on the power of children is very striking.

Almost more than anything else in the Gospel it proves that in God’s eyes being something comes before doing something.

He sets a little child among his apostles as an example of what He loves. He says that heaven is full of children.

Indeed, the Architect of Love has built the door into heaven so low that no one but a small child can pass through it,