



*Dear Lord,*

Today I begin my retreat.

Surely this is no news to you. (May I pause here to wonder if you prefer us to write “You” with a capital or a small “Y”? Everyone seems to be divided nowadays—printers and editors and typesetters, I mean—over whether in speaking of you in the third person, to write the pronoun He or he, His and Him or his and him. For years I paid you the willing tribute of capitals. Yet recently a very great life of your Son, published by a great Catholic firm and authored by a holy and learned priest, spelled the pronouns always in lower case. Shall I be permitted to follow his example? Thank you, Lord!)

At any rate, it is not news to you that I have this morning begun my annual retreat. I am making it in St. John’s Hospital, St. Louis, where you have graciously allowed me to undergo a physical trial in the midst of your customary lavish care and the charity of the wonderful Sisters of Mercy. They must be very dear to you, as surely they are to me.

With a slight pretense of humor, I have often spoken of a retreat as submergence. “I am submerging this evening,” I write in mild facetiousness to friends. And at the end, “Once more I emerge.” Would that it had meant that I had sunk into the ocean of your Presence, allowing myself to sense and feel that in you I am living, moving, and possessing my being. I am afraid that it had instead often enough been in a sort of coma. I have put the arms of parentheses around eight days of my life and devoted them to a saint surely not registered in Heaven’s guestbook—St. Inertia.

So, though it is not news to you that I am in retreat, it may be a surprise to the angels that this year I intend to keep in close touch with you.

Often enough in times past, the start of a retreat must have seemed almost a severing of connections with my personal Recording Angel . . . at least on the credit side.

I have sometimes wondered why. Prayer, I have told thousands of others, is simply easy conversation with the One who loves us. And surely it should be easy to talk with One who loves and is Love. Yet it remains a fact that prayer is not easy, is it, Lord? Is it hard because it often seems so one-sided? You answer with grace but not with audible replies. And sometimes words are what we want; words that say “Yes,” “Certainly,” “I have heard you,” “Go on, I’m listening.”

In response to our prayer, you are extravagant with your gifts. But we are so human; and the reply is what we crave. “Lord, I love you,” we say; and though the whole world is the outpouring of your love, we strain for the whisper that says, “I love you, too.” “I am sorry that I have done so badly,” we confess; and the voice of your priest comes with the comforting assurance that we may go in peace for our sins are forgiven. Now if an overtone to the priestly voice were your sigh of pitying forgiveness, what a difference we would . . . feel.

Yes, I know that “feel” is a poor and unsatisfactory word. But you made us creatures of feeling and surely you are not surprised when we feel sharply the need to hear your voice replying to ours.

This, I recognize, is all self-excuse and lazy demanding. Even in prayer, our conversation with you, you assure us that “my grace is sufficient for you.” But even Job the patient found more joy in your voice speaking to him from the whirlwind than from all your other gifts.

At any rate, this time I am writing to you. Do you mind?

I should like to write a letter to my Lord.

I am not quite sure whether a letter is a self-centered sort of thing or a contented sort of thing. But at least it does not expect an immediate answer. When one writes, he writes because he wants

to talk to a friend. He cannot reach that beloved person with the throw of his voice, so out from his heart through his fingers pour the thoughts he would like to share. He signs and seals, and sends, and then waits with practiced patience in a world of fairly bad correspondents for his answer. And when the answer comes, the friend have may totally neglected the questions he was asked, have failed to discuss the problems that inspired the first letter, and talks instead about things which interest him. Who cares?

The joy of writing letters is the letters themselves. The answer when it comes is like an almost completely separate and distinct joy. The original writer by that time may have almost forgotten what he wrote about. If the answerer is not careful to repeat the question, taking it for granted that the writer remembers what he wrote, his answer may not make sense.

“Regarding your problem, I’d say, ‘Don’t worry about it in the least.’”

“What problem?” puzzles the man who posed it in the first letter.

“Your question should be answered with a prompt ‘Yes.’”

“What question?” the writer wonders.

Actually it may well have been that by the bare statement of the problem, the problem disappeared; and once the question was asked, the question was already answered. Letters are probably much less for the information of the receiver than for the relief of the writer. Surely it is better to write letters than to receive them.

As you well know, either the nature which you gave me or the training which you afforded me has made me one of the world’s most prolific letter writers. As with everything else that I do, I sincerely hesitate to mention the quality of my letters. There is no mistaking the volume. I reach for a typewriter where more modern men reach for a telephone. I am afraid that often enough I have annoyed my associates by sending them a note or letter when a few steps down

a corridor might have brought us face to face for what men like to call “a chat.” With years, I find it easier to talk to a thousand people and harder to talk to one. In a large audience, one misses the boredom that may be filming the eyes of the individual on whom our conversation is inflicted.

And I surely find it vastly easier to write a letter than make an oral explanation, to solve a problem by mail than to handle it face to face.

A lot of elements that you understand much better than I, dear Lord, enter into that. They say that the English find it hard to talk out their inner emotions; yet Heaven knows they are among the world’s great and fluent writers. And there is English in my ancestry. But isn’t that just as true of the sometimes garrulous Irish? An Irishman can tell a wonderful yarn or sing the endless stanzas of an Irish ballad; yet in the heart of his family he may often be a silent, almost brooding fellow. The great love in his heart for his wife seldom seems to find expression in what we call “pretty speeches,” though he may write her a great poem or a lovely song. He’s proud of his children and often at a loss how to tell them. He can shout out amusing nothings in a crowd of strangers and sit silently over a pipe and a mug with a friend. And there is much of the Irish in my veins.

For the English and the Irish in me, dear Lord, an unaccustomed thanks. I have not thanked you before for ancestry. Now, without disparagement of any of the splendid nationalities on earth, I am grateful to you for long American tradition, for what the English ancestors of my father and the Irish forebears of my mother gave me. I could wish that I were even more a “mongrel,” with more of the traditions of your races and nations, your children across the earth, furnishing me the raw material of my character.

At any rate, I have, thanks to your goodness, found writing letters a pleasant privilege and an inspiring duty.

I have liked answering the strangers whose questions came to me over strange signatures that were never to know an identifying face. I have tried never to let an unanswered letter rest long on my desk. To the relief of my own soul, I have written hundreds, thousands of letters to friends across the world. I have liked to share the joys and triumphs even of personal strangers with a little note. It has seemed to me a matter of visiting the sick and burying the dead and talking with the prisoner in his cell when I have written in sympathy or tried to write what grief or loss or failure can mean to the enrichment of the human soul. I have not been present for many weddings; my letters have taken my place. I do not often form part of the “wake” around the dead; but I have been there with letters of condolence.

All this you know, dear Lord. Why tell you?

Well, just for the surprising fact that flashed upon me; I have never written you a letter. You are my dearest and best friend, and you have never had so much as a note from me. I have talked about myself in letters to many another friend, and never put on paper to you anything that concerned me. Oh, I have made the jottings that mark the course of a retreat. When some “light” flashed upon me, I noted it down. But that was for myself, not for you.

I have written uncounted letters of thanks, and never one “Thank You” note to my greatest Benefactor. I have written countless letters on the occasions of death and never wrote once to condole with you on the death of your Divine Son. I have hurried into the mail the notes that shared with friends some small success, which, incidentally, I may have mentioned to you in a sudden spurt of prayer. I have confessed by mail my failures and described to my own relief and the sympathy of friends problems that blocked my forward movement, detours that led me far from my goal, mistakes that were sometimes funny and often tragic, collapses which were shameful when I wrote them down and less dreadful once they had

been shared. And all this was in letters to friends . . . not in letters to my Lord.

Yet the joy and strength I have known in correspondence—couldn't they be intensified if the correspondent were yourself? ("Yourself" is what the Irish call you sometimes; does it not make you divinely smile?) If I have found talking to friends sometimes hard and writing to them always easy, might I, who find prayer hard, not find letters to you simple and fluent?

Have I missed telling you a great many things you wanted me to tell, simply because I can be diffident about small glories and mighty failures? You have written me the Divine Correspondence which is the Sacred Scripture. So I feel that if I write to you, I can interrupt my writing to pick up your answer and read it in advance. Odd, but correspondence with you would be rather strange; your answering letters were written centuries before my inquiring letters were ever penned. Or is that too human a viewpoint?

So as I begin my retreat, and with your leave, my dear Lord, I shall write to you.

Perhaps letters to you should be masterpieces of epistolary composition. But even as I wrote that collection of polysyllables, I felt your deprecating smile. You wouldn't want me to pause for words, the precise and elegant word, when writing to other friends I let my fingers fly over the portable keyboard? You wouldn't want me to write letters that smack of the classic correspondence of the 1700s when I live in the second half of the exciting, perilous twentieth century?

Actually these are letters from a son in exile.

They are field reports from a minor soldier in an endless siege.

They concern, as topical letters must, the trivialities of the year and the month and the day and the hour.

They are meant less to inform you, who know everything, than to inform myself.

You understand my feelings before I put them down on paper. Perhaps I understand them better because I do. You have given the grace that makes possible some minimal triumphs, yet you might like a report on them. You have watched with regret my wanton smashing of your plans and need no list of causalities. Yet would my apologies ring as true as I want them to read? And would I do less badly another time because I had confessed this time's mistakes to a patient Lord?

So as I think I shall write; and as I write I shall think. And my prayer will be a letter rather than words upon the eloquent air, and the habit of a lifetime can be turned experimentally to the spiritual release of advancing years.

Like a small child attempting a first letter to an affectionate parent, I make blanket apology for mistakes, whatever they may be. I confess that, like all egocentric correspondents, I shall be abnormally dull. I acknowledge in advance that my news is stale, my emotions trivial, my failures inconsequential, my successes unhistoric. Yet my letters come with gratitude and love and a desire to be known, from the heart of

Your grateful son,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Daniel". The letters are fluid and connected, with a prominent loop at the start of the "D".



*Dear Lord,*

Do you grow a little weary with the way I give good advice to others? Surely you must, for you give so much of everything else and really so little advice. Just a few wise laws, and for the rest, the common sense and judgment which ought to make good advice superfluous. Anyhow, I apologize for the vast quantities of good advice I have handed out over the years, and the little attention I pay to what I am giving others. Probably I am so fascinated with the music of my voice that I don't listen to what my voice is saying. I've heard that sometimes I advise others wisely and well; they would be astonished to learn that I take in so little of my own "wise" counsel.

I've just been thinking as this retreat starts of the time I spent in two successive weeks giving the same piece of advice to boys and young men. In succession, I gave a retreat at a boys' high school and a men's university. And both times, I found myself saying, with great feeling and sincerity:

"Boys, go home and thank your fathers!"

I think I was a little misty-eyed at the time, for I have reached the point where I can grow mightily sentimental about fathers.

Is that the sign of growing up? A sign, at least? And isn't it a little sad to reach my age and still look for signs of growing up? Emotion over mothers seems to be a thing that develops early. What they do for their children is right there for anyone to see and weep tenderly over. Even fathers are part of the chorus that lifts its hymns of praise to mothers.

Meanwhile the fathers themselves . . .

Anyhow, if you'll graciously recall, I told both groups, in words graded, I hope, to the passage of some four years from Junior in high school to Junior in college, "Go home and write Dad a little note.



Tell him you realize what he has done for you and how much you owe him. Mention two or three outstanding acts of unselfishness you can recall. And say, from your heart, ‘Thank you, Father.’ Poor chap, the surprise may be almost more than his weary constitution can take. He may look at the letters not through a mist of tears but through eyes knocked out of alignment. But he rates it. And it’s about time you appreciated your father.”

That may prove, too, that I myself, far too late to do much about it, realize one of the greatest of your gifts was the father you sent into my life. So perhaps you are not too surprised that I am a more than ordinarily ungrateful son toward you, my Father in Heaven. For I was a casual, unappreciative, grasping, thoughtless, patronizing son toward the father you gave me on earth.

Fathers are an unthanked class of human society, aren’t they? And in that they are very like yourself.

So since I gave that excellent advice to my young men-retreatants the other day, I find myself hearing the echo of that advice as I start my own retreat.

“Say thank you to your Father.”

And since you long ago took to his grateful reward the father who gave me the devotion of his life-time on earth, I lift my eyes gratefully to you.

“Thank you, Father! Thank you, very much indeed.”

Let’s see; if I were to start off to enumerate the reasons why I should be grateful, where should I begin? Where should I end? This would not be a letter. It would be the library of world science, the catalogue of the stars, the codex of natural laws, the entire record of your part in human history. It would begin when the empty void began to flow with the seeds of creation, and Chaos was first shaped and ordered according to your divine plan.

You surely know that I am no scientist. What the great minds of the scientific world write in formulae for the initiated few, I read

in Large-Letter Primers. I have never peered through the lenses of Palomar and watched space reach out beyond imagining. I have never mathematically figured the speed of a comet, the heat of a sun, the number of stars in a minor solar system, or where that unseen planet moving through outer space will be a million years from now. I just look at the stars and hear my heart singing; I open my arms and let the sun warm me like the hearth fire in a great hall. I nod when I hear the astronomers talk of the heavens, and I grow fuzzy when the physicists assure me that deep in the heart of every atom are planetary systems more wonderful than what I fuzzily see in space.

I could never prove that there are no two violets in the world alike, nor any two snow crystals on a window pane; I just know that you have made the earth a garden and covered the bare earth of winter with incredibly beautiful lace. I can only nod my agreement when a great mathematician says of you, “Whatever else you may say of God, you can say this surely: He is the greatest mathematician of all.” I can with amusement watch the artist strut a bit when he has briefly caught and copied some small sector of the beauty with which you have filled the earth and the skies and the manifold recesses of nature. When the cloth manufacturer has finished his finest fabric, he has something that copies the underside of a moss violet, or the less subtle shades of a fungus, or the iridescence of one of your lower forms of sea urchin.

A sculptor carves the flowing grace of an antelope and freezes it in stone; you touch the antelope and its grace becomes the pure dance of rhythm and power. The painter struggles to catch the smile on his model’s face, and once it is caught, gains in it an immortality. You fashioned the million faces of mankind mobile in a million smiles—not one face on canvas but the mighty mural of all mankind.

What a Father is mine!

What an incredibly magnificent Father!