

HOLINESS IN THE EVERYDAY

• **Adrienne von Speyr** •

“It is a tribute to the Father that the Son is perfect in his humanity, because the Son thereby justifies the Father’s creation. But his perfection is an act and an achievement of his love for the Father and for human beings. His love is so great that it is able to embody the Father’s holiness in human form.”



A man goes to work in the morning. He isn’t thinking of anything. He suddenly hears a popular melody in the street. He listens. Eventually, it haunts him, and he can’t get rid of it for the rest of the day. Or he hears a nasty word as if by chance. He doesn’t even know if it was meant for him. But it sticks in his mind, and he broods on it. Maybe he heard it at the same instant a car door slammed and now, whenever he hears the same noise, the word comes back to him.

There is always some weak point where our psychic life is defenseless and exposed. External influences or stimuli can shape it, color it, capture it. And most people’s everyday occupations don’t take up and absorb all their attention. They leave a whole, unused zone of inner life in them. Work doesn’t prevent a person from being able to replay a memory or ponder an idea throughout the whole day. And even if he himself realizes that he could be working more intensely or with greater dedication, no one else can tell by the final product that he was distracted or that his mind was elsewhere,

or whether he was in a good or a bad mood, or was obsessed by some *idée fixe*, when he finished his daily assignment.

But maybe, reflecting on the two days—the day when he heard the melody and the day when he heard the nasty word—he will realize with shock just how far his personal inner world was influenced by random happenings. And he will wonder whether a human being might not have the ability, after all, instead of being colored and shaped by trivialities, to live by a hidden, substantial nourishment, by an inner choice and decision, by a source that accompanies him throughout his everyday existence and makes his life an essential, Christian, and holy life. If something meaningless has such power over us, better, if we have so much energy, such deep inner chambers, which lie unused in our everyday life and for sheer emptiness are ready to serve the trivialities of the everyday, what would a life look like that offered these free possibilities to a true reality, the reality of God?

We are Christians. We believe. We comply with the Church's minimum requirements. But perhaps we do so like that man goes about his work: neatly, loyally, untroubledly. Only there's an empty space—bigger, perhaps, than the space occupied by the “precepts of the Church”—that we keep for ourselves, where we live for ourselves, where we've settled down comfortably with ourselves. But what if the Word of God were to seize the place that chance and peripheral enjoyment now occupy? The Word of God lays a claim to this sphere. It wants to live in us like God's seed lived in Mary: growing and pervading everything. We shouldn't call ourselves believing Christians if we shut certain doors of our soul to the Word. If we hold things back. If we put only a part of ourselves at the Word's disposal. Believing means: being a bearer of the Word, which in turn means, being borne by the Word—totally and always more.

Faith doesn't mean approaching the Word of God slowly, successively, in measured stages and intervals. It doesn't mean converting to the Word of God gradually, maybe according to some clever plan, perhaps beginning with what seem to be Christ's easier words in order to buy time, so that you can put off the harder ones, the ones that demand everything, for some vague “later.” Faith means risking the whole at once, immediately receiving and affirming the most unbelievable, most impossible-to-translate words. In order suddenly to find yourself, all escape cut off, face-to-face with the Absolute and, all escape cut off, to surrender to this

Absolute, this “impossibility,” the room it demands. And this room no longer has anything to do with that indifferent, slack openness to all the chances of the street. It is the inmost place in me, the place from which all the other points and spaces of my soul can be occupied and ordered. An example of this sort of word might be the Lord’s demand “be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Or God’s command in the Old Testament: “Be ye holy as I am holy.” The demand, in other words, that we cast our whole everyday existence, and all its trivialities, into God’s blessedness; that we drown our miserable sins and the vanity fair of our imperfections in the Father’s holiness. In a word: that we make room in ourselves for God in place of our self.

The one who demands this seeming impossibility is the Son of God, who knows only one will—the Father’s. Who did nothing his whole life except fulfill that will. Who, when he became man, took our everyday upon himself in order to fill it with the Father’s eternal day. Who, coming down from above, reached out of eternity and laid hold of temporality, in order to make it the vessel of eternal life, undiminished, undimmed, uncompromising. This abasement preserves his whole divine dignity: he doesn’t compromise himself by it; even as man he is holy as God the Father is holy. “Which of you can accuse me of any sin?” His way of living perfection keeps it open to us, too. Accomplishing the incredible, he invites us to perform it, although in the inverse direction. He invites us, that is, to cast ourselves up from below into this holiness, which, after all, is governed by the Father’s holiness, in order to embody it in accord with our personal character and mission.

This leap, this upward cast, is first and foremost an act of faith. When we try to understand something of the Son’s demand that we should be perfect as God is perfect, we immediately realize that it’s impossible to make sense of it from the outside, in a purely rational, purely theoretical way. People who think they know about God and about the creature, or even about the sinner, are going to find it downright absurd. If we examine and assess ourselves as we are with our bare minds, there’s only one possible conclusion: we can’t comply with this demand. If we don’t want to make the Lord out to be a liar, however, then we have to say that what he demands is possible. In a movement, an act that is performed in us by the Lord’s power, an act in which we really let the Lord perform it, an act in which—among other things—we unconditionally stop relying on our own grasping and measuring as the criterion. No believer

will ever be able to see, understand, or assert his own holiness. On the other hand, his faith equally forbids him to assert that God can't really do in him what he says. The believer leaves the clear vision, the comprehension, to God.

Holiness is a word whose truth is in God and lives in the believer only in the form of a demand. The believer can put his life under this demand like a kind of motto—Be holy! Be perfect!—but he can never consider that the demand has been fulfilled. In the end, he isn't even free to accept it; he has to. By believing, he puts his life under a truth that he has received from God, a truth that he has declared his readiness to serve. The root of sanctity, then, is obedience. The obedience of faith, a blind obedience even, which knows in its deepest core that it doesn't see, contemplate, or understand anything here by human power alone. And yet, it isn't an absurd or desperate faith that secretly knows better than God; it's a humble, open faith that leaves the hope of becoming the widest possible berth. It's like the Lord's miracles. I've been paralyzed since birth, and the Lord tells me to get up. I will get up, not because my reason has worked itself up to the discovery that faith is indeed right and reasonable, but because I receive God's Word and, on the Word's command, the faith to get up—abruptly, without deliberating beforehand whether my faith is sufficient. The power to get up lies in the believed word "Get up!" Everything meant by getting up and everything connected with it is contained in this word. I won't get up, take two steps, and then find I can't go on to a third, or that I have to become supine again. Getting up means, and contains, being able to walk. When I get up, I won't have depleted the power to get up; the demand will remain within the achievement of the act, and so will the power to achieve it. I will get up tomorrow, too, indeed, whenever the demand wills, and the demand has created a living state of getting up, of remaining in the act of getting up. Even in the everyday, the Lord gives words whose power is no different from that of his wonder-working words. They bear life in them, always as if for the first time. They enable those who accept them to live and serve the word, always as if for the first time, without any possibility of grading, of estimating proximity and distance. The word remains absolute, and the servant has no right to relativize it in himself.

Relativization would inevitably mark the beginning of unbelief, or at least of a pusillanimous faith that considers the Lord's demand to be exaggerated and unfeasible. The fact that I am

imperfect, or even the worst of sinners, is utterly beside the point. The word doesn't descend from its absoluteness because of that. It doesn't weaken, it remains the living absolute, which is absolutely alive. The refusal of unbelief can't rob it of itself. All that is asked of the believer, however, is that he place his life at the disposal of the life of the word in him so that it can have in him the power that it has in itself.

We have spent a whole day with the popular tune in our ears. We might try to do the same thing with the Lord's word. We might try to enter as deeply as we can into its holiness, which is infinitely more powerful than a melody. The melody may be beautiful, but it wears out, it becomes banal, until you can't stand it anymore. The Lord's Word always comes fresh from God's mouth, as if for the first time. And we can receive it in this closeness, this urgency, this eternal inexhaustibility and novelty. And in its incomprehensibility: for who has even an inkling of the Father's perfection? Only the Son and the Spirit know it. And yet we are to enter into it, without trying to relativize it. When we attempt to measure the Father's holiness by the holiness that we can achieve and understand; when we try to form some picture of it by adding up all the values and perfections of the world, raising them to infinity, and then saying "the Father's like that," while adding with a sigh "but even greater," we run the risk of devaluing God's perfection. Filtered through the mode of our finite cognition, it all too easily appears as a chain of little human and worldly advantages, and it loses the thing that truly sets it apart: its absoluteness, its divinity. And if we tried to act on the basis of such a calculus and thought that, by adding up a certain number, or even an infinite number, of little acts and virtues, we could slowly work our way up to God's perfection and gradually fulfill the Son's demand, we would have succeeded in doing only one thing: killing the Absolute in our life.

When someone does something good in faith, he must always also confess "as far as I am involved in this, it's nothing, it doesn't register." To think that you can eventually produce something great by adding such nothings would not only be absurd, it would be a sin against faith. It makes no sense to look for the mystery of faith in the verifiable facts of the visible world, where we can't find it. There is only one thing we can do, then: permanently put our whole being inside the absolute demand, permanently try to receive God's Word with everything in us and to await the whole answer that the Lord shapes as the consequence of his demand. To

await within an act of faith that can't be broken down into smaller bits. The command that we should be perfect carries with it the destruction of any gradation. What we do—so far as it falls within the purview of human experience—is unspeakably tiny. What tips the balance is the Lord's demand that we should be perfect as the Father is. If we reflect on whether our nothing is nothing or something, what we do stands in the way between us and the Lord's Word. The more good deeds we do that we can recognize and evaluate as such, the loftier rises the obstacle that prevents us from receiving the Lord's Word intact, that is, in faith. The good that we consider to be good can hold us back from God as much as any evil or sin.

The possibility of leaping over the abyss lies completely in the Son. He came into the world in order to bring the world back to the Father through his love. When he became man, he didn't forgo either his divine being or his divine knowledge. But his task was wholly a task of love. By the same token, it was a task of love not just in its execution, in action, but also in his mind's eye, in contemplation. He sees the Father also as man. But during his mission, this vision isn't isolated from it. It isn't a merely personal prerogative that he would use, say, in order to recoup his strength. Rather, its measure and its meaning lie in his mission of love. The Son knows the Father and sees his perfection within his only love. His vision is more state than act; it is the clear-sightedness of his love and his obedience. In love for the Father, then, he establishes the measure between God and the world and builds the bridge between them. He doesn't adapt the Father to the world, rather, he shows the world the absolute Father. And he proves by his own life that human beings can live as God expects—in love for the absolute Father. It is a tribute to the Father that the Son is perfect in his humanity, because the Son thereby justifies the Father's creation. But his perfection is an act and an achievement of his love for the Father and for human beings. His love is so great that it is able to embody the Father's holiness in human form.

The Son's holiness isn't one that comes out in quiet hours of devotion, far from the hurly-burly of the everyday world. His holiness is always equal to itself, in every situation of his life. It is equal to itself, because it is always equal to the Father. And it is equal to the Father because it always flows out of his love and flows back into it. And because he lives out this holiness of the Father as man, even going so far as to die on the Cross in obedience, he can also share it by grace with human beings. Whenever he has a demand for

men, he has already fulfilled it first himself, and it is out of this fulfillment that he gives it the possibility of being fulfilled, that he gives his word the greatest possible closeness to the Father. Man can't be any closer to the Father than in the Son's Word. And when he even demands "Be like the Father," it's as if, at that moment, he were throwing man directly into the Father's arms. He annihilates the distance by himself becoming the distance bridged over, as a Son who is also the Word.

The Lord's words were all spoken in a historical situation. In most cases we know what it was. But their validity transcends this situation: they are always being spoken *now*. This is because an eternal situation shines through the historical one, because the Son eternally bore these words in himself as an expression of his being, and because none of them contradicts in the least his eternal love of the Father. They are in some sense adapted to our historicity so that we earthly human beings can perceive them. Nevertheless, they are not adapted to the laws of our time, because they assume our time into eternity, and so don't peter out or fall flat in time. They are eternal life, because they are the Son's love for the Father and bring everything back to the Father.

Because the Scripture is a book, it has become an everyday object through which we can meet the Son's eternal Word at any time. But we don't encounter it only when we read; the Word can stick in our memory and at any moment take on life through our will. It can become the measure of our activity, the mantle of our existence, and it can put forth such vital energy that it is, in a certain sense, more alive than our life. It can constantly receive and shelter us within itself. It can do so even insofar as it is a demand; but it does so above all insofar as it is love. If this realization comes alive in us, there arrives a moment when everything urges us to attempt a complete obedience. Not merely to think often of God with devotion, not merely to keep his commandments severally, but to make the massive closeness of his absolute being the constant companion of our lives and therein to understand love and, in love, the demand for love. To remain where we haven't understood—after all, who could claim to understand the Absolute?—but also, precisely because we haven't understood, to remain in the readiness to hold out as God expects of us, it being left to him to fashion perfection out of that readiness.

And then there is the holiness of the saints in the Church. Their holiness consists in the fact that they permanently move, and

let themselves be moved, within the Absolute. That they don't understand the meaning of the word "enough." That they don't apply their own standards. That they are permanently in dialogue with God, and that in this dialogue they constantly receive their direction from God, a direction that may not always be totally clear to them, but that in any case has God's will as its goal. In some respects, the saints' lives are prolongations of the Lord's earthly life. Of course, their lives can be explained and recounted; they consist of numerous details; they bear a personal stamp. And yet, all of that is somehow secondary. The primary thing, the one thing necessary, is that their soul is ordered to God, that they let God be God in their souls, that they see everything else as a demand of this one thing. The saints, too, have their everyday, just as God did while he was on earth. But if they are really saints, then it's because this everyday became the expression of the most *uneveryday* thing, of the Father's life, of his will in and through them. The saints burn with the fire of eternal life. And in our relationship with them we shouldn't try to dampen this fire. We shouldn't trivialize them. We get to peek into their everyday. We get to look into the rectory at Ars or the Carmel of Lisieux. And so we can almost forget the holiness of the people who inhabited that everyday. We should avoid this danger. We shouldn't follow today's trend to "humanize" the saints and so overlook the greatness of the gift that God has given to Church and world in them. It's quite otherwise when we put their everyday back into the heart of their confrontation with God. Then what looks to us like the quiet course of everyday life turns out to be the continuity of God's molding them and of their surrender to his molding. Then one's attention goes, not to the relative, even when the relative is a saint's life, a saint's soul and consciousness, but to the immensity of what God is doing. Then the everyday and all that fills it is no longer anything but a framework for the other, real life of the saint, something that helps us to situate this incomprehensible fact. But even this situating is important only insofar as it leads us to God's unsituatability. The saints live in eternal life already here below. Once they cross the threshold of real sanctity, they are ready for heaven. Strictly speaking, they don't really need to live on earth any longer. If they do keep living, then it's as if they had volunteered to stay for the others in order to serve them with their love, their sacrifices, their sufferings, just as the Son voluntarily lived his whole everyday on earth, and in order to give the others their way

(Francis gives the way of poverty, Ignatius of obedience, Therese gives the Little Way), just as the Son gave us all his divine way.

Even the saints are just an illustration of God's holiness. We shouldn't ever separate the saints' holiness from God's holiness and treat it as something in its own right. The saints live by God's holiness. And because that holiness is infinite, it's impossible to compare the holiness of individual saints and weigh one's holiness against another's. Holiness is always one and indivisible, because it is in God. Just as the word and the love that open God's holiness to us are always one and indivisible. God has to be approached from above, which is to say, from his side. If we tried it from below by piling up individual acts of virtue and then at a certain point looking down at our pile as if we'd achieved something, we'd be acting like a child who climbs a chair in order to catch hold of the sun. Even the saints aren't in the first instance ladders for us. They are signs. Signs that Christ lives. They make sense only in terms of the Incarnation. They are something that's been revealed, something that's been given away. For real saints, life on earth must be a torment because they are consumed by the yearning to see God. And yet they stay, out of obedience. That's why they are so close to Christ's obedience on earth. Together with Christ they sanctify the everyday. They sanctify it actively, because their everyday is passively holy, in an action that flows from contemplation. Their life is an act of love within the Son's love for the Father.

The Son came to give the world back to the Father, and in so doing he demonstrated his infinite love for the Father. But he doesn't want to make this demonstration alone. He makes it divinely and perfectly, but at the same time openly and invitingly. As if what he does were not only his never-to-be-repeated act, but, simultaneously and absolutely, a sign of his eucharistic being and willing. He wants God the Father to be able to recognize men's love for him in the redeemed. And so he gives everyone who believes this love of his. We mustn't ever see this love of the Son as if it were something closed and settled. If we do, we act contrarily to his commandment of love. He loves us in order to teach us how to love. And in his saints this love lives with a fire that is ignited by his and is like his. And so what we perceive and grasp of the saints again and again becomes a perceiving and grasping of the love between Father and Son, which, however, can't stay on the level of aesthetic contemplation, but immediately demands our cooperation, our involvement, our joining the Son in his love for human beings. The

holiness that we can attain in the everyday comes down to this: we are invited guests, who through the Son are privileged to participate in the Father's holiness.*—*Translated by Adrian Walker.* □

ADRIENNE VON SPEYR (1902–1962) was a Swiss medical doctor.

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