

# GRACE

On the Journey to God

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## Introduction

The title of this book is very general: *Grace: On the Journey to God*. It is made up of a series of reflections on what we are likely to experience when we begin to give ourselves conscientiously to the spiritual journey. The closer we come to the end of this journey we are more probably inclined to agree with Georges Bernanos's character at the end of *The Diary of a Country Priest* that grace is everywhere.<sup>1</sup> The benevolence of God expresses itself in so many different ways as our journey unfolds. Gradually we come to realize that everything that happens in our life is somehow the gift of our loving Father. Occasionally this is apparent at the time; most often it happens in retrospect when the elements of wisdom are beginning to find a place in our hearts. This is why I have included the word *grace* in the titles of all the chapters in this book.

My aim is to be mainly descriptive, to talk about experiences we may have on our spiritual journey, and to throw in some historical or theological parallels in the hope that you, the reader, may recognize yourself in what I say and take the giant step of concluding that perhaps you are normal after all. I cannot repeat too often: what you hear within your own spirit is more significant than what I say. My aim is to help you to listen to the voice of God in your heart. So, this book attempts to be an exercise in increasing our levels of spiritual literacy—our capacity to read what is happening in our spiritual life, what the Holy Spirit is accomplishing in our souls at this time. Sometimes what we feel surpasses our powers to describe it, and this is where we are obliged to extend the scope of our spiritual vocabulary, to find words that can adumbrate what we are experiencing. It is also an invitation to look back on past

years and to wonder at what God has done in our lives. This is the frequent admonition of the book of Deuteronomy: Remember! Although we have to keep our eyes on the goal and look ahead to the future, we also have to remain in contact with the pattern of God's action in the past. This is the work that leads to wisdom—as it were to extract all the juice from what our years of discipleship have taught us.

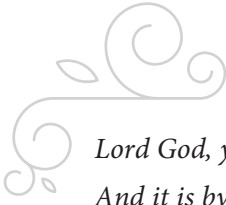
In this matter of spiritual literacy, it is always useful to operate within a tradition. This is why, over the past century, fervent Catholics have often attached themselves to one or other tradition or movement within the Church, supplementing what they received from their home parish with a formation and support that seemed to accord with their own spiritual aspirations.<sup>2</sup> You will not fail to notice how heavily I am reliant on the great writers of the Benedictine and Cistercian tradition, especially Aelred of Rievaulx and Bernard of Clairvaux. The overt references are only the part of the iceberg visible above the surface. There is much more dependence on these sources that is underneath and is invisible even to myself. This ancient and well-tried tradition may not be very familiar to you, but you will certainly discover points of contact with your own approach. There is some advantage in looking at familiar matters from a different perspective, and it is my hope that the tradition that has nurtured me these many years may be helpful to you, the reader, in your own particular situation.

This book came to birth as a series of retreat conferences given to religious communities in different countries, and some of my examples and applications are drawn from life in a monastic community. Given my own background and experience, that is probably inevitable. It is my hope, however, that the themes covered are sufficiently general to enable those in other walks of life to find in them echoes of their own experience.

The specific slant that I want to give to this book is to group themes around the word *grace*. We know that there is always a

tendency to the ancient heresy of Pelagianism wherever people are a little bit more fervent; the temptation is to put too much emphasis on what they do—sometimes with much effort—and not enough on the invisible action of God’s grace. Even poor John Cassian (360–435) was accused of being a Semi-Pelagian because his spirituality was not on the same page as that of Augustine, his more famous contemporary (354–430). So, the point that I want to emphasize is that the most important happenings on our spiritual journey are not the result of our own actions but are gifts of God, given directly or indirectly, including what may seem, at first, to be accidents, tragedies, or disasters. When we fail to detect their source we often misjudge how to respond to them. We have to restate the principle that is surely well-known to us all that what God does to us or for us is far more beautiful and effective than anything we can do to ourselves or for ourselves.

I have included a prayer at the end of each chapter in the hope that the reader may take the opportunity to stop reading and thinking and move into a different space, perhaps to take a few moments for prayerful reflection. I expect that not everything I say will be self-evident and at least some of it may seem counter-intuitive. This is why I recommend that you test what I say against your own experience. I am not infallible; your own experience of the ways of God will be a better guide than anything I write. What I propose is offered merely for your reflection. I am not interested in propounding a systematic theory of the spiritual life; what I offer is an attempt to describe some of the realities we may encounter on our journey, in the hope that you, the reader, may have more success in capturing those fleeting moments when a glimpse of something greater appears and, like the travelers to Emmaus, you find your heart burning as you walk along the road.



*Lord God, you are the origin and source of all our good works*

*And it is by your gift that they attain completion.*

*Help us all to hear what needs to be heard,*

*To understand what we hear,*

*And to do what needs to be done.*

*We ask this in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen!*

# The Grace of Discontinuity

Every journey has a beginning. Our earthly career begins when we are conceived and then we are born: both beginnings happen without our active involvement. In contrast, our spiritual journey is said to start with an act of choice on our part—even though, for many of us, our Christian initiation was simply an element in the complex cultural endowment we received in our upbringing. Whether at the dawn of reason, as Saint Thomas Aquinas seemed to think, or later, we had to make a choice to begin to follow a spiritual path—sometimes not just once but through a series of narrowing options. For some of us these free acts of will have eventually led to a deliberately spiritual lifestyle or landed us in some form of intentional or consecrated life or, perhaps, in a monastery.

In the past, the idea of a vocation was more or less restricted to those who embraced the priesthood or the religious life. Recruits often arrived at the decision to enter a seminary or a religious order through a fairly efficient delivery system: Catholic family, Catholic education, positive reinforcement for the idea of vocation, entry into an esteemed religious group. It was all so smooth—even seamless. Those who did not follow this path or those who abandoned it were considered to have “no vocation.” To some extent this way of thinking still survives. This is despite the fact that the Second Vatican Council entitled a chapter of *Lumen gentium*, The Universal Vocation to Holiness in the Church.<sup>3</sup> It is true that a



vocation is more visible in those who adopt a specifically religious lifestyle, but the fact remains that all Christians have a vocation to holiness that is both a gift and a summons.

Today the old delivery system no longer functions. Instead of a lifelong continuance of the religious conventions of childhood, living a serious Christian life more and more seems like a fairly radical reversal both at the level of values and regarding lifestyle. Making a personal commitment to live a spiritual life demands a positive choice, and usually it depends on some kind of spiritual experience that calls a person to a more fervent practice. Vocation is now more visibly a prime example of what I may call “the grace of discontinuity.”

The call to discipleship has always been a summons to make a new beginning. We see this very clearly in Saint Mark’s account of the call of the first disciples (Mk. 1:16–20). They *were* fishermen, but Jesus promised, “I will make you to *become* fishers of people.”<sup>4</sup> The two verbs are not the same. Those called are to be no longer what they were; they are to become something different. It is the end of one life and the beginning of another. The process by which this new becoming operates is twofold: the fishermen have first “to leave behind” what was previously theirs and “to follow” Jesus into an unknown future. The interior experience of vocation is seen exteriorly as the leaving behind of the past and stepping into a future that cannot be foreseen. To bring about such a dramatic change the experience must have generated a certain energy in the ones called, in order to overcome the inertia that we all experience at the prospect of taking up a challenge.

Between the past that is being left behind and the new future there is a gap that marks the definitive discontinuity between the two phases of life. We could call it a “paradigm shift” to indicate that “an entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques and so on shared by members of a given community” has been left behind in favor of an alternative worldview.<sup>5</sup> There has been a

radical turnaround in our way of looking at the world and in our understanding of our own life. The old order has come to an end. Saint Basil the Great insists that this dying to the old is an essential component in the Christian initiation to a higher life.

It is necessary, first of all, to make a break with one's past life. This is impossible, according to the Lord's words, unless one is born again. Regeneration, as its name indicates, is a second beginning of life. To begin a second time, it is necessary to finish the first. As in athletics when a double race [there and back] is run, there is a halt or a brief rest between the going and returning so, in changing one's life, it is necessary that there be a death to put an end to the life that was and to make a start with the life that is to follow.<sup>6</sup>

Most of us have a fear of change that is initiated from outside: as the old saying goes, "The devil you know is better than the one you don't know." We are grateful that the world around us is familiar and that whatever happens occurs within a familiar range of possibilities. This allows us to fly on automatic pilot—not having to think too much about the details of daily life. We are secure and comfortable, and that is a good thing, but there is a danger that our feelings of ease may degenerate into complacency, smugness, or even a type of arrogance. We become a little too pleased with ourselves. Habituation dims our powers of perception, and we do not see what could change the way we evaluate our present situation.<sup>7</sup> There is much in life that is uncertain, and it is likely that too much certainty will insulate us from the demands of reality. Experience teaches us that there is a healthy kind of insecurity that helps us to recognize the changeableness of every human situation and admonishes us to remain alert to the indications of change and to be creative in fashioning a response.

Complacency can sometimes bedevil our spiritual life. We have to be careful that we do not allow the fact that our religious practice has become more or less routine to lead us into overconfidence. Unless we have an unusually intense relationship with a competent spiritual elder or guide, we are likely to overestimate our progress.<sup>8</sup> “Ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge.” This reminder comes from Charles Darwin in his introduction to *The Descent of Man* (1871). His assertion was confirmed when, in 1999, David Dunning and Justin Kruger of Cornell University published the results of their experimental research that found an inverse relationship between competence and confidence. It seems that those who are incompetent in a particular area habitually overestimate their ability and their performance, casting the blame on external factors when results fail to meet their expectations. They do not know enough to recognize the limits of their knowledge. Those who are more competent blow their own trumpet less loudly. The more they know, the more they are aware of what they don’t know. A similar effect can be observed in the spiritual life. Beginners sometimes think they have mastered the spiritual art in a matter of months or years; veterans are more likely to be sober in their self-assessment. The more advanced we are, the less we are satisfied with ourselves and with our progress; the more conscious we are of a nagging need for some change of direction.

In addition, we need to remind ourselves of how routines operate on a moral level. They are very efficient in helping us to do things without much thought, but they can often imprison us behind a wall of inattentiveness so that we are not fully present in the actions we perform. Whether these be sins or good deeds, there is often some degree of automation involved. Even the practice of the virtues can make us blind. I can be so committed to my own program of moral rectitude that I fail even to notice that there are more urgent and more important situations demanding my attention. Remember

the judgment scene in Matthew's Gospel. Those condemned by the judge asked, puzzled at their rejection, "When did we see you, Lord?" Sins of omission are much more easily overlooked by ourselves than sins of commission. It may happen that I have constructed my own version of spiritual life as it seems right and proper to me, without becoming aware of how rigid and unseeing the end product is. Not only is this the case for hard-liners and strict observers, but the same imperviousness can also be found in those who embrace an easygoing philosophy of minimalism. In this situation, whether we are trapped behind walls of virtue or vice, we are not making any progress. We are walking around in circles. "The one who walks in a circle is moving, but he is not getting anywhere."<sup>9</sup> To continue as we are risks a loss of liveliness in our lives. Routine rules and none dare challenge its authority!<sup>10</sup>

In most cases we are happy enough with things as they are. We do not see what we cannot see. We do not know what we do not know. This is why sometimes we need to pray for the grace of self-doubt—which may be described as the Scriptures often say of fear of God, as the beginning of wisdom. Occasionally we ought to interrupt our lifelong paeans of self-congratulation and begin to wonder whether some things could be improved. We need to ask whether we have placed limits in our lives from which we need to break out: limits to our prayer, limits to our *lectio divina*, limits to our participation in family or community life, limits to our compassion, limits to our service, limits to the honor we show to others. If we are to advance on the spiritual path, it is quite likely that we will need the assistance of the grace of discontinuity—the willingness to see the need to move in a new direction and, then, to make a break.

From time to time in our life we will become aware of a call to conversion. Because this is a very familiar term there is the possibility that we all attach our own (often reductive) meaning to it. The New Testament word *metanoia* signals that the basic

component of the process is a change at the level of intellect; first of all, it involves seeing things differently. Following Bernard Lonergan we may define conversion as a change in perceptual horizons.<sup>11</sup> When we see things in a different context we begin to change our value system; we realize that a situation is not as we had supposed, and we recognize the need to reevaluate it. Usually when we know more of what is hidden we are more understanding and, as a result, more prudent and more compassionate. In time, the new values will give rise to the corresponding actions, and when the actions are repeated they cohere to form virtues. This is how our lives are gradually renewed.

The point of departure for conversion is not always a life constrained by sinful habits or by unbelief. More often it is an existence characterized by inattention. It happens that, in the providence of God, many people pass through a phase during which, after a few fervent years of spiritual living, their lives seem to lie fallow, in a state of chronic nonurgency or passivity. We let things slip, believing that we need a break, not fully conscious of how long we have let it run. For the time being the spiritual life fades into a state of unproductiveness while we attend to alternative areas of growth. This seems unproductive but, secretly, it can be a state of rest in which, unknowingly, preparations are made for what is to come. Breaking out of this state occurs when a new phase of life signals its arrival with a jolt. Unforeseen events confront us with the prophetic call: “Break up the fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord” (Hos. 10:12).

Conversion is a process by which the uncreative sameness of our life is fractured and, in a best-case scenario, we are reoriented toward becoming the kind of person God created us to become. In most serious lives, there are two or three major conversions—each of them accompanied by something akin to crisis. The exact shape these transitions take is unique to ourselves—their elements are drawn from our history and our circumstances—and

this is very often a cause of much fretting. We worry especially because we do not conform to the stereotype in our heads and we don't grasp that it is precisely to liberate us from these stereotypes that the process is initiated.

Beyond these major conversions and either deriving from them or leading up to them there are many small course adjustments to be made as we continue our journey. The winds and waves that try to turn us around never abate. No doubt that is why Saint John Cassian in his first *Conference* relays the teaching of Abba Moses on the importance of having an ultimate destination and an immediate goal so that we can take sightings as we progress and avoid wasting our efforts drifting away and then having to come back to our fundamental intent.

Conversion is, therefore, a necessary starting point for the spiritual journey. It is also a necessary device to bring us back on course when we have drifted away. Conversion is not, however, something that we can dutifully manufacture, nor is it something that we can somehow monitor or control. It is a gift, a grace; we cannot bring it about through our own efforts. Because it has its origin outside ourselves, mostly it is unwelcome. We change because, in a sense, there is no alternative. "I can do no other." Often conversion comes after prolonged resistance on our part; the same is true of many vocations.

So, then, how does conversion come to us? Following monastic tradition such as Antony of Egypt and Abba Paphnutius, Saint Aelred of Rievaulx suggests four different channels through which we are inspired to make a change.<sup>12</sup>

1. In some cases there is a moment of acute spiritual intensity unconnected with anything that is happening in the outside world. Those who belong to a faith tradition have a language to describe this experience: "a touch of God," a "stirring," an awakening, an enlightenment, compunction,

vocation. This is experienced as a surge of energy that enables us to take the step so long imagined and so long postponed. “A calling is from God whenever some inspiration has taken possession of our heart and even though we are asleep stirs in us a desire for eternal life and salvation.”<sup>13</sup> Compunction is “whatever rouses the soul, by God’s grace, from its drowsiness and half-heartedness.”<sup>14</sup> The experience is strong enough to make a lifelong impact. Those who lack the vocabulary to describe what they have experienced often spend years trying to puzzle out what it means, going from one ideal to another, never finding one that eases their restless searching. But, for all, life is not the same afterward. For those who give assent to its leading, it results in the radical change of lifestyle that we call “conversion.”

2. For others there is an attraction to some good or holy person who seems to embody the future they desire for themselves. This could be a relationship with a living person, or an acquaintance of some saint of another time. How many people have discovered yearnings within themselves through contact with Saint Therese of Lisieux or even Thomas Merton? Such an encounter “edifies”; it makes possible the building of a new life. These models serve as mirrors in which persons can see themselves more clearly: they are means by which they discover their own “deep self.” Holy people are for us living testimony that sanctity is not impossible and that when it flowers it has a power of attraction that makes others want to pursue it.
3. The summons to walk a spiritual path can come through the counsel of a wise person. This is especially potent when we feel that we are known and understood by the person giving the advice. When someone whose judgment is trusted deliberately suggests a particular path it is a means by which deep, unformed intimations are given shape and

direction. Often the person in question is unaware of the impact made by their words; what is heard is more potent than what is said. The echo resounding in the heart is the primary agent in a new sense of self that, in turn, grounds the willingness to adopt a new manner of living. When wise persons are in short supply God often makes use of baser means, such as Balaam's donkey (Num. 22:15–35). The means are not important; what matters is the resonance that is stirred up in the soul. Books, liturgical readings, and even homilies can operate in a similar way. I know of someone who was converted by a line in a soap opera, which put into words what he himself had been feeling for a long time and resisting. But hearing the words somehow, by God's grace, gave him the energy to take the step that had been staring him in the face for many years.

4. Finally, God can speak to us through disaster, when the order we have so rigorously imposed on our life is lost and we are left to pick up the pieces. Bereavement, loss of employment, family break-up, serious illness, accidents, even grave sins—these can in a single day destroy the lives we had, and precipitate us into irretrievable crisis. Like Humpty Dumpty, we find everything is broken; it is almost impossible for us to put the pieces back together in the same way they were, and so we have to create a new and, perhaps, higher integration of the elements of our life. In the process, we develop a new self-image and, maybe, a new social identity. Despite being overwhelmed by what seems to be a tragedy, this is, in reality, an opportunity to be liberated from the staleness that was beginning to mark the previous stage of our life and to venture out into unexplored territory.

Sometimes more than one of these influences is operative. The possibility of these forces affecting us in a way that produces results



largely depends on our vulnerability; the great obstacle is the condition of spiritual impermeability that the New Testament names “hardness of heart.” We will have more to say on this topic at a later stage of our reflections.

There are five somewhat distinct moments that are required for the integrity of conversion or vocation, both of which are really the effects of the gift of faith becoming active in resetting the parameters of our life. The foundation of the process is an *experience* or the accumulation of experiences that brings the person to a tipping point in which a life-changing decision is unavoidable. The second stage is a certain *illumination* of the mind in which the person begins to perceive what had previously been hidden. A door opens in what had hitherto seemed an impenetrable wall and something of the brilliance of eternal light shines upon them, calling out to them as the burning bush did to Moses. Probably Saint Paul’s subsequent teaching on the absolute gratuity of grace, independent of any worthiness on the part of the recipient, had its origin in the illumination that flooded his mind at the moment when God elected to intervene in his life. He spent the remainder of his days pondering its significance. The third and crucial step is that, at the level of free will, a person gives *assent* to what has been unveiled. This is not the end of the process. A fourth stage is *practice*, when the moment of assent is repeated and prolonged so that what was experienced begins to influence the mundane choices by which daily life is shaped.<sup>15</sup> Conversion is most often not just a lightning flash; it is more like the slow dawning of light that begins faintly but gradually permeates the whole of existence. The final stage is *stabilization*: when the effect of conversion not only embraces all spheres of activity, but also reaches out in time from the moment of impact until the end of life. Experience leads to illumination, to assent, and to practice and is crowned through perseverance.

The high drama associated with the conversion of Saint Paul should not be taken as normative. For many people conversion is

a drawn-out process that may meander through several years and be marked by many false starts and wrong turnings. Augustine took seventeen years before crossing the finishing line—even with the nagging “assistance” of his mother’s prayers. Conversion is not only an action by which change is introduced into one’s life. It has to become a state in which the change is, as it were, institutionalized in order that it may become a determinant of the decisions made in the years that follow. It is a little like the dominant political party in Mexico: the Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*). We have to have a permanent revolution, an ongoing conversion. In the language of Latin monasticism, *conversio* is translated into *conversatio* (way of life or lifestyle).

Conversion is more than a change of affiliation, going from one group membership to another. It is not done once and for all and then forgotten. It is more like a lifelong process by which we allow ourselves to be continually challenged to move out from what is familiar and potentially stale into zones of growth that are not necessarily of our own choosing. It introduces a permanent element of discontinuity into our lives that undermines our usual reluctance to do much more than we are doing at present. We have no assurance that what we will encounter on the road ahead will be the same as the situations we have already met and dealt with. The experience of conversion is necessarily fraught with insecurity. It is not a matter of passing from one stable platform to another—it is more like a leap into the unknown. No doubt this is why Kierkegaard spoke of the *leap* of faith.

This is where it becomes important for us to appreciate the role of discontinuity in our life. To some extent, when we become Christian and, even more so, if we happen to enter a monastery, we renounce our citizenship in a rational world. We become citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20). The normal laws of cause and effect no longer apply. A higher and more mysterious causality

operates: the first are made last, the lowly are exalted and the rich are sent empty away. We are in the awkward position of never quite understanding what is happening in and around us. We are drawn into a cloud of unknowing or—to use flashier language—we become involved in a process of self-transcendence that involves our coming forth from our comfort zone and entering on a lifelong journey through unknown regions. The first imperative of such a life is that we yield control. We stop trying to masterplan everything and allow ourselves to go forward guided by the hand of divine providence.

In general, there are three great turning points in the way many experience their spiritual life. We move, as it were, from nowhere to the beginning, from the beginning to the middle, and from the middle to the end. In each case the transition is difficult. In some way, these stages correspond to the three renunciations described by Abba Paphnutius in Cassian's fourth *Conference*. We are led to step aside from the normal life we had followed to take up some form of serious discipleship. Then progressively we have to eliminate the inconsistencies of our behavior so that our religion is lived from the heart and not from external restraints. Finally, we have to submit to radical self-transcendence to allow ourselves to be divinized. It may well be that the transitions between these stages correspond to what Saint John of the Cross termed "the obscure night of the senses" and "the obscure night of the spirit," but that is a question beyond my competence and I will leave it for others more qualified to judge.

Our spiritual life begins when our interior faculties are activated by a wake-up call with a persistent summons to pursue a new way of living. We have already spoken a little about this, and it is not difficult to understand. It is often marked by a certain enthusiasm and energy. This enables us to overcome our initial reluctance so that we may begin to perceive some of the benefits of the new path we have chosen. It gives us the courage

to take a first step, and then another. But the journey is much longer than that. This first conversion is a beginning, a point of departure. As such it has to be left behind. The future will be qualitatively different; it is not just a question of quantitative growth. Eventually we will discover that unforeseen hazards threaten to block the way ahead.

The second transition is much heavier. It occurs around the midpoint of life, or rather it creates a midpoint in life at whatever age it occurs, so that retrospectively there is a fuzzy demarcation between “before” and “after.” In simple terms what happens is this. In the first part of our life we live and make our choices in the context of others’ expectations. Whether we seek approval or rebel, we do so with reference to a parental figure of some kind. At first, obviously, it is our parents who, by a system of rewards and punishments (or nonrewards), train us to *do* what is “good” and so, by implication to *be* or to *become* “good,” that is, to conform to their expectations. We are considered “good” if we do what they consider good. If we do not act as expected, then we are made to feel that we are deemed “not-good.” As we advance in life others take the place of parents: educators, employers, authorities of all kinds, and maybe even friends. Religious authorities can easily slip into this role, identifying virtue with conformity to their pronouncements. We want to be “good” in their eyes. We conform to their expectations. These do not have to be spoken outwardly because, gradually, we internalize their rules so that they become our own. Many of our choices are influenced by this internal parental voice that is sometimes called the superego, and sometimes our image of God gets mixed up in this dynamism. For half our life we try to fulfill the roles others have assigned us.

Our first major crisis occurs when we begin to assert ourselves more fully, to throw off this heteronomy and become our own person. This is more profound than mere adolescent rebellion, which, after all, demands the presence of parents against whom to rebel. We feel

the need to stop being “good” and, instead, to be ourselves, without any clear vision of what this involves. We make a preferential option for the unknown. This is not so easy. In the first place it requires us to detach from the substantial affirmation that was linked to our previous persona. We can’t be ourselves unless we are somewhat free from the dominance of a need for the approval of those around us. It can happen that our self-approval plummets as well, because we have so fully accepted the roles and rules others assigned us. Because there is often a certain fractiousness in our behavior at this time, we have to deal with others saying, “You used to be so nice!” They do not like us slipping out of the mold they have unconsciously created for us. We are moving toward living more from the “deep self” and less from the “superficial self,” and we have to be prepared for the consequences. This is a second conversion; the beginning of a second journey, a journey toward greater authenticity.

The third transition moves us into high spirituality. The state of purity of heart about which the ancient monks sung so rapturously progressively renders the self completely transparent. This means that God is ever more present to the person, since there is no intervening barrier—or to express it another way, the person is more present to, more mindful of God. A collateral effect of this is that the one who is in this state becomes a channel of God’s presence and action to others—providing that the others are, at least, somewhat receptive. This is, obviously, the goal of all our spiritual striving, and it usually coincides with many years of fidelity and, as you may guess, advanced years. But progress is not smooth, and there is a great deal of discontinuity between a worthy life and its transcendent culmination.

Much of our wisdom arrives through retrospection. It is only when we have passed through to the other side that we begin to perceive the advantages of the harrowing through which we have passed. This is partly why there is less information available about these final struggles. As a result, the transition is often

rendered more difficult by the doubts that are generated by the changes in our experience. For example, we may feel a profound detachment from many of the exercises that previously seemed to bring us closer to God. Our experience of prayer may seem to be progressively emptier of content. The tenets of the Nicene Creed may seem increasingly baffling. Our faith and our devotion seem to have moved in the direction of the apophatic. Most distressing of all our relationship with Jesus Christ seems to have undergone a substantial change. We begin to comprehend what Saint Paul may have meant when he wrote, “If we have known Christ Jesus according to the flesh, we know him thus no longer” (2 Cor. 5:16).

To enter this ultimate state we must also do battle with a number of fierce demons that guard its portals. In the first place, we have to deal with the fact that (usually) we are getting old and that our life is drawing to a close. We are facing the possibility of prolonged debility and the certainty of death. The first response to the realization of this reality is often anger. This is not necessarily expressed by flaming outbursts of recrimination; it is more often a tendency to complain about things that cannot be changed. It may be tinged with an unconscious fear of exclusion or of being left behind. Usually it is a subtle and seething resentment at the inevitable infirmities and indignities of old age, being out of office, the slapdash manner in which things are done nowadays, the complexities of technologies and the obscurities of newspeak.<sup>16</sup> We can be tyrannized by a shadowy nostalgia for the times when things were better. The anger can turn in on ourselves so that we experience a sense of disgust that we are not handling things better. We are angry at ourselves for being angry.<sup>17</sup> Coupled with this anger is an invisible envy directed at those who are now in charge, for their relative youth, their energy, their insouciance, their apparent freedom. There may be a feeling of being pushed to the margins, though it is not unknown that some elders become complicit in their own alienation, cynical at any attempt at inclusion.

Trivialities may disturb our inner peace in a way that disturbs us still more. In such a situation, we need to recognize that unbroken peace is for the next life; for the present we are often called to patient endurance, though this is easier said than done. All this negativity is easily comprehensible, but it takes a mammoth effort to overcome. As Bette Davis famously remarked, “Old age ain’t no place for sissies.”<sup>18</sup>

That is a commonplace response to aging; those who overcome it attain to a certain mellowness, sweetness of disposition, and wisdom.<sup>19</sup> But there remain other shadows. Not many of our seniors—if they are honest—are ready to join Edith Piaf in singing *Je ne regrette rien* (I regret nothing). They are more likely to latch onto a line from the Canticle of Hezekiah, much quoted in the Latin tradition: *Recogitabo tibi omnes annos meos in amaritudine animae meae* (Isa. 38:15)—“For you I will think over all my years in the bitterness of my soul.” This is what might be termed “late-onset compunction.” One of the effects of a resurgent self-truthfulness is the recognition of the spottiness of past decades when apparently good actions were soiled by mixed motivations and unworthy agendas often hidden even from ourselves. We may well ask ourselves “Where have all the years of opportunity gone?” Part of the wisdom of seniority is the ability to gauge more objectively the moral quality of past actions and, in so doing, to experience a deep yet subdued sense of regret at what was done, what was left undone, and the imperfect subjective dispositions that underlay the choices made. Such an insight is not based on far-fetched feelings of inferiority or guilt, but on a profound self-knowledge and on ultimate realism in our own regard. The best indicator of wisdom is that we can face such reality with an emergent equanimity.

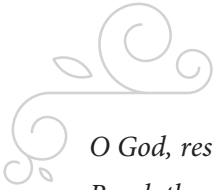
Perhaps we have witnessed such a state in others or in ourselves. What is happening? It is important to acknowledge that this is not only a normal development but also a desirable one. It means that the impregnability of our self-approval is being eroded.

It may well surprise us to learn that Saint Bernard considered the infusion of bitterness (*immissio amaritudinis*) as one of the major manifestations of divine mercy.<sup>20</sup> “The third manifestation of [God’s] mercy was when he visited my heart and brought about a change whereby what was wrongfully sweet became bitter . . . and I began at last to think over in his presence all my years in the bitterness of my soul.”<sup>21</sup> We have advanced so far on the way to truth that we become aware of the flaws in the glass.<sup>22</sup> What is past has passed and we are not able to change it, but by becoming aware of it we can change ourselves. Though we may no longer act in the way we used to, a residue of these past actions remains—and it is possible for us to take steps to neutralize it or eliminate it. “This is the summation of spiritual practice: to arrange our present wisely, to think over our past deeds in bitterness of soul, and also to make prudent provision for the future.”<sup>23</sup>

In this way, we effect a radical break with our past, we arrive at a deeper conversion that not only concerns conscious activity but also dredges up elements of our past and subjects them to purgation so that they no longer sully our conscience. As the prospect of the radical discontinuity that comes with death begins to seem closer there is a tendency to wash away with tears of compunction whatever defiles the integrity of our past. More and more we become reliant on the mercy of God and dismissive of any claim we might previously have made of merit or worthiness. This new sobriety is a retrospective purification of the soul that works to restore us to baptismal innocence. This is the transformation that brings us to the threshold of heaven. No doubt there is continuity between the way we live and what will happen to us in the next life, but death will mean the discontinuity of all that is familiar and dear, because it is the doorway to a state that will be even more precious. To grasp eternal life with both hands we must let go of what we now have. The disconnect with our own past that we are experiencing is bringing us to a point of freedom and innocence



in which our setting forth for our eternal home becomes an increasingly attractive prospect.



*O God, restorer and lover of innocence,  
Break the chains that hold us captive far from you,  
Wake up our hearts to perceive the ways that lead to you  
And strengthen us to embrace what we previously feared.  
We ask this in the name of Jesus, our Lord.  
Amen!*