

## SIMONE WEIL'S RELIGIOUS THOUGHT IN THE LIGHT OF CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

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That the Church is holy is an article of faith proclaimed in the Nicene Creed. Striking evidence of this privilege is provided by those souls who are called by God to great heights of the spiritual life. In the history of Catholicism each century has plentiful examples to offer of this intimate contact with God, and the Church has always paid especial attention to them, gladly recognizing in them one of the enduring signs of her divine mission.

Nevertheless, the Church's joy in recording the direct and consciously felt action of God on souls has always been tempered with prudent reserve. The greatest saints have themselves realized and pointed out the dangers of illusion in the higher realms of the spiritual life. Extreme caution is necessary. Such experiences cannot be accepted as authentic until they have been subjected to careful examination, and then only the supreme authority of the Church can pronounce upon their validity.

In this study we are not concerned with extraordinary manifestations such as visions, private revelations, and ecstasies; we are concerned only with that conscious form of loving and living with God which is the normal, albeit rare, apogee of a spiritual life raised by divine grace to the height of perfection. There is nothing astonishing about this sort of experience when it occurs among saints whose whole life has been developed in the faith, for visible membership in the Body of Christ carries with it participation in the favorable conditions in which sanctity should normally flourish. Difficulties begin to arise when the type of mystical experience we are considering appears to be granted to a soul not belonging to the visible community of the Catholic Church, to a soul which has not known our religion, or which has turned from it at the very moment when it believed it was receiv-

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ing the direct rays of divine light. Is such a case possible? What are we to think about it?

There are certain facts we must accept. The existence of authentic mystics among people entirely ignorant of the Catholic faith is nowadays regarded as beyond question. Missionaries from the Far East have provided evidence which cannot easily be rejected. Be that as it may, there is another fact, this time beyond argument, which raises the same question—the fact that there exist among pagans quite large numbers of souls living in a state of friendship with God but without any apparent link with the Church of Christ. Though they cannot know it, these souls do receive their spiritual riches through the mediation of the Church, whose prayers and Eucharist have a mystical influence far beyond her visible boundaries.

The existence of a life of grace in souls making no external profession of the Catholic faith raises the fundamental difficulty familiar to apologists—that of the salvation of unbelievers. The addition of mystical experiences does not raise a new problem; it merely emphasizes the degree of sanctity attainable by souls in involuntary ignorance. This is the extremely difficult case of Simone Weil. The recent publication of her notes, essays, and letters, too hastily made available to a very wide public, has made known the extraordinary life of this “agnostic-atheist” Jewess. She was a woman of exceptional intelligence and culture, familiar with Catholic doctrine, heroic in her faithfulness to the precepts of evangelical morality, favored, it would seem, with numerous mystical experiences, yet determinedly unbelieving about several essential articles of faith, and for that reason unable, right up to the time of her death, to receive baptism. She did not hesitate, moreover, to show an aggressive hostility towards certain of the Church’s attitudes and teachings. She denied the Church’s right to impose beliefs on the faithful. Finally, she propounded the notion, based on her personal supernatural experiences, that the easiest way to achieve unity with God was to refrain from any explicit act of faith and even from any intellectual affirmation about His existence.

Such an attitude is a serious matter—more serious than people seem to think. If Simone did have mystical experiences—which would prove that she enjoyed a life of grace—she constitutes the most difficult possible case of the problem of the salvation of unbelievers. Nor is

this a mere academic problem. Simone's writings are not solely a personal testimony; from this testimony is developed a spiritual doctrine which is in direct opposition to the Church's teaching on several fundamental points. How can we reconcile the spiritual life of Simone Weil with the serious deficiencies in her faith and the wilful errors contrary to the Church's teaching to which she admitted?

# I

We cannot be content with the completely negative answer, reached by disposing of the problem with an adverse judgment—a judgment which in any case no one in this world has the right to give. It could be said that Simone Weil had, by her wilful and culpable refusal, cut herself off from eternal life; that, as an “infidel” in the true sense of the word, she remained all her life in a state of sin; that her mystical experiences were no more than illusion. Nothing would remain to her credit but genius, a highly refined aesthetic sense, prodigious learning, natural virtues apparently unflawed, and above all complete sincerity, while on the debit side there would be certain eccentricities and exaggerations and a touch of intellectual pride. Such a solution, apart from being overly simple and intolerably unjust, would involve the risk of depriving us of a testimony which, if it really has any element of the divine, is a gift of Providence we are not permitted to spurn.

There is a second solution, still negative but less radical. This would admit as probable the state of grace and supernatural virtues of Simone Weil but would dismiss her mystical experiences as illusory. Simone would have believed, in good faith, that she had been in direct touch with God but she would have been mistaken or deceived. There is no lack of reasons to support such an idea; one need look no further than Simone's own psychology. There is an unmistakable tendency to regard intellectual intuition as divine inspiration. Her famous attitude of “waiting,” of which we shall speak again later, predisposed her to accept as supernatural sudden and unexpected perceptions which were by no means necessarily of divine origin. Above all, the devil himself, whose intervention in the lives of even the greatest saints is not rare, would have had the most powerful motives to cheat this soul (deprived as it was of the support given by an explicit faith) of the sacramental life and of the guidance of an enlightened spiritual

director. A diabolic illusion would in her case be an excellent means of preventing her from turning to a fully explicit faith by making her believe that she had achieved a mystical union with God by means of religious beliefs which were for the most part wrong. The terrible consequences of this illusory mysticism would probably be even greater among readers who, in all good faith, accepted her testimony. Many of them might be tempted to see in her mystical union with God the confirmation of her ideas (wrong as they were) on faith and the spiritual life.

But there are serious reasons for discounting this solution. When the devil intervenes in matters like these, he always leaves unmistakable traces of his activity. There is no apparent sign of them in Simone's writings, and the evidence of people who knew her, and who observed her closely and at length, unreservedly confirms the impression of complete uprightness, of purity, and even of profound humility. Certainly there was error, and even a certain amount of obstinacy in error, but it seems that this was previous to and independent of her mystical experiences.

The account of her contacts with God which appears in the autobiography addressed to Fr. Perrin plainly confirms this interpretation. Its extreme soberness and its pure and radiant transparency are a reflection of the divine. Listen to her own words:

It was during one of these recitations [of George Herbert's poem, *Love*] that, as I told you, Christ himself came down and took possession of me. . . . Moreover, in this sudden possession of me by Christ, neither my senses nor my imagination had any part; I only felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of a love, like that which one can read in the smile on a beloved face.<sup>1</sup>

Later, during an attentive recitation of the Our Father, the experience is renewed:

At times the very first words tear my thoughts from my body and transport it to a place outside space where there is neither perspective nor point of view. The infinity of the ordinary expanses of perception is replaced by an infinity to the second or sometimes the third degree. At the same time, filling every part of this infinity of infinity, there is silence, a silence which is not an absence of sound but

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<sup>1</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Putnam, 1951), p. 69.

which is the object of a positive sensation, more positive than that of sound. Noises, if there are any, only reach me after crossing this silence.

Sometimes, also, during this recitation or at other moments, Christ is present with me in person, but his presence is infinitely more real, more moving, more clear than on that first occasion when he took possession of me.<sup>2</sup>

It should be noted that in the first case quoted above Simone expressly excludes participation by the senses and imagination. Her experiences seem to be strictly limited to the domains of pure intelligence and love. Now theological teaching is that in these domains the devil cannot act directly on the soul. Without being decisive, that is one very good reason for discounting the theory of diabolic illusion. Besides, descriptions like that are not imagined and everyone who knew her agrees that Simone was incapable of lying. In any case, the bare admission in this second possible solution that Simone Weil enjoyed a supernatural life of grace and charity poses in all its force the problem of reconciling such a life with her errors in matters of faith. The mystical experiences add nothing essential to the problem and there is therefore no a priori reason to reject them.

There remains, therefore, only one acceptable way of stating the problem: to admit as probable (for there is no certainty in these matters, except perhaps in the case of canonized saints) that Simone, in spite of her doctrinal shortcomings, lived, at least during the time she had her mystical experiences, a lofty supernatural life, since she did attain at times to a union of love with God. What then are we to make of her errors?

One is tempted to reduce them to the inoffensive minimum, a simple historical mistake about the Jewish people and the Catholic Church and a failure to grasp the doctrine of the constitution of that Church. All the rest could be written off as unimportant misunderstandings. According to his preface to *Gravity and Grace*, this is the stand taken by Gustave Thibon, who prudently disclaims any pretensions to theological competence.<sup>3</sup> On the whole, a quick reading of the aphorisms which make up this book confirms such a judgment. Unfortunately, one is apt to forget that these thoughts were selected and arranged by M. Thibon. When one compares them with the works

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), Introduction, p. xxix ff.

later published over her name, one is struck by the sharply different impression they give. The highest motives impelled M. Thibon to make a selection from the loose notes he received and to arrange them methodically. One gets the impression that the selection, guided by a very praiseworthy prudence, has unintentionally attenuated what might otherwise have been a little too much for the faithful to swallow. A more detailed study would perhaps show us that the editor has used this means to give us a truer and more intimate picture of Simone. We shall soon see that all that is most profound and true in her lies hidden in the rough ore of error. Only someone who knew her and whose competence is beyond question has the right or the means to separate the gold from the dross.

Not being in the privileged position of M. Thibon, I believe we must confine our attention in the main to her writings as she herself left them in her notebooks and as they have recently been made public. Despite the veil of so much error which hides the best in them, they remain transparent enough for us to discern the supernatural riches of a soul which, in spite of its shortcomings, undoubtedly received signal favors from God. We shall devote the second part of this study to the difficult task of making the distinction between the obvious serious errors which swarm (I do not think the word is too strong) from the pen of Simone Weil and the nucleus containing the precious germ which, once isolated, has the most magnificent lights and reflections. For the moment we shall limit ourselves to admitting and, as far as possible, explaining the antithesis between Simone's genuine interior life and her denials of fundamental matters of faith.

According to traditional Catholic theological teaching, no supernatural life is possible without a minimum of objectively explicit faith in the existence of God and His rewarding providence. Now Simone Weil has declared on several occasions that before her experience of union with Christ she had always maintained a complete abstention from any intellectual judgment on the existence of God. "As soon as I reached adolescence, I saw the problem of God as a problem the data of which could not be obtained here below, and I decided that the only way of being sure not to reach a wrong solution, which seemed to me the greatest possible evil, was to leave it alone."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *Waiting for God*, p. 62.

During the whole of her life she continued to believe that for a soul which has not yet experienced contact with God, the attitude most favorable to this contact is one of complete agnosticism with regard to the intellectual problem of God. She herself on several occasions referred to this intellectual position (which was for so long her own and which, according to her, is the ideal position for beginners), denominating it "atheistic agnosticism."

She emphasized it particularly in her autobiography in terms which leave no room for doubt: "I was brought up by my parents and my brother in complete agnosticism and never made the slightest attempt to get away from it. And, rightly in my opinion, I never had the slightest wish to do so." We shall come back to this "atheism" later, but it is important first of all to fix Simone's attitude towards the problem of faith as it is presented by the teaching of the Catholic Church. To her the Church's teaching seemed neither rational nor useful; on the contrary, it appeared to be an obstacle to union with God.

But to add dogma to this conception of life [the Christian conception], without being forced to do so by indisputable evidence, would have seemed to me like a lack of honesty. I should even have thought I was lacking in honesty had I considered the question of the truth of dogma as a problem for myself or even had I simply desired to reach a conclusion on this subject.<sup>5</sup>

The special function of the intelligence requires total liberty, implying the right to deny everything. . . .<sup>6</sup>

He who has not heard this word [the word of God in the secrecy of the soul], even if he adheres to all the dogmas taught by the Church, has no contact with truth.<sup>7</sup>

. . . my vocation imposes upon me the necessity of remaining outside the Church, without so much as engaging myself in any way, even implicitly, to her or to the dogmas of Christianity. . . .<sup>8</sup>

. . . that my thought should be indifferent to all ideas without exception, including for instance materialism and atheism. . . .<sup>9</sup>

She taxes with totalitarianism the Catholic idea of faith, which she describes in the following terms: "Unconditional adherence to the Church. That is what St. Thomas, as well as the Catechism of the Council of Trent, calls faith."<sup>10</sup> A few pages later she calls this faith

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>9</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> *La connaissance surnaturelle* (12th ed.; Paris: Gallimard, 1950), p. 79.

"social idolatry."<sup>11</sup> She copies word for word a paragraph on faith from the Catechism of the Council of Trent and adds the abrupt and brutal comment, "Bad!"<sup>12</sup>

It is therefore not only the content of the Catholic faith which she rejects but our whole concept of faith and the manner in which we exercise it. She rejects all idea of a submission of the intelligence to a divine authority exercised by the Church. To my mind this attitude constitutes the most powerful argument against the reality of authentic supernatural life in the case of Simone Weil. The deviation—rather, the opposition—is found right at the basis of her concept of the religious life; this deviation shows up on every page of her work, even on the most moving ones. Quite often also, on account of this permanent undertone, certain passages which seem perfectly good to us (because we interpret them in a Catholic context) have actually quite a different, and in fact erroneous, meaning.

Faced with this "black list," in which we have made no attempt to minimize anything which adds to the difficulty of our problem, we are strongly tempted to give up the attempt and to leave to God alone and His infinite mercy the task of solving a problem towards the solution of which the available data give us no lead. It is certain that all Simone's assertions which we have just quoted on the subject of atheism and the Catholic faith are errors which we are bound to reject. However, the writings of Simone are so transparent that it does not seem completely hopeless to try to discover therein indications of the action of grace and of the private dispositions which made it possible. Let us come back, first of all, to Simone's "atheism." M. Thibon has given us on this subject a text which even by itself can calm some of our fears:

A case of contradictory truths. God exists: God does not exist. What is the problem? I am perfectly certain that there is a God in the sense that I am certain that my love is not an illusion. I am perfectly certain that there is no God in the sense that I am certain that there is no real being resembling the conception I have when I use the word *God*. But that which I cannot conceive is not an illusion.<sup>13</sup>

I believe St. Thomas Aquinas might have put his name to such a formula of "atheism," though he would have noted at the same time

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>13</sup> *Gravity and Grace*, p. 103.



that there was nothing really contradictory about it. It is true that Simone gives it a meaning which St. Thomas would not have accepted, since for her nothing real, absolutely nothing, corresponds to what we conceive under the appellation God, whereas in Christian philosophy our concepts allow us not only to reach certainty about the existence of God but also to have some imperfect yet objective knowledge of Him.

In the text which M. Thibon quotes immediately afterwards, Simone remarks that there are "two atheisms, of which one is a purification of the notion of God."<sup>14</sup> But St. Thomas also recognized the need for a "way of negation" to purify any assertion we make about God. When we have said that God exists, we must always add that He does not exist in our way of thinking of existence. It is a part of our approach to transcendence, which affirms the existence of a God greater than anything we can conceive of Him. Undoubtedly, Simone exaggerated the negative side of this concept and did not see beyond it on the plane of conceptual intelligence. This extreme position is based on a false notion of knowledge and certainty, which in her view can only result from a real and immediate contact with the object. She held that to rise above atheism one must experience God, and said on several occasions that only mystics had ceased to be atheists.

But Simone has revealed the existence in herself of a psychological act, or rather a permanent attitude, which implies, without any verbal expression or clear-cut formulation, a profound belief—nay, a faith—in the reality which she considered as conceptually unknowable, the reality we call God. This belief of hers has an experimental basis; it is the recognition of her own misery, her own impotence, what in philosophy we should call her contingency (i.e., the fact of existing without having any inherent right to exist).

Moreover, from the start of her spiritual life Simone really believed that she had a call, a vocation, an obligation which required her to adopt an attitude basically Christian. She submitted to it immediately and unreservedly.

... I never hesitated in my choice of an attitude; I always adopted the Christian attitude as the only possible one. I might say that I was born, I grew up, and I always remained within the Christian inspiration. While the very name of

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<sup>14</sup> *Loc. cit.*

God had no part in my thoughts, with regard to the problems of this world and this life I shared the Christian conception in an explicit and rigorous manner, with the most specific notions it involves.<sup>15</sup>

From the start she had a feeling of obligation which was not only moral but also religious, in the sense that she saw herself as required to perform actions impossible for human nature alone. Only a superior strength, a supernatural strength, would allow her to perform them. She placed herself thus unmistakably in a supernatural perspective. Everything she did, in fact, implied the existence of an Absolute, a Creator of the material world and of souls, who gives to the latter the feeling of having a supernatural duty and (in the measure that they submit, wait, and consent) the supernatural means necessary to carry it out. This certainty, finding concrete expression in a submission which aimed at being complete and absolute, was by no means hindered by her awareness of her own misery. On the contrary, it was her misery which seems to have given divine supernatural aid (soon to be called love) its great opportunity. In this attitude it is possible to recognize, implicit but real, an imperfect form of the initial movement of the soul towards faith and justification described by the Council of Trent (Session VI, Chapter 5).<sup>16</sup> There is a certain faith in God and His supernatural providence in the attitude of "waiting on God" which is the primary and fundamental attitude of Simone's soul. No one had a greater sense of God's mercy. Later on we shall have to make considerable reservations in the matter of her exclusion of the idea of merit and reward; even so, she believed in a rewarding Providence which gives to each faithful soul what it has caused it to desire.

How is it that this attitude did not lead Simone to a *fides ex auditu*, the intellectual adherence accorded to an explicit revelation, which would have broadened into a profession of the Catholic faith? The reason is that there was the obstacle of an intelligence at one and the same time extremely alert and yet hindered in its objective development by a mass of faulty prejudices and, most of all, by a wrong concept of knowledge. This was an obstacle all the more insurmountable

<sup>15</sup> *Waiting for God*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>16</sup> Denziger-Bannwart-Umberg, *Enchiridion symbolorum* (ed. 24-25; Barcelona: Herder, 1948), n. 797.

because it concerned an intelligence sincerely and unyieldingly attached to what it considered to be the basic and immutable laws of thought. On account of this prejudice, faith was to her something that could be neither visualized nor expressed and, more serious still, something which could never be acquired by external instruction. If this attitude had implied any ill-will or culpability on Simone's part, it would have constituted an obstacle to any spiritual life. However, it seems that in fact she did not incur this responsibility in the initial disaster which closed her mind to the reception of any divine revelation conveyed by the verbal and conceptual teaching of a human intermediary.

By contrast, in her innermost soul there was complete submission to everything that was recognized as a call or a duty coming from a transcendent other world, in itself unknown. Such submission is partly natural: submission to those circumstances of our life which are beyond our control (acceptance of the laws of the universe and the expressions of the divine will which we call "necessities"), absolute submission to the natural moral law and to the obligations imposed by social conditions. But there is also something of the supernatural in this submission when the soul is aware of an interior inspiration within itself of which it recognizes the absolute value without explicitly knowing its origin. Simone often describes this inspiration in the form of an attraction exercised by an absolute supernatural good, which for her is the only good. Later she gives it its true name of supernatural love, which she conceives to be not so much the love of the creature for God as the love of God Himself informing the creature in order that the creature may share in its own motion. The submission of the natural faculties (understanding and will) to this absolute good, to this supernatural love, is what constitutes faith for her. This submission is "waiting," desire and love; it is based on one absolute certainty, that a real desire for the real good is never in vain. In other words, God never refuses Himself to anyone who, by reason of grace, consents to desire Him: those who ask for bread are not given stones. To end with, we must quote from her *American Notebooks* a passage which gives the most recent expression of her thought on this matter.

That God is goodness is certain. It is a definition. That in some way—unknown to me—God is reality, that too is certain. These are not matters of faith. But to

believe that each thought by which I desire the good brings me nearer to it, that is faith. I cannot know this except by faith. And even when I have known it, it still is not a matter of established fact but remains a matter of faith.

Since the possession of goodness consists in desiring it, the object of the article of faith in question—and it is the sole article of true faith—is the self-multiplication of every desire for the good.

The mere fact that a soul desires this goodness purely, truly, and exclusively with a part of itself, means that at some later time it will desire it with a greater part of itself . . . unless it refuses its consent to this transformation.

To believe that is to have faith.<sup>17</sup>

Do not let us misunderstand the meaning of this desire: it is the desire for a real good and therefore, for Simone, the desire for supernatural good, and cannot be achieved without supernatural aid. The passage quoted gives a very elevated view of the intimate personal aspect of faith.

We must, however, recognize that this personal aspect is only a part of it. To make this concept of faith the sole guiding principle of one's whole spiritual life is to destroy the foundations of Christianity and open the door to illuminism. It is, unfortunately, to render oneself inaccessible to all external apostolic action. Religion is reduced to pure mysticism without any exterior control or guidance. The soul can only be moved from within by God Himself and rejects in advance any step which it does not feel a supernatural interior call to take. The whole attitude of Simone, right up to her death, stems from this initial lack in her.

This lack did not, however, have for Simone all the disastrous effects which it might have had. Since it was the result of an intellectual obstacle which did not involve any wilful fault, it did not constitute an absolute barrier to divine grace. In spite of this imperfection, which had no taint of sin, God took the initiative in a work of grace. In effect, He gave to Simone's innermost soul the first impulse, the first attraction, which she welcomed without knowing its source, knowing only that it did not derive from her own will but from a transcendent otherness to which she owed absolute submission. This divine initiative is all the more outstanding in her case on account of the deficiency in intellectual light which, in the ordinary way, would be rendered supernatural by explicit faith and would have accompanied the grace.

<sup>17</sup> *La connaissance surnaturelle*, p. 275.

Simone was faithful to this first grace; by its help she did all that it was possible for her to do, and God continued to give her interior guidance to make up for what is normally the work of the mind and of explicit faith. We have two indications, which it would be difficult to refute, that this (too exclusively) interior faith of Simone's did implicitly embrace the mystery of Christ. The first of these is the fact that from her first contact with the Gospels Simone recognized that her interior life had been, unknown to her, a really Christian life. The second is that Christ revealed Himself to this soul in a mystical experience of love. In spite of so many deficiencies, there was at the root of Simone's spiritual life an element of faith sufficient, with God's grace making up for what was lacking, to allow her to make the act of supernatural charity necessary to purify her soul and place her in a state of friendship with God. That is, we must believe, the only explanation of how this soul could have attained the mystical union of love which marks the approach to supernatural perfection.

Let us conclude this first study with a brief recapitulation. Simone's case remains an exceptional one and one that can never be regarded as a normal example of Christian life. The path she followed was valid for her alone, taking into account all her circumstances. It would be false and dangerous for others to imagine that their circumstances are the same. Any sincere unbelievers or non-practicing Christians who think to find comfort in her example must first satisfy themselves that their prejudices and their ignorance are really invincible and that there is no taint of culpability. They must be able to say, like Simone, that they have been faithful to interior grace to a heroic degree. Lastly, they must see whether they have followed her example in adopting a Christian attitude which has done more than merely make them behave like well-brought-up people. This attitude should also have led them to a practice of continuous asceticism, renunciation, perfect charity, daily meditation on the Gospel, attentive attendance at Holy Mass and the Divine Office (like that of Simone at Solesmes in 1938 when "the thought of Christ's passion entered into her once for all time"), and lastly to that intense love of the Blessed Sacrament which is perhaps the most reassuring thing about the last phase of Simone's life. Most people who managed to keep pace with her that far would find no difficulty in embracing explicitly the entire beliefs of the Church.

There is one other reason for not allowing Christians to take Simone as a model of the spiritual life: that is the initial error which closed her mind to explicit belief in the Church and in the long run influenced all her religious thinking. Perfect sincerity, genius, even supernatural love, cannot make truth out of falsehood. In the second part of this study we shall see the striking contrast her errors make with the treasure of goodness and beauty which constitute the only acceptable part of her most moving testimony.

## II

It is not without a certain hesitation that one approaches Simone Weil's work with the object of setting its content alongside the fundamental truths of philosophy, and one has even greater scruples about confronting it with the teachings of the Catholic faith. Simone herself would have been the first to disallow such a comparison. Was she not constantly setting her conception of intellectual liberty against any *a priori* compulsion or doctrinal authority? Moreover, in confronting her writings with a system of teaching from which she deliberately remained aloof, is one not running the risk of forcing them into a rigid framework which will distort and falsify them? The great danger here lies in taking ideas having their origin and development in an atmosphere of phenomenological psychology and placing them in a content of ontological realism inspired by Aristotelian philosophy. The difference between these two systems is not just one of vocabulary; the whole thought content is different. To avoid misrepresentation one would have to translate one into the terms of the other, and even then one would risk being led astray by a faulty translation.

We shall therefore not waste time on the impossible and useless task of making a literal comparison between Simone Weil's texts and the theses of theology or Christian philosophy. We shall deal only with certain fundamental points in her thought and try to see the extent to which they can be reconciled, not with a scientifically elaborated philosophic system nor even with the canons of a Council, but with the primary self-evident truths of common-sense and with what the Church has received from Christ's own lips. For it was in the name of truth and of Christ that Simone, too, purported to speak.

Straightway Simone brings us up short—she is a mystic directly

instructed by God. Her experience is therefore infallible and beyond all human question. Has God not the right, if He so wishes, to speak in a language different from that which He used to express the public revelation confided to the Church? By what token has the latter any right to pronounce upon the intimate confidences Christ makes to His friends?

Let us first of all dispose of the basic error of this plea in bar. God does not speak in different languages to mystics and to the Church, for in real mystical experiences (we are not talking of visions and prophecy) God uses no language at all. He manifests Himself in a contact of pure love in which there are neither words nor images nor, it seems, ideas. Words and thoughts are the means used by the mystic when trying to analyze and express the experience. Normally, therefore, the mystic when expressing himself will make use of ideas and words which are familiar to him.

It goes without saying that these words and ideas are not necessarily taken from the ecclesiastical vocabulary of Christian dogma. Nevertheless, so long as the words used remain close to the experience they describe, they cannot expound notions of the Divine Being contrary to those taught by the Church. The Church is not merely the first of all mystics, receiving her revelation from the lips of the Word Incarnate; she is also the infallible mouthpiece for the transmission of this revelation and is guaranteed from error by the perennial support of the Holy Spirit. She cannot be mistaken in matters of faith.

By contrast, other mystics (we exclude the sacred authors), even after entirely authentic experiences, are not infallible and can be mistaken in their account of their experience and still more in the rational interpretation of their relations with God. Only the Divine is infallible; anything added by man runs the risk of deviating from the truth, and the more personal thought man gives to it, the greater is the risk of deviation. An absolutely direct, simple, and unornamented account has a very good chance of being true. Deductions, attempts to explain, a great deal of thought and imagery, all tend to open the door to error. What verification can there be of these accounts, then, except by putting them alongside some certain knowledge, either that of natural reason when all the relevant facts are knowable, or that of the Church when it is a matter within the scope of her infallibility?

One does not, of course, reject the evidence of a mystic just because he does not use the same vocabulary as the theologians. We are not concerned with the words themselves but with what they are intended to convey. It is perfectly possible that private revelation may make known something which is not embodied in the explicit teaching of the Church. The over-all perspective of collective revelation is a very different thing from the intimate personal point of view engendered by an intimate union of love in the depths of the soul. Nevertheless, any divergences between the two revelations can never amount to real contradictions. God is absolute truth and, whatever Simone Weil may have had to say about it, truth in its singleness and perfect simplicity never contradicts itself. Not even the most unfathomable mysteries of the faith contain any real and serious contradiction; the occasional appearance of contradiction is entirely due to the limitations of our understanding.

From the above considerations we can draw the following conclusion of capital importance. Every time a real contradiction between the evidence of a mystic and the teaching of the Church is apparent, we must admit either that the mystical experience was illusory and had nothing of the divine in it, or that the mystic has added some human error to the evidence of authentic experience. It is not always easy to decide between these two alternatives: only an experienced spiritual director, wise in the interpretation of souls, could prudently give judgment. Based on my faith in just such a judgment, I have accepted the probability that Simone's experiences were genuine. We are then faced with the second alternative each time her thought comes into conflict with the truth as taught by the Church.

We need not be surprised if we are constantly coming upon this situation in her writings. Simone was not only a mystic; she was also a great reasoner who never ceased turning her thoughts over from one day's end to another. Unfortunately, her philosophy rests on an intrinsically unsound foundation. It is therefore to be expected that, even after a genuine mystical contact with God, she would be unable to express her experience, even less to relate it to the rest of her intellectual life, without a generous admixture of error.

One remarkable fact in her writings seems to confirm the point we have just made. Throughout her work, in the midst of page after page



of writings more or less contaminated, one comes across one which is purer and full of light and freshness. For the moment, the imperfections of the interpreter are lost and the highest part of the soul is allowed to find expression with so true an accent and so perfect a transparency that it is difficult not to recognize the evidence of God's presence. Though it is by no means infallible, a sign like this taken in conjunction with a life of asceticism and heroic charity is almost unchallengeable.

That being so, how are we to answer Simone's plea that the Church was not competent to judge? We can make her one concession—the divine, transcendent element of mystical experience, when it is genuine, is not subject to the judgment of the Church. But it is for the Church, if she thinks fit, to recognize or deny the genuineness. More, the conceptual and verbal expression given to the experience, and the interpretations and deductions made from it, are human actions into which error can easily slip. These are therefore properly subject to the verification and judgment of the Church.

The idea that an individual who has reached the height of mystical union with God can put the divine favor forward as a guarantee for all his thoughts and philosophical, moral, and spiritual teachings is quite unacceptable. We can, therefore, even while we do not necessarily reject all the mystical value of Simone's testimony, draw a line in her writings between the truths, which may have resulted from an intimate relation with God, and the errors, which certainly came from some other source.

A thing that is most noticeable in Simone's writings is the considerable space devoted to a sort of perpetual contradiction in her thoughts, her actions, and her attitudes. A portrait of her would be just an assemblage of contradictions. She was atheistic yet mystic; a Jewess yet passionately anti-Semitic; attached to the Catholic Church yet very hard on it; an artist of genius yet careless how she presents herself and of her personal appearance. Her intelligence was unceasingly at work, yet she underestimated the value of reason; passionately devoted to humility and renunciation, she obstinately refused the guidance of friends and the services of a spiritual director.

She also seems to have had a mania for contrariness. In almost all problems she seems instinctively to have chosen the answer contrary to the general consensus. Her original interpretations of Scripture

show up this trait in high relief; one has only to look at her reading of the story of Noah's three sons or her interpretation of the parable of the prodigal son.

It is no mere chance that this motif occurs throughout her work. She herself saw contradictions everywhere. One is tempted to say that she went out looking for them—or, if that is not quite the right word to apply to her, that she “waited” for them and never let one pass unnoticed. Even more, confronting a direct contradiction was, to her way of thinking, the best possible thing for the human intelligence, just as a completely insurmountable obstacle was the best thing for spiritual development. In this connection one should read the two chapters of *Gravity and Grace* called “The Impossible” and “Contradiction.”<sup>18</sup> Here, in any case, are some of her statements: “Human life is *impossible*.”<sup>19</sup> “Our life is impossibility, absurdity.”<sup>20</sup> “The contradictions the mind comes up against—these are the only realities: they are the criterion of the real.”<sup>21</sup> “All truth contains a contradiction.”<sup>22</sup> A passage from the American Notebooks gives us the origin of this tendency: “Plato’s scale of cognition [from perception to dialectic] has this significance alone: to prepare the intellect to rise to the point where it can grasp the simultaneous truth of contradictions.”<sup>23</sup>

What result can be expected from this philosophy of the absurd? Nothing, apparently, save scepticism. But that is not Simone’s idea. For her, the absurdity which is an obstacle in our way of thinking and acting is a lever by which the soul is to be raised to a higher plane. It puts us in a position of having to “wait” for an infinitely greater transcendent force or light which will resolve the contradiction or the impossibility. This light or force constitutes the supernatural, which is essentially love (love of God, she specified later). And it is a divine gift which we can neither procure nor attain to on our own; God alone can give it to us. So long as we are without it, all that is real seems absurd to us and all good is illusory and vain; real good can be seen by us only as something unattainable by our own unaided powers. This would be the gift made to Simone, “agnostic atheist” as she was,

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Gravity and Grace*, pp. 86–93.

<sup>20</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>23</sup> *La connaissance surnaturelle*, p. 50.

the day that God, in response to her "waiting," came down and filled her with His supernatural light.

What are we to make of such a philosophy and of such a method of disposing of the absurdities which baffle our reason? One's first instinct is to reject out of hand a construction based on a premise which is irreconcilably opposed to reason, does away with all possibility of thinking or doing, and is the negation of the principle of non-contradiction, first law of realism and rational thought.

We must be chary, however, about such a drastic judgment. To do justice to Simone's method, we must put ourselves in her position. She maintained (and this is where she really goes wrong) that human intelligence, by its natural limitations, is incapable of knowing anything beyond the material actualities of the physical world in which it lives. Now God is outside this material sphere. Therefore, for anyone capable of knowing only the finite realities perceptible by the senses, one must admit that the whole world is a contradictory enigma: it is something which exists but has no right or reason to do so. If everything real is contingent, then everything real is absurd. To escape this absurdity, sound reasoning leads one to posit a necessary Being, a God, who is the *raison d'être* of everything. This approach, however, will not do for Simone. It would be a verbal, a conceptual solution without any real value, and in her view we must therefore resign ourselves loyally to the absurd and admit that our reason cannot explain it away.

We can escape it, however, if we know how to desire and to "wait." For what? That one does not know; if one did, there would be no problem. To "wait" without knowing whether there is anything to wait for, to wait naked and without object, that, without our knowing anything about it and vastly to our surprise, will give us God. The mere action of desiring Him, in fact, will give Him to us because, clearly, if He did not exist there could be no such desire. But if we remain faithfully "waiting," He will reveal Himself clearly, He will show us that this desire, this love which causes us to wait, is no work of ours but is His doing; it is His own love which passes into us, for God alone can love God. To be aware of this love is to make a genuine contact with God, and thereby we shall resolve the contradictions which our intellect has confronted.

This method is not without its defects and its dangers; it is not, however, the complete tissue of contradictions that it at first appears. It seems that for Simone at any rate, who followed it with faithful heroism, it brought results. She does seem to have attained actual knowledge of God through supernatural love. We must beware, however, of accepting this process as normal or general and we must bear in mind that the results are not really certain. In most cases it would result in utter failure. It would open the door wide to pseudo-mysticism. For Catholics, it would entail disregarding the teaching of the Church and would jeopardize our faith. Modernism itself would be at home in this system.

Moreover, though Simone's supernatural knowledge enabled her to resolve the contradictions which human reason could not, she was only to find herself faced on a higher plane with new ones just as insoluble. She believed that the mysteries of the faith were strictly contradictory. It is true—and we are constantly compelled to come back to this—that she judged purely the appearances of things, the phenomenon as psychologically perceived. Even from that angle, however, it is a mistake to assume an absolute and evident contradiction between the natural and the supernatural, between reason and faith. The Vatican Council has solemnly proclaimed that there is no disharmony between revelation and the natural truths accessible to mankind. When Simone, therefore, accuses all who try to reconcile reason with faith of being heretical, she is completely on the wrong track. The heresy would be to explain away the mystery, to show positively that there is no contradiction; by contrast, the task of the Catholic theologian is to show, negatively, that the apparent contradictions of our religion are never clear or certain and that there is a means, unknown to us, of resolving them.

There is another point in Simone's thinking which, like the last, is heavy with consequences—the psychological structure of the human soul. Considering no more than spiritual activity in this sphere, Simone distinguishes three faculties; two of them are natural—understanding and will; the third is “supernatural love.” There is material for a whole book to be written about this keystone of Simone's spiritual doctrine, her concept of supernatural love (which would have been a

much more suitable title for her book than *Connaissance surnaturelle*, supernatural knowledge), but we shall have to confine ourselves here to a few short remarks.

Simone separates and contrasts "love" and "will." That is to say, for her real love (supernatural love) is not something achieved by our souls but an act of God in us; all we do is to receive it. The whole function of our understanding and will consists solely in submitting to it.<sup>24</sup> She frequently repeats that only God can love God. Our natural faculties are therefore entirely passive in relation to this love. This is a grave error which, despite Simone's remarkable asceticism, tends towards quietism, and this in turn does away with merit and with all true supernatural life.

Simone herself has several ways of looking at this love. Sometimes she makes it a constituent part of the soul (its *fine pointe*); sometimes she describes it as an act of God which must pass through the soul as through a sort of tube whose perfection would lie in offering no resistance to its passage. She also identifies this love with God Himself substantially present in the soul.

Any reader with the slightest knowledge of the Church's spiritual teaching will recognize in these inexact concepts a certain measure of truth, enough to lend to one aphorism or another an often very profound orthodox meaning. But caution is imperative. In a form of words which is perfectly accurate as we understand it, Simone manages to express an entirely different and much less acceptable idea.

Against all these affirmations of Simone we must oppose the certain truth that the love of God is always an act of our souls—or rather, of our will reinforced by divine grace and the infused virtue of charity. Once we have grasped this point, we can admit that in the highest forms of mystical experience the human understanding is no longer conscious of anything but God's uncreated love working on the soul, or more precisely, of the effects produced in the soul by the divine love. From the psychological standpoint, everything that happens in the soul is the action of God. Let me repeat that this is the attitude which Simone consistently adopts. But in fact, even in these conditions, the soul itself is also active; the understanding is aware of what is

<sup>24</sup> Cf. the essay, "The Love of God and Affliction," in *Waiting for God*, pp. 117–36.

happening and the will returns love for love. Now that is action, that is life; it is, in fact, the highest form of life here below. There is nothing higher but the beatific vision of eternity.

We find another curious mixture of truth and error in the concept that Simone, now a mystic, has of creation. The point is relevant since it is, as it were, the ontological basis of the mistakes of her thinking.

On God's part creation is not an act of self-expansion but of restraint and renunciation. God and all his creatures are less than God alone. God accepted this diminution. He emptied a part of his being from himself. He had already emptied himself in the act of his divinity; that is why St. John says that the Lamb has been slain from the beginning of the world. God permitted the existence of things distinct from himself and worth infinitely less than himself. By this creative act he denied himself, as Christ has told us to deny ourselves. God denied himself for our sakes in order to give us the possibility of denying ourselves for him.<sup>25</sup>

In the American Notebooks she wrote again: "God is not omnipotent, since He is Creator. Creation means abdication. But He is omnipotent in the sense that His abdication is voluntary. He knows the results of it and wills them."<sup>26</sup> Further on in the same book we come to the climax of these astonishing assertions: "Creation and original sin are but two facets, different to us, of a unique act of abdication by God."<sup>27</sup> "What from God's point of view is creation, is sin from the creature's point of view."<sup>28</sup>

How can we attempt to justify these paradoxes? We cannot help asking ourselves if their author is not just deliberately misconstruing the most self-evident truths. To start with, there is a completely false idea of creation, which Simone sees as a sort of pantheistic emanation. God transforms a part of His substance into each creature; this would entail a degradation of the divine Being. There is also a sort of mathematical misconception: God, who occupies all space, has to diminish Himself in order to make room for His creatures. All this is very far removed from the Catholic doctrine of creation, and it is easy to see how in Simone's conception this divine action constitutes the impossible realization of a perfect contradiction.

Onto this primary error there are grafted many others which we

<sup>25</sup> *Waiting for God*, p. 145.

<sup>26</sup> *La connaissance surnaturelle*, p. 67.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

can only note in passing. Creation, which would be a sin for the creature, is an absolute necessity for God. Without it He would not have been able to become man, and without the Incarnation there could have been no God the Son. Thus, for Simone the supreme mystery of the Trinity is the result of the Incarnation, original sin, and creation. And since this mystery is necessary, it follows that its causes are as well.

It also happens sometimes, as we have had occasion to note, that Simone Weil associates with her fallacious notions certain truths of which she became directly aware in the course of the development of her interior life. It is on her false concept of creation as renunciation that she bases her ascetic doctrine of self-denial by the creature. The soul makes a space within itself to allow room for God and permit its own divinization. Many moving pages are devoted to asceticism and total renunciation, pages which, read in the context of Catholic doctrine, have a truth and beauty worthy of the great spiritual masters. But replace them in the framework of Simone's doctrine and they show, if not error, at least some serious lack. We have already remarked how, with her, asceticism lacks the positive and supernatural element which gives it its efficacy. There is wanting the real supernatural love of the creature for its God.

Attached to this doctrine of creation is an opinion, also sadly defective, on the final destiny of the human soul. Simone conceived the soul as an amalgam of two elements—one natural, the understanding and the will; the other divine, supernatural love, which could only really exist in the souls of mystics or of those on the path to mysticism. What happens at death? The animal part disappears and nothing is left but the supernatural love, which is not a created being but God Himself. Nothing of the individuality of the soul, therefore, survives death. For a clear definition of this tragic and hopeless opinion we must refer to the *American Notebooks*. It is obviously useless to try to reconcile this notion with the Catholic teaching on man's last end. The error is absolute: it is pantheism and the denial of all personal immortality of the soul.

The consequences of this idea are equally serious. There is no finality in human activity; God is not an end for us; He exists for His own good alone. Our only joy and our sole perfection is to be aware by mystical

union of the existence of pure joy in Him who alone is happy. Such thoughts foster a high philosophy of perfect disinterestedness, but on account of sublimation all contact with reality is lost.

What happens to the theological virtues in this scheme of things? We spoke of faith in the first part of this study and found that it remained implicit. Hope, too, loses its principal object, final happiness. There is nothing left but *hypomone*, the waiting upon a God who is unknown and who will reveal Himself only to allow His confidant to lapse once more into nothingness.

Charity remains. Here we are in an immense field which would involve ranging over all of Simone's works. We should have to read all that she has to say in *Waiting for God* on implicit charity and unconditional love. Our personal love cannot be directed towards God, it can only bear upon created objects which can be loved unconditionally, such as "Beauty of the World" and "Religious Practices." After we have received the graces of mysticism, this love develops into the higher plane of benevolent contemplation, becoming the love of God Himself exercised in us and through us for the whole of His creation. Here once more we must pick out certain pages rich with truth and beauty from the rest where errors pullulate. It is in these passages where she hymns the love of God that Simone's nobility and incomparable art are revealed. To cite only one example, consider these closing lines from a meditation on love in *La connaissance surnaturelle*: "God loves, not as I love but as an emerald is green. He is 'I love.' If I were perfect, I, too, would love as an emerald is green."<sup>29</sup>

There is another theme which runs throughout Simone's works, that of Christ and the redemption. It occupies the leading place in her thoughts and by its realism and austerity corrects a tendency in her to replace mysticism with aestheticism. One can never tire of reading her notes on redemptive suffering, on the suffering of the innocent. But here again beautiful conclusions are based on faulty or too fragile foundations. Her most moving words are those devoted to the mystery of the cross. She is constantly meditating upon Our Lord's cry, "My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?" There are times when she twists this beautiful text out of recognition, but at others she derives great truths from it.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.



The tragic, almost pessimistic, side of the redemption obscures for her the other aspects of the mystery; the cross overshadows the resurrection, the ascension, Pentecost, and the Church. How could Simone have felt all this if heaven existed for God alone, if the survival of the soul, and still more of the body, were radically impossible? On this point, which is essential, she completely distorts the authentic message of Christ.

We can no longer be astonished to find that she understands nothing of the doctrine of the Mystical Body based on our real and present union with the body and soul of the risen Christ, instrument of all grace. Her conception of the sacraments, too, reduces them to mere symbolism. True, she talks about the real presence in the Eucharist in terms reminiscent of the Church's teaching, but when she goes on to say that the presence is purely conventional, like God's presence in pagan idols, we can see how far she still is from the truth.

I have spoken of the Church and it is to the Church that I come back now after a far from complete exploration of the forest of Simone's works, a forest liberally interspersed with impenetrable undergrowth. Simone devoted several passages to the Church which reveal quite clearly how little she really knew of its greatness and beauty. We shall not discuss her criticisms of the Church, which bordered on calumny and blasphemy. These attacks were not inspired by what was beautiful and pure and perhaps even divine in her interior life; they were the evil results of a terrible error, an error all the more corrupting because it was invested in the guise of truth. The last notes written by Simone and published in *The Need for Roots* and *La connaissance surnaturelle* are the most painful.<sup>30</sup> Simone, whose view was sometimes so lofty and so wide, was here unable to rise to the level of a reality which is itself also a divine work. The Church Triumphant which she denies, and the Church Militant which she wished to limit to the European races, are precisely the *catholica*, the Universal, which gathers to its maternal breast all who live in true charity.

Some recently published articles have tried to find in Simone's criticisms of the Roman Church evidence of her being spiritually akin to the Catharists. These notions, based on certain phrases detached

<sup>30</sup> Cf., for example, *The Need for Roots*, trans. Arthur Wills (New York: Putnam, 1952), p. 277 ff.; *La connaissance surnaturelle*, pp. 67, 82, 265.

from their context or on a misunderstood letter, are not only entirely gratuitous; they are diametrically opposed to the basic orientation of the whole of Simone's thought. The sympathy which she shows for Manichean, Gnostic, and Albigensian traditions is not more than she shows for Buddhists or Pythagoreans. She could never have adhered to these sects, which were even more circumscribed and narrow than her view of Catholicism. The *consolamentum* reserved for the perfect would have been as repugnant to her as baptism. Her sympathy for dissident sects, far from constituting a rejection of Roman Christianity, was in her case aimed at embracing them all in a religion which she wished to be even more universal. She was never able to understand that the Catholic Church, while refusing to incorporate error, has always recognized as members those who, through no fault of their own, are in invincible ignorance yet live in a state of grace and friendship with God.

What conclusion can we reach from these rapid glances over a work which premature death and the abnormal circumstances of her life left uncompleted? There is no lack of valuable material in this work, and it is too precious to be allowed to slip into oblivion, but the work as a whole is too unbalanced and too dangerous to be placed in everyone's hands. Simone's works can only benefit those souls which are capable of picking out the truth and beauty without danger of being seduced by her mistakes, mistakes which are unfortunately very widespread today. Like so many of her contemporaries, Simone underestimated the power of the intellect; like them, too, she advocated a religious indifferentism and a syncretism fundamentally opposed to reason and faith. It has been said that some unbelievers have been drawn towards the faith by her testimony. That is not impossible: God's grace can make use of defective instruments. But it is by no means sure that, even while effecting this rapprochement, Simone's example may not at the same time have made more difficult the final step, the one step which floods the intellect with true supernatural light.

Above all we must warn readers against expecting to find in Simone's writings the doctrinal nourishment to sustain and guide a religious life unassociated with dogma or religious observances. As we observed

at the end of the first part of this study, to do this would be contrary to the example of the author herself, who well understood the need for a religious and sacramental life, even though some of the riches to be found therein were unknown to her.

Finally we must remember that, in spite of the sincerity of her interior life and the heroic degree of her asceticism, Simone remains an abnormal and exceptional case. She cannot be put forward as an example to be followed. Her very achievement is entirely a personal one and in any case remains uncertain. Christ's Church has authentic saints whom she canonizes and sets up as examples for us in sufficient numbers for there to be no need to look elsewhere for our models. The preference for people who have reached their goal by an uncertain and roundabout way is an eccentricity of our time, in which true saints seem dull, uninteresting, and old-fashioned.

These important reservations do not prevent us from admiring all that God achieved in the way of greatness and beauty in Simone. Grace can triumph over all obstacles; only obstinacy in sin renders it powerless, and there is abundant reason to believe that this condition was not present in the case of Simone Weil, who considered sin the greatest of all evils. In these days when the great wave of materialism sweeping over the world threatens to engulf us, Simone's testimony, though itself lacking in balance, acts as a counterweight (sometimes even by reason of its own excesses) to the more dangerous tendencies of our time. Her reactions to the theories of evolutionism and progressivism, and even to the sort of humanism which tends to absorb the supernatural, offer us pertinent food for thought.

In her writings, and even more by her personal example, she reminds us of the primordial necessity for the elementary moral virtues which so many young revolutionaries are inclined to forget. Her sense of purity is a complete rejection of the disintegrating tendencies of modern literature. Her meticulous delicacy and search after perfection stand as a condemnation of the indifference and mediocrity that are sometimes very near to serious negligence. Her reflections on devotion and almsgiving are an expression of a profound sense of real purity of intention. In this connection it is appropriate to quote the magnificent words in which she gives full value to the grandeur and dignity of

misfortune when the sufferer knows "that he can be the means of earning for his benefactor the thanks of Christ."<sup>31</sup>

Simone often insisted—perhaps too often—on disinterestedness. She condemned all seeking for recompense and did not see the formal rebuttal of her position contained in Christ's words, "Your reward will be superabundant in Heaven." Nevertheless we must recognize the greatness, the beauty, and the nobility of her attitude of waiting, silence, recollection, and patience expressed by the untranslatable word *hypomone*. All young people should have read to them the "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God" found in *Waiting for God*.<sup>32</sup> Some details need modification but the reflections are basically sound and constitute a magnificent vindication of the true contemplative spirit. She insisted on divorcing even our conception of heroism from the glory with which we tend to surround it; she was well aware that virtue does not consist in a passing action, however spectacular, but in a habitual disposition which informs and modifies our whole nature. A virtuous man is one who naturally and spontaneously does the right thing.

This anxiety for profound realism in the life of virtue caused Simone to ponder throughout her life the problem of pain and human suffering. She wanted to experience it herself so that she could feel a genuine "compassion." Her sense of suffering is deeply moving. The fact that she did not understand the Christian mystery meant that her thoughts on the subject were incomplete; but they can at least help us to realize the falsity of our own fear of difficulties, of our tendency to flee anything liable to interfere with our pleasures, of our being scandalized by the sufferings of the innocent. As a result of her meditations on the mystery of the cross, Simone came to see quite clearly that this apparent injustice was in fact the greatest gift of a merciful love.

Lastly and most important, Simone exalted the place of God in the life of man, emphasizing thereby the value of the passive virtues of humility, renunciation, and obedience. Her works can help us to acquire the sense of God.

Without forgetting all the defects in her work, we can well believe that God in His infinite mercy may, by the gift of a light that is shadowless, have revealed to a soul in love with beauty and perfection the innermost secrets of love for all eternity.

<sup>31</sup> *La connaissance surnaturelle*.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Waiting for God*, pp. 105–16.