

Nine

Simone Weil

"As I worked in the factory, the affliction of others entered into my flesh and my soul. . . . There I received forever the mark of a slave, like the branding of the red-hot iron which the Romans put on the forehead of their most despised slaves. Since then I have always regarded myself as a slave."¹ These were the words of Simone Weil, teacher by profession, philosopher and mystic by nature, champion of intellectual liberty. She was appalled by the violence in modern society, the oppression of the weak, the fatigue and humiliation of industrial work.

Born in a middle-class Jewish family at Paris in 1909, she obtained her teacher's training certificate in 1931. She left France with her parents for the United States in 1942—to evade capture by the Germans. After six months she returned to England to offer her services to the Free French. She died there of consumption in August of 1943. The 12 years of her adult life can be described as a series of adventures and involvements. As a teacher at La Puy she helped industrial workers obtain a pay raise by pleading their cause in the press and joining them in public demonstrations and protest marches. In 1934 she quit school and took employment as a laborer, first in the Alsthom Metal Works, then in the Ateliers de Basse-Indre at Boulogne, and finally in the Renault factory outside Paris. She took up teaching again, and then, in 1936, she went to Barcelona to offer her services as a volunteer in the Spanish war, an episode that ended after a few weeks when she had to be evacuated on account of

an accident in which she scalded her hand with oil. Between further teaching assignments she worked in the vineyards of Saint-Marcel-d'Ardeche. Although her health was rarely good she kept going back to physical work.²

Simone Weil is not remembered first and foremost as a social activist. During her life she had few friends, and she never attracted much public attention. At her funeral only seven people were present. It was her thoughts and ideas that captured the imagination of many when her not too voluminous letters and essays were published posthumously. This was actually exactly what she had hoped for. She cherished her thoughts and hoped that some day they might benefit other people, though she could not see how this might happen. In one of her last letters she says: "It is a great sorrow for me to fear that the thoughts which have come down into me should be condemned to death."³ Knowing that many people today read her notes and are inspired by them would have been a great consolation to her.

For Simone the most fundamental laws of life are to love and to adhere to truth. These two laws are an inalienable part of our human make-up, they are the warp and woof of our existence. No collective authority, church or state or whatever, can in any way diminish these individual rights or limit them as obligations. Our love by its very nature has to stretch as widely as the whole of space, and our intelligence should reach out to all reality without any restriction or prejudice. Our minds should operate with unlimited freedom and complete impartiality.⁴

In this, Simone is a true prophet of our times. Perhaps never before in human history has the need for intellectual honesty, sincerity in behavior and frankness of speech been universally acclaimed as in our own days. Christ said, "The truth will set you free" (Jn 8:32) but truth has usually come out second

best in the age-old struggle with diplomacy, cowardice and ambition. The emergence of the scientific method and the philosophy of the Enlightenment prepared the way for an enormous re-evaluation of sincerity and truth in our own days. Simone felt this need in the marrow of her bones.

The first duty resulting from our surrender to truth is to be absolutely natural and objective, to guard ourselves against preconceived ideas. The mind should be receptive to whatever information is offered to it and should judge by the available evidence. Tilting the balance this way or that to suit one's own party or to support a favorite theory is a serious denial of the highest vocation. "The degree of intellectual honesty which is obligatory for me, by reason of my particular vocation, demands that my thought should be indifferent to all ideas without exception, including for instance materialism and atheism."⁵ The mind should be like water which allows all kinds of objects to fall into it; whether they float or sink to the bottom is not due to the water but to the weight of the objects themselves.

To allow the mind to exercise this function, it should be accorded perfect freedom. For the common good, people may be protected against theories that have not been proved or propaganda that causes social unrest. But on no account may the individual himself be punished or may his thinking be stifled. "The special function of the intelligence requires total liberty, implying the right to deny everything, and allowing no domination."⁶ This, Simone maintained, applies equally to the church. A dissenting Christian may, in certain circumstances, be forbidden to spread his doctrines; never should he on that account be put under a penalty or excluded from the sacraments. The right to have one's own thoughts, even if they are mistaken, cannot be expropriated by the church.

Simone was a radical freethinker. And she remained a freethinker even after accepting Christ. She

criticized the church for not being objective in its appraisal of spiritual values in other religions (thus anticipating statements of the Second Vatican Council) and pointed out the precarious condition of the theologian, who has both to defend pre-defined doctrine and be true to his own intellectual convictions. "Almost since the beginning, the individual has been ill at ease in christianity, and this uneasiness has been notably one of the intelligence. This cannot be denied."⁷ Yes, she was a critic and a humanist, but one with a difference: She believed in God and in salvation through Jesus Christ. "Humanism was not wrong in thinking that truth, beauty, equality are of infinite worth, but in thinking that man can obtain them for himself without grace."⁸

Pagan Christian

In many ways Simone is an extraordinary and controversial figure.⁹ The ancient rule that saints should be admired, not imitated, may well apply to her. That is, if we may consider her a saint of some kind or other. Because certain decisions she took may seem so strange and paradoxical that they call for a special kind of understanding. But, then, has the church not known such extraordinary figures as St. Simon, who spent years of his life sitting on a pillar, or St. Benedict Labre, who never took a bath?

What upsets most law-abiding Christians about Simone is her steadfast refusal to be baptized. Simone was convinced that Christianity was a revealed religion. She believed in Jesus Christ and accepted Catholic doctrine as true. She loved Catholic liturgy, hymns, architecture, rites and ceremonies. After her conversion she used to attend Mass regularly and spend hours in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. In spite of all this, she did not want to enter the church and so join the Mystical Body of Christ.

She has explained her position in a number of letters. One of her reasons was that she had great difficulty in accepting the church as an institution. She knew that Christ had instituted a body of his followers and realized that some kind of social organization was unavoidable. Yet she could not forget the many injustices that had flowed from the church as a collective body in preceding centuries: the political wars fought in the name of religion, the persecution of heretics, the oppression of social classes. Coming in as an outsider she was also painfully aware of the many human aspects inherent in the present church structure. "I am kept outside the Church. . . not by the mysteries themselves but the specifications with which the Church has thought good to surround them in the course of centuries."¹⁰ "Apart from pure mysticism, Roman idolatry has defiled everything."¹¹ "I have not the slightest love for the Church in the strict sense of the word. . . . I am capable of sympathizing with those who have this love, but I do not feel it."¹²

She also had a more positive reason for hesitating to be baptized. She felt closely affiliated in thought and affection to large groups of humanity and to many human values which, she feared, were kept outside the realm of the church.

So many things are outside the Church, so many things that I love and do not want to give up, so many things that God loves, otherwise they would not be in existence. All the immense stretches of past centuries except the last twenty are among them; all the countries inhabited by colored races; all secular life in the white peoples' countries; in the history of these countries, all the traditions banned as heretical, those of the Manicheans, and Albigenses for instance; all those things resulting from the Renaissance, too often degraded but not quite without value.¹³

She argued that all such realities should be Catholic by right, but are excluded in present-day practice. She

was convinced that God wanted her to express this Catholicity by refusing to be separated from them through baptism.

You can take my word for it too that Greece, Egypt, ancient India and ancient China, the beauty of the world, the pure and authentic reflections of this beauty in art and science, what I have seen of the inner recesses of human hearts where religious belief is unknown, all these things have done as much as the visible christian ones to deliver me into Christ's hands as his captive. I think I might even say more. The love of those things which are outside visible christianity keeps me outside the Church.¹⁴

Such a stand may initially seem unintelligible. But on second thought it is strangely moving and has a compelling prophetic value. It reminds us that our solidarity with all men and women and the universality of God's presence in all religious search precede our Christian faith. Simone may not have been right in denying herself baptism; she was right in pointing out the danger of cutting ourselves off from our most basic solidarity through a partisan understanding of the church. Though outside the church, Simone said, she hoped she was inside the church in a different sense, or rather that she was on the threshold. She was convinced that this was where God wanted her to remain, loyal to Christ but also loyal to his presence in people outside Christianity.

Captive of Christ

It was this unusual woman who had a very direct experience of Christ. To appreciate what happened to her we should know that from her youth she had been educated an agnostic and that explicit religion had played little part in her life. Her home had been atheistic; her education totally indifferent to Christianity.

As soon as I reached adolescence I saw the problem of

God as a problem of which the data 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. So I left it alone.

The very name of God had no part in my thoughts.

In those days I had not read the Gospel.

I had never read any mystical works because I had never felt any call to read them.

I had never prayed. I was afraid of the power of suggestion that is in prayer.

Until last September (1941) I had never once prayed in all my life, at least not in the literal sense of the word. I had never said any words to God, either out loud or mentally.¹⁵

On two previous occasions Christianity had made an impression on her. The first time was the summer of 1935 while she was with her parents on holiday in a small fishing town in Portugal. On the feast of the local patron saint she watched the women march in procession round the ship, singing very ancient hymns "of a heart-rending sadness." It came to her in a flash of insight that Christianity was the religion of slaves and that she should really belong to it, as she was a slave herself. The second occasion was a visit to Assisi, two years later, when she was overwhelmed by a profound religious feeling in the chapel of St. Mary of the Angels. These contacts predisposed her, in a general sense, but they did not make her pray or read the gospel or other spiritual literature.

The meeting with Christ came in the monastery of Solesmes in 1938 during Holy Week. Solesmes was famous for its Gregorian chant and perfect Roman liturgy. In spite of the splitting headaches she was suffering from in those days, a residue of neglected sinusitis, she enjoyed the beauty of the music and the

"Truth Lord, But I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve."

"And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the
blame?"

"My deare, then I will serve."

"You must sit down," sayes Love, "and taste my
meat:"

So I did sit and eat.¹⁷

During one of the times that Simone recited this poem she had a direct experience of Christ. Without her realizing it, as she confessed later on, the recitation must have assumed the virtue of a prayer. Then, unexpectedly, "Christ himself came down and took possession of me. . . . 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."¹⁸ The experience took her totally by surprise. It had never occurred to her that this might happen.

In my arguments about the insolubility of the problem of God I had never foreseen the possibility of that, of a real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God. I had vaguely heard tell of things of this kind, but I had never believed in them. . . . God in his mercy had prevented me from reading the mystics, so that it should be evident to me that I had not invented this absolutely unexpected contact.¹⁹

It was this experience that made her study the gospel. She reread the Greek classics and discovered they were "bathed in christian light." She noticed how the Bhagavad-Gita is filled with "words of such a christian sound." And, most of all, she learned the Our Father in the original Greek and made it her life prayer. "I had made a practice of saying it through once each morning with absolute attention."

The Our Father became for her the vehicle of a

regular mystical experience. "Although I experience it each day, it exceeds my expectation at each repetition." The prayer usually brought her into a state of metaphysical ecstasy.

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 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.²⁰

This experience of limitless reality was sometimes enlarged by a distinctly different sensation, namely, the presence of Christ.

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.²¹

We may well ask ourselves, what was it that predisposed Simone to receive such exceptional graces? Why was she gifted with experiences denied to many a baptized Christian?

Attention

Simone had developed a remarkable intellectual and moral attitude which she had labeled "attention." She tells us more or less how she made the discovery. As an adolescent of 14, she went through a stage of great despondency. Through her studies and contacts she had come to see that some people in this world attain a degree of true greatness while others do not. By sheer intellectual brilliance and integrity of charac-

ter some men and women rise above the ordinary level of existence. They are the geniuses who understand things others don't and who are in contact with truth. A deep fear had gripped Simone that this realm would be outside her reach.

She tells us that this realization had come upon her mainly because her brother André, older than herself by three years, seemed to overshadow her. He was excellent in his studies, possessed an exceptional memory and could make penetrating remarks. Simone felt that she herself was much inferior in comparison. She feared she might be condemned to remain forever on the level of what is second rate, superficial and trite. She was so dejected at this that, she says, even the thought of dying came to her mind.

It was in this period that she discovered the meaning of "attention." It came to her as a profound and liberating insight. The mark of true genius is not natural intelligence, but what we do with our intelligence. We do not reach the realm of truth unless we consciously raise our minds above what is superficial and deceptive. It is not natural disposition that lifts us to a higher plane of awareness, but a sincere effort to be open and to learn. It is concentrated attention that leads us to truth and brings us to fulfillment.

I suddenly had the everlasting conviction that any human being, even though practically devoid of natural faculties, can penetrate to the kingdom of truth reserved for genius, if only he longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention upon its attainment.²²

After this event, attention dominated Simone's conduct and thought. With her strong will she internalized it to such a degree that it has truly become a distinctive trait of her personality and her philosophy of life. Some authors have maintained that her teaching on attention has been the main contribution of her life.²³

Attention, Simone tells us, does not exist in physical effort, as many people think. It does not mean that our muscles tense or that our body goes rigid. It proceeds rather from a relaxation of all tensions, a laying aside of distractions, an opening of the interior faculties so that they are ready to receive truth. Attention means extricating oneself from all prejudice, waiting with expectancy, listening carefully, longing to penetrate reality as it really is, not as we may imagine it to be.

Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object. It means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. Our thought should be, in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts, as a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains. Above all, our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it.²⁴

Simone did not apply this attitude only to abstract truth. Attention was a key concept for her in her relationships to people. We cannot really help others unless we first understand them as they see themselves, unless we give full attention to their unique personality. Few people have the charity to give another person such attention. Simone used to meditate endlessly on a line of the *Iliad* concerning the dead warriors who had been left unburied on the battlefield: "But they lay on the ground, dearer to the vultures than to their wives."²⁵ Most people, Simone reflected, love in the same way as they eat: They feed on other people. When they no longer find any use in a person, anything to feed on, they leave him or her to those who *can* still find something there to devour. The dead warriors received more attention from the vultures

than from their wives whose love, presumably, had worn off.

Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world but people capable of giving them their attention. The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it *is* a miracle. Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess it. Warmth of heart, impulsiveness, pity are not enough. . . .

The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to them: "What are you going through?" It is indispensable to know how to look at him in a certain way. This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the person it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth. Only he who is capable of attention can do this.²⁶

It was also through this same attitude of attention that Simone was open to receive her experience of Christ. Although she did not realize it at the time, her complete openness to truth in all its reality predisposed her for a person-to-person meeting with God. While she was attending the Holy Week ceremonies at Solesmes and listening with all her soul, and while she was reciting George Herbert's poem on "Love," she was, in fact, raising her mind to God by her attitude of attention. Later she realized this. She saw then that attention is the heart of prayer.

The key to a christian conception of studies is the realization that prayer consists of attention. It is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable towards God. The quality of the attention counts for much in the quality of the prayer. Warmth of heart cannot make up for it.

It is the highest part of the attention only which makes contact with God, when prayer is intense and pure enough for such a contact to be established; but the whole attention is turned towards God.²⁷

Simone, who was—let us not forget!—a teacher

herself, maintained that the highest value of education lies in its development of the faculty of attention. Even secular subjects such as mathematics, French and Greek can, if properly taught, train the mind toward attention. "All of them develop that faculty of attention which, directed towards God, is the very substance of prayer."²⁸

Waiting for the Master

When Simone began to read and study the gospels, she was immediately attracted to them. One aspect of Christ's teaching that affected her deeply was the concept of "waiting in patience." Simone saw in it a confirmation of her own basic disposition. It was a discovery that moved her deeply. Father Perrin, who knew her personally for some time, narrates: "This insight was a very personal discovery for her. She rejoiced over it at Marseilles and talked to me about it. She remained excited about it in London and discussed it with Maurice Schumann."²⁹

Christ spoke of different kinds of servants, Simone points out, and thereby he indicated different ways of service. There is the servant who works in the field and comes home after hard work. This servant is not invited to have his own meal; rather, he is made to do work again so that his master can eat first (Lk 17:7-10). But there is another kind of servant who waits for his master to come back. If the master finds him vigilant at his return, even when he comes at an unexpected hour, the master will reward him in a very personal way. He will make the servant sit at the table and will wait on him (Lk 12:35-37; cf. Mt 24:45-51). Not the working slave, but the slave who waits is the better model, says Simone.

The slave who is to be loved is he who stands upright and motionless by the door in a state of watching, waiting, attention, desire — ready to open as soon as

he hears a knock. Neither weariness, nor hunger, nor the requests, the friendly invitations, the blows or jeers of his companions, nor the rumors which may be circulated round him to the effect that his master is dead or angry and determined to hurt him—nothing will disturb in slightest degree his attentive stillness.³⁰

[Each student must strive to] be the slave—faithfully waiting while the master is absent, watching and listening—ready to open the door to him as soon as he knocks. The master will then make his slave sit down and himself serve him with meat. Only this waiting, this attention, can move the master to treat his slave with such amazing tenderness. . . . The thing which forces the master to make himself the slave of his slave, and to love him, has nothing to do with hard work. Still less is it the result of a search which the servant might have been bold enough to undertake on his own initiative. It is only watching, waiting, attention.³¹

A key word of the gospel in this context is the Greek term *hypomone*. The dictionary indicates as meanings: "patience," "endurance," "perseverance." The term is etymologically related to "waiting" (Greek: *hypomenein*) and cannot be so easily rendered in a modern language. Referring to the inadequacy of modern translations, Simone often prefers to use the Greek term itself, "that divinely beautiful expression of the Gospel." The following passages from the gospel thrilled her and had a special message for her (*hypomone* translated as "waiting in patience"):

"And as for [the seed that fell] in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit *waiting in patience*" (Lk 8:15,RSV).

"You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But he who *waits in patience* to the end will be saved" (Mt 10:22,RSV).

"By *waiting in patience* you will gain your lives" (Lk 21:19,RSV).

A New Kind of Saint

There are other realms of life in which Simone deserves to be our teacher. I am thinking especially of her wonderful discussions on Christian suffering. As few other spiritual writers of our day, she has penetrated the mystery of Christ's passion and grasped the paradoxical reality of a loving God who tolerates suffering. It convinced her of Christ's divinity. "The proof for me, the thing that is miraculous, is the perfect beauty of the accounts of the passion, together with some brief passages from Isaiah and St. Paul. That is what forces me to believe."³²

What we may not pass over in this short account of Simone and her experience of the divine is her impassioned plea for a new kind of saint in the church.

Today it is not nearly enough merely to be a saint, but we must have the saintliness demanded by the present moment, a new saintliness, itself without precedent. . . . I think that under this or any equivalent form it is the first thing we have to ask for now, we have to ask for it daily, hourly, like a famished child constantly asks for bread. The world needs saints who have genius, just as a plague-stricken town needs doctors.³³

Was Simone such a saint herself? Perhaps, unconsciously she indicated through her life and convictions what kind of saint the world needs today.

It is useless to attempt a judgment on Simone's sanctity: As she is not likely to be canonized, such a judgment should be left to God alone. We should not make the mistake either of exaggerating her wisdom or taking all her statements as normative. Simone Weil repeatedly pointed out that her thoughts were often tentative and open to correction. "I do not know what they are worth." . . . "It is for others to decide what it is worth." . . . She would have been the last to ascribe absolute value to them.

Whatever else she was, Simone was certainly a

prophet, a spokesman for many outside the church, a true mystic and a witness for Christ. If we imitate her intellectual honesty, if we practice "attention" as she did, we will certainly come nearer to Christ. With Simone, we too may realize that "only God is worth the gift of our total attention and absolutely nothing else."³⁴ Attention and obedience to truth cannot fail to lead us to God.

He (the divine Spirit) led me into a church (at Marseilles in 1942). It was new and ugly. He said to me, "Kneel down." I replied, "I have not been baptized." He said: "Fall on your knees before this place with love, as before the place where truth abides." I obeyed.³⁵