

ST CHARLES OF SEZZE

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Autobiography

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INTRODUCTION

THE author of this autobiography was not a man of letters, not a student, not of the nobility. He was a child of the country from the village of Sezze in Italy. Located on a spur of the Apennines, this little town looks out over the rich countryside and the Tyrrhenian Sea as it stretches from Anzio and Nettuno to Circeo, even as far as the mountains of Terracina.¹ He was born on 19 October 1613, of Ruggero Marchionni or Melchiori² and Antonia Maccioni.³

At school he learned "to read a little and to write poorly", as he admitted himself;⁴ then he gave up elementary school to strengthen his very poor health as a shepherd in the pure air of the mountains. Later he gave his time to farming. He had a preference for the plough because he liked oxen very much, "having learned that these animals, along with donkeys, were part of so great a mystery in the cave of Bethlehem".⁵

At twenty-two he became a religious in the Order of Friars Minor and in it chose the humble state of a lay-brother, against the will of all his relatives. This meant that once he had made his

1. Sezze is well known for its Passion Plays promoted by the association of that name.

2. In his *Autobiography* the Saint wrote *Marchionni*; *Marchionni* or *Marchionne* or *Marchionno* simply repeat the official register of reception of candidates into the Franciscan Order, as those think who knew the family well. On the other hand, the parish baptismal register gives the name *Melchiori* for the Saint and his brothers. It is a matter of two spellings of the same family name, one official (as found in the parish register), and the other popular.

3. Antonia Maccioni or Maccione was the second wife of Ruggero; the first was Virginia di Nicola, who bore him two children, Francis and Mary. Seven were born of Antonia: John Charles (the Saint), John Baptist, John, Margaret, Joseph, Anthony, and Mary Valenza.

4. *Autobiography*, 1 1r (that is, from the autograph, as are the following citations entitled *Autobiography*).

5. *Ibidem*.

year of novitiate (1653-1636), his life was given to the modest tasks that pertain to a cook, gardener, quester of alms, and sacristan. With all these duties it is clear that he had enough on his hands from morning till night without getting into books. "Brother Charles never did any studying", very emphatically declared Brother Anthony of Sezze, one of his brethren, in the process of canonization. This brother had known him intimately as a boy.⁶

The author had no background for the task of writing. Besides, in his rule, St Francis exhorts "those who do not know letters not to be anxious to learn them but to pay attention to that which above all they are to desire and possess, which is the spirit of the Lord and his holy operation".

Nor was the mentality of his brethren at that time any more sympathetic in this matter. How, then, could this lay-brother be a writer? How could he leave behind works such as were not left us by famous writers of his and other Orders, writers who spent their lives between library and church?

It was God himself who wanted this. The Saint's more important works were willed by God, either directly or through his superiors. This is made clearer when we point out that at first the superiors were decisively against him. At least three times they forbade him to write and inflicted severe public penances on him.

Because God willed it he wrote the following: *Trattato delle tre vie della meditazione e stati della santa contemplazione*⁷ ("Treatise on the Three Ways of Meditation and States of Holy Contemplation"), of which there have been three editions (Rome, 1654, 1664, 1742); *Cammino interno dell'anima* ("Interior Journey of the Soul"), (Rome, 1664); *Settinari Sacri* ("Sacred Septenaries"), (Rome, 1666); *Le grandezze delle misericordie di Dio* ("The Grandeurs of the Mercies of God"), which is his *Autobiography*⁸ herewith

6. *Summary of the Processes*, 123.

7. Since St Charles wrote in Italian, the titles of his works are given in that language. However, the English translation of those titles as found in parentheses will be used hereafter in this introduction, in the text itself, and in the table of contents.

8. This translation is made from an abridgement of "The Grandeurs of the Mercies of God".

published in English for the first time; *L'Esemplare del cristiano* ("The Model of the Christian"), still unedited; and *Discorsi sulla Passione di Gesù Cristo* ("Discourses on the Passion of Jesus Christ"); not to mention other smaller works.

In his *Treatise on the Three Ways, etc.*, after speaking of ordinary meditation adapted to everyone, he masterfully describes—since he had personally experienced them—the different degrees of infused contemplation.

When, in the *Interior Journey of the Soul*, he comments on eighteen spiritual songs he had composed, he launches out into the highest mysticism in a manner still more detailed and original than in the *Treatise*. Here his writing reminds us of the classical works of St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross.

The *Sacred Septenaries* are a series of meditations on the seven days of creation, the three theological and four cardinal virtues, seven principal moral virtues, the seven journeys of Jesus in his Passion, the seven petitions of the *Our Father*, and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The Model of the Christian is the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his considered opinion on this work, the well-known Father Jerome of Montefortino, one of the censors, wrote: "In reading this book I must admit that my greatest wonder did not come from seeing that one who was not at all versed in the humanities could gather in his heart so great a treasure of heavenly doctrine that like examples are simply not found, however rare; but rather my wonder arises from the way the intrinsic value of this doctrine is presented. It is this, I have to confess, which surprised and deeply moved me."

The *Discourses on the Passion of Jesus Christ* treat of the subject preferred by the Saint, if we may so speak. It is to this subject that he gladly returns often in his other works. Devotion to the sufferings of Christ is certainly one of the more characteristic marks of his spirituality.

St Charles of Sezze is a writer eminently ascetical, seraphically mystical; and his spiritual theology was lived—a point which increases its importance and efficacy. He teaches and comments on the principles of the interior life with examples from his own life.

This is particularly evident in this *Autobiography*, written at the order of his confessor.

He gives examples of every virtue. Fraternal love, humility, obedience, patience, purity, penance, the spirit of prayer and devotion to a heroic degree, in the midst of struggles and vicissitudes of every sort. In recounting his life it seems he set out to show us that whatever happens to us within or without, even to the smallest details, is permitted or willed by the providence of God for our good, for our sanctification.

The liveliness with which he describes the trials which strike him one after the other surprises us. Interior and exterior storms alternate, and at times they unite to form a general frontal attack to annihilate him, if possible, justifying the candid outburst coming from him spontaneously in the fifty-ninth chapter: "How strange it is! When tribulations start raining down on the servants of God, one would think that heaven's cataracts have burst forth, for like a flood they come down to drown them!" One could really use as a title for the account of his life the saying: *War without quarter!*, so uninterrupted is the series of battles engaged in and won by him.

For this reason the *Autobiography* stands as a very strong refutation of the opinion, quite common among religious people, that saints are born saints, that they are privileged right from their first appearance on this earth. This is not so. Saints become saints in the usual way, due to the generous fidelity of their correspondence to divine grace. They had to fight just as we do, and more so, against their passions, the world and the devil.

Consequently we can say with St Augustine: "If they, why not I?—If these men and women could become saints, why cannot I with the help of him who is omnipotent?"

What has been said thus far shows why this book has the style and interest of a romance, just because of its genuinely historical content and its very pure spirituality. It is not limited to mystical phenomena, like the *Autobiography* of St Veronica Giuliani,⁹ nor is it presented as a running chronicle like that of Salim-

9. *Scritti di S. Veronica Giuliani*, Città di Castello, 1883-5, in 3 vol., cf. vol. 1.

bene,¹⁰ though it has got variety and sprightliness. The Saint's whole life is treated in a lively way, as are all the religious and earthly surroundings in which he lived and worked, right to the eve of his death (1670). His *Autobiography* is similar to that of St Teresa of Avila, but it deals more than hers with external events.

What pleases and edifies above all in these pages is the Spirit of God pervading and moving the Saints always. It never decreases, not even when the counterweights of tribulation, as he likes to call them, make us think of the story of Job. In every circumstance all he wants "is to let himself be carried by God".¹¹ That is why, strengthened by grace, he sees and masters all events in the divine light, and though the storm seems to overpower him it is just then he writes the chapter on "Cheerfulness of Heart"¹² which, though a few centuries later, faithfully translates the "perfect joy" of St Francis.

Of particular importance and interest is his description of the mystical states.¹³ It is clearly apparent from this, as indeed from the whole book, that God who "playing in the world"¹⁴ usually chooses the meanest instruments for accomplishing the masterpieces of his grace, has truly been liberal and munificent in repaying the generosity of his servant. And so, "to a flood of tribulations and temptations" he counters marvellously with a "flood" of heavenly gifts: ecstasies, visions, divine locutions, miracles, infused knowledge, discernment of hearts, spirit of prophecy, wound of love, certitude about the remission of sins, confirmation in grace!

This humble brother who "had never been a student" writes works that excite the admiration of the greatest theologians of his day. If at times "he is vilified by everyone", still his counsel is sought by the highest prelates in the Church and he is ordered by cardinals and by the Supreme Pontiff himself, Clement XI, to test the lives of outstanding persons. If he is frightfully beset by demons

10. Salimbene, *Cronaca*, edited by G. Pochettino, San Casciano, Val di Pesa, 1926.

11. *Autobiography*, 176r, 219v, 355v, etc.

12. *Treatise on the Three Ways*, etc., Part III, Ch. 5.

13. The description of these has been omitted for the most part in this abridged edition.

14. Proverbs 8. 31.

and by men, still he confidently asks our Lord one day in a vision, and obtains it, to be "a saint like Saint Charles Borromeo"!¹⁵

We can, then, justly repeat with the Psalmist: "God is wonderful in his saints",¹⁶ and with our Lord himself: "I confess to thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them to little ones."¹⁷ With greater reason would St Francis de Sales have passed the same judgment on the mystical doctrine of this Saint of Sezze as he did on St Teresa of Avila: "Against her untaught wisdom the knowledge of many intellectuals appears ignorance: for all their long laborious study, they are put to the blush, so brilliantly does she describe the practice of charity. In this way, God, who presents his sovereign power on the stage of our weakness, *has chosen what the world holds foolish, so as to abash the wise.* (I Cor. I. 27)."¹⁸

A complete and critical edition of this *Autiography* is in preparation. The present one is an abridgement published on the occasion of the author's canonization. The critical edition will constitute the first volume of the *Opera Omnia* of St Charles of Sezze, to be edited by scholars of the Roman Province of the Friars Minor in the monastery of St Bonaventure on the Palatine, Rome.

In this abridgement anything that would not be of interest to the readers for whom it is meant has been omitted. It is a work of selection. I have therefore omitted whole chapters, or a part of a chapter, or the secondary circumstances of some event, and sometimes even a sentence has been shortened. But what I have selected is what the Saint said in his own words, except for the correction of some evident slips of the pen,¹⁹ or of purely gram-

15. *Autobiography*, Appendix, n. 9.

16. Psalm 67. 36.

17. Matt. 11. 25.

18. This passage from St Francis de Sales is found in his *The Love of God*, trans. Vincent Kerns, M.S.F.S., London, 1962, pp. xxix-xxx.

19. These are frequent and at times serious because Brother Charles, as can clearly be seen from the autograph, recopied his work whenever he had a minute. This was almost always at night when he was tired and sleepy. With the exception of rare passages he did not read over again what he had recopied (cf. Introduction to the critical edition).

matical errors. Thus I have followed the criterion he fixed for those to whom he gave his works for revision, before sending them to the printer:²⁰ correct grammatical mistakes without at all changing the words.²¹

Thanks, especially, to its author, the reading of this book will doubtless attain the purpose he had in mind in writing it: to manifest "the grandeur of the mercies of God in pitiable man when helped by his grace"; to show forth the grace of that God who, "looking with a sad and humble heart on us turned away from him, once more embraces and caresses us, treating us with a familiarity and love so great that never has an earthly father given the like to his children".²²

FR SEVERINO GORI, O.F.M.

Rome, Monastery of St Bonaventure on the Palatine,
Feast of the Visitation of the Virgin Mary, 2 July 1958.

20. *Summary of the Processes*, 58. Among the revisers of the Saint's works are mentioned Don John Francis Topini, a Roman, Rector of S. Salvatore delle Coppelle, Rome, who revised the *Interior Journey* (*Summary of the Processes*, 58 and 126) and Don Nicholas Grappelli of Frosinone (Father Angelus of Naro, *Memorie intorno a fra Carlo da Sezze*, I, 55b).

21. Father Angelus of Naro, *op. cit.*, I, 55a; 103a-b. His corrections, however, mostly concern orthography, punctuation and word endings, rarely the tense and mood of verbs.

22. *Autobiography*, lv.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION, <i>by Father Severino Gori, O.F.M.</i> , Editor of the Italian edition	v
TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD	xix
1. WHY ST CHARLES WROTE THE ACCOUNT OF HIS LIFE	1
2. HIS PARENTS Virtues of his father, 3; virtues of his mother, 4.	3
3. HIS BIRTH TO GOOD PARENTS AND THEIR CARE FOR HIM First years, 5; affectionate grandmother, 5; school, 6; deception of the devil, 6; serious illness, 6.	5
4. VOCATION TO THE RELIGIOUS LIFE Forced to leave school, 8; his work in the fields, 8; beginning of a religious vocation, 9; preference for the state of a lay-brother, 9; determination to embrace this state, 10; death of his grandmother, 11.	7
5. RESTORATION OF HEALTH THROUGH WORK ON THE FARM Good books and companions, 12; spiritual direction, 12; temptation to impatience, 13.	11
6. FERVENT SPIRIT FROM GOD: VOW OF CHASTITY Fervour of soul, 13; vow of chastity in honour of the Blessed Virgin, 14; serious temptations, 14; liberation from danger, 15.	13
7. PRAYER OF INTERIOR RECOLLECTION A new degree of prayer, 16; before a painting of the Madonna, 17; effects of this new kind of prayer, 17.	16
8. DISCUSSION OF PRAYER OF RECOLLECTION More frequent confession, 18; increase of the prayer of recollection with every reception of Holy Communion, 18; remembrance of our Lord's Passion, 19; charity to the poor, 19; virtue of obedience, 20; inclination towards solitude, 21.	18
9. MEANS GOD EMPLOYED TO KEEP HIM MINDFUL OF HIS VOCATION Dangerous sickness, 22; vision of death, 22; various misfortunes, 23.	22
10. MANIFESTATION OF INTENTION OF BECOMING A LAY-BROTHER; OBSTACLES TO REALIZING THIS Reveals his vocation, 25; return to school, 26; opposition from relatives, 26; especially from his uncle, Don Maccioni, 26.	25
11. OTHER OBSTACLES; THE APPEARANCE OF ST FRANCIS AND ST ANTHONY OF PADUA Another illness, 28; pleas to the Blessed Virgin for the health of his brother, 29; vision in which he is assisted by two Friars Minor, 29; two angels in the form of Friars Minor, 30.	28

12. TWO JOURNEYS TO ROME TO BE RECEIVED INTO THE FRANCISCAN ORDER	31
Visit to priest uncle, 31; return to Sezze, 32; call to come back to Rome, 32; second visit to priest uncle, 33.	
13. DIFFICULTIES PRECEDING HIS ADMISSION	34
Incident with the notary, 34; wavering of his determination, 35; short stay in the monastery of St Francis a Ripa, Rome, 35; restatement of his purpose to be a lay-brother, 37.	
14. DEPARTURE FROM ROME FOR NAZZANO	37
Arrival at the novitiate in Nazzano, 38; trial of his vocation, 39.	
15. CLOTHED IN THE HABIT OF ST FRANCIS	42
Start of the novitiate, 43.	
16. MANUAL WORK	44
Perfection in everything, 44; everything out of obedience, 45.	
17. PENITENTIAL EXERCISES	46
Various mortifications, 46; two ill-mannered cats, 48.	
18. INTERIOR DESOLATION DURING THE ENTIRE YEAR OF NOVITATE ...	49
Melancholy, 49; conference with the Father Guardian in confession, 50.	
19. SOME TEMPTATIONS AND ILLUSIONS FROM THE DEVIL	51
False visions of the Blessed Virgin, 52; mysterious liquid, 53.	
20. TEMPTATION TO VAINGLORY	54
Tranquillity of conscience, 54; complacency occasioned by praise from others, 54; uneasy conscience for six years, 55.	
21. PROFESSION OF VOWS	56
Brother Thaddeus, 56; determination as to what he would do if not admitted to vows, 56; some relief, 57; what the hermit of Sezze had said, 57; kneeling before a painting of the Madonna, 58; threat from a fellow novice, 58; admission to profession of vows, 60.	
22. ASSIGNMENT TO THE MORLUPO MONASTERY	60
Departure from Nazzano and arrival at Morlupo, 61; first impressions, 61; gardener, 62; temptations, especially to rebellion, 63; two wild oxen, 63.	
23. THE COOK	64
Placed under an older brother, 64; training in charity, 65; on the quest, 65; kitchen work and spirit of recollection, 66; plea to fellow lay-brothers, 67.	
24. FURTHER POINTS ABOUT HIS TIME AS COOK	68
Charity to those who came to the door, 68; miraculous provisions, 69; counterbalance of the breaking dishes, 69; fried onions, 69; death of his father, 70.	
25. DETERMINATION TO PRACTISE RIGOROUS PENANCES	71
Particular austerities, 71; resistance of the devil, 72; temptation against chastity, 72; attack from the demons, 73; vision of hell, 73.	
26. NEW GUARDIAN AND MASTER	74
Porter also, 74; Superior is scrupulous over the amount of food being given to the poor, 74; interior rebellion against his Master in the kitchen, 75; self-punishment, 76.	

27. NEW SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR	77
Total abnegation, 77; miraculous replenishment of bread, 78; trip with a Father preacher, 79; magpies, 80.	
28. A COMMAND FROM THE SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR	81
Prayer to Mary, 81; dread of being sent to Ponticelli, 81; resignation to the will of God, 82.	
29. MONASTERY AT PONTICELLI: GARDENER	82
New Master of work, 82; little prayer and much obedience, 83.	
30. COOK AGAIN: TROUBLE IN THE KITCHEN	84
Unusual fish, 85; testing of patience, 86; the Superior corrects the Friars, 87.	
31. RENEWED TEMPTATION TO VAINGLORY	87
Going barefoot, 87; lifted up by the hair, 88; escape from the temptation to vainglory, 88.	
32. INCREASE IN THE DESIRE FOR PENANCE	89
Command of the Superior to follow the common life, 89; exercise of confidence in God, 90.	
33. ROME, PALESTRINA	91
Provincial Superior summons him to Rome, 91; death of his mother, 91; transfer to Palestrina, 92; generous almsgiving, 93; six frisky lambs, 93.	
34. BEGINNING OF ECSTASIES: THEIR CAUSES	94
First ecstasies, 94; causes of these ecstasies, 94; their effects, 95; false ecstasies, 95.	
35. MANY CONTESTS WITH THE DEMONS	97
Like ferocious lions, 98; near death, 98; vision of our Lord, 98; another snare of the devil, 99.	
36. PORTER: CHARITY TO THE POOR	99
Perfect detachment, 100; alms of bread sent by Cardinal Barberini, 101; care of Tertiaries, 101; accusation of excessive generosity, 102; very few alms, 102; healed of a hernia, 103.	
37. TRANSFER TO CARPINETO	104
Advice given by confrères, 104; vigilance against wrong counsel, 104; departure for Carpineto, 105.	
38. STRICT SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR	106
Severe trial, 107; more advice from his confrères, 107; vehement temptation against obedience, 108; angry Vicar, 108.	
39. NEW CONFESSOR—OFFICE OF SACRISTAN	109
Qualities of a good spiritual director, 110; sacristan, 111; advice to fellow lay-brothers, 111.	
40. DESIRE FOR MARTYRDOM	111
Three opportunities of going to the missions, 112; sickness and obedience, 112; fierce inner struggle, 113; cured miraculously, 114.	
41. SPIRIT OF FORNICATION	114
Conversion of a count, 115; battle with lust, 115; penances against this temptation, 116.	
42. APPEARANCE OF THE DEVIL IN THE FORM OF OUR SAVIOUR... ..	117
Recourse to confessor, 117; other subtle temptations, 118; help from God and his confessor, 119.	

43. EXERCISE OF CARRYING A CROSS 120
 Levitation, 120; moderation of penances, 121.
44. EPIDEMIC AROUND CARPINETO 121
 Help given by the Franciscans, 121; begging for the sick poor, 122; desperate young man, 123; recourse to St Ann, 124; procession in honour of St Ann, 125.
45. DEVOTION TO ST SALVATOR OF HORTA 125
 For the picture of St Salvator, 125; cure of a sick child, 126; other miraculous cures, 127.
46. FIRST ATTEMPT AT WRITING 128
 Reason for starting to write, 128; opposition from confrères, 129; penance imposed by the Superior, 129.
47. TRANSFER TO ROME 130
 Fear of Rome, 130; departure for St Peter in Montorio, 131; strict Father sacristan, 132.
48. FREEDOM FROM TWO SERIOUS TRIALS 132
 Doubt on the Immaculate Conception, 133; temptation to revenge, 134; good resolves are put into practice, 134.
49. CONSIDERATIONS ON DISCERNING THE SPIRIT OF GOD AND AVOIDING A FALSE SPIRIT 136
 A woman's ecstasies and revelations, 136; discovery of deceit, 136; insistence on obedience, 138; another woman's false visions and stigmata, 139; her conversion, 140.
50. PRINTING OF A SMALL BOOK OF MEDITATIONS 141
 A generous gentleman, 142; a wrathful Father General, 142; threat of prison, 142; stern Father Guardian, 143; in memory of a saintly lay-brother, 143; the voice of Jesus, 144.
51. DESIRE TO POSSESS THE LOVE OF GOD 144
 Desire persists intensely for two or three months, 145; cure of the General of the Order, 145; penance given by the Superior: to walk behind the donkey on the quest, 147; new companion in work, 147; wound of love at the moment of Consecration in the Mass, 148; pain endured for three years, 149; palpitations of the heart because of love, 149; effects of divine love, 150; practical admonition, 151.
52. APPEARANCE OF ST TERESA; THE "THREE WAYS OF MEDITATION" 151
 Command of his confessor, 152; heavenly light, 153; a book on contemplation, 153; another on meditation, 154.
53. ASSIGNMENT TO THE MONASTERY OF ST FRANCIS A RIPA 154
 Interior rebellion and melancholy, 155; "The will of God be done!", 156; joyfulness of spirit, 157.
54. DAILY HOLY COMMUNION 157
 Sweetness of tongue and lips on receiving the Holy Eucharist, 157; request to receive Holy Communion daily, 158.
55. CURE OF ILLNESS THROUGH THE INTERCESSION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN AND ST ANN 159
 Apparition of Father Angelus del Pas, 159; of the Blessed Virgin and St Ann, 160.

56. REVELATIONS AND VISIONS: THE HOLY GHOST IS HIS TEACHER ...	161
Gift of counsel, 161; vision of the souls of different persons in the state of grace, 162.	
57. UNDERSTANDING OF SACRED SCRIPTURE	164
A difficult verse in the Canticle of Canticles, 165; sensible devotion and infants in the spiritual life, 165; another passage of the Canticle of Canticles, 166.	
58. THE "INTERIOR JOURNEY"	168
Preparation for writing this book, 168; recourse to the Crucified, 169; prayer during the writing, 169; remembrance during this prayer of known persons, 170; mental vision of several saintly persons, 170.	
59. SOME TRIALS AND GRACES FROM OUR LORD	171
Two distressing conflicts: one external, 171; another, internal, 172; two martyrs of charity, 173.	
60. RELATION OF OBEDIENCE AND CHARITY TO PRAYER	175
Like the sick man at the Probatina pool, 175; reassertion of the passions, 176; frightening example of a religious who craved renown, 177; difficulty in distinguishing prayer from obedience and charity, 178; example of our Lord, the Blessed Virgin, and the saints, 179; desires, and obedience, 179; aridity in receiving the Eucharist, 180; purity and faith, 180.	
61. MORTIFICATION OF THE BODILY SENSES	181
Terrible aversion, 182; repugnance for his sickness, 182; various remedies, 183; journey to Nocera for the water-cure, 183; two holy events, one of them at Assisi on the Feast of the Portiuncula, 184.	
62. STAY AT NOCERA FOR THE CURE	185
A brave woman, 186; the water-cure and its effects, 186; the spiritual effects of his sickness, 187; trip to Norcia to console a sick woman, 187; stay at Aquila and return to Rome, 188; nature complains, 189; complete victory, 189.	
63. FINAL DEGREE OF PRAYER: STATE OF THE LOVE OF GOD	190
Complete detachment after mystical purification, 190; perfect liberty of spirit, 191; obedience and charity are prayer, 191.	
64. ELEVATIONS OF SPIRIT AND INTERIOR LOCUTIONS	192
A nun recommended to his prayers, 192; two sisters who desired to enter the Carmelite Order, 193; anxiety about the <i>Interior Journey</i> , 194; temptation not to be a hindrance to receiving Holy Communion, 194; remembrance of two saintly persons, 195; Naples and the Feast of St Louis, Bishop of Anjou, 196.	
65. FURTHER SPIRITUAL ELEVATIONS AND INTERIOR LOCUTIONS ENJOYED IN PRAYER	197
Our Lord orders the writing of the <i>Sacred Septenaries</i> , 197; difficulty in writing on the seven journeys of our Lord in his Passion, 197; bitterness of spiritual dryness, 198; visit to a sick nun, 199; some hard-headed religious, 199; two cases of vain women and their punishment, 200; great charity toward the second woman and its miraculous reward, 200.	
66. SPECIAL FAVOURS RECEIVED THROUGH THE MYSTERY OF THE NATIVITY	201
The joy of paradise, 201; "Brother Charles, little one!", 202; return of the passion of sensuality, 202; its disappearance one day after Holy Communion, 203; confirmation in grace, 203; vow not to hate anyone, 204.	

TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

IT is not enough that a translation present in substance what the author had to say. There is a completeness needed, a completeness that takes into view the author's every thought, phrase and expression. The translation needs to say what he said, with—as closely as words will permit—the same candour, the same warmth, the same colour, the same simplicity, where these are found; no attempt should be made to invent them where they are lacking.

St Charles of Sezze belonged to the seventeenth century. We ought not try to remake his manner of expression and the channel of his thought into those of the twentieth. Any such effort will surely result in hiding his personality and simple charm.

The Italian editor did well in titling the autobiography the *Fioretti* of Brother Charles. The Saint has made the story of his life read like a new chapter, as it really is, in the account of the first Franciscans as told by the ancient chroniclers.

I

WHY ST CHARLES WROTE THE ACCOUNT OF HIS LIFE

Come and hear, all ye that fear God;
and I will tell you what great things
he hath done for my soul. Ps. 65. 16.
The mercies of the Lord I will sing
forever. Ps. 88. 2.

BECAUSE God and my Father confessor have commanded me to write the pitiable account of my life, it will be enough to say, and thereby include everything, that since I have been a great sinner and have received a sea of graces from His Divine Majesty,¹ everyone will clearly see the grandeur of his unlimited mercy. This will be acknowledged all the more when I am allowed later to write specifically about all my sins.

In doing what I have been commanded under holy obedience, I will stress only what is most essential from the beginning of my life to the present moment.² I will tell how I regained the state of grace after many falls, how our Lord gave me a religious vocation with its graces and favours, and how I made my way to perfection through it under many forms and degrees of prayer.

Our Lord who wills everything for his glory began making me experience a very powerful impulse in my soul. This urgently prompted me to write the story of my life as a source of great profit to my neighbour, and the more I advanced, the greater this desire grew.

1. Consistently in his *Autobiography* St Charles uses this expression when he speaks of God.

2. The Saint began writing his life sometime in 1661 and completed it on 15 August 1665.

During this time I had the chance of going outside Rome to beg for alms and to talk to a Poor Clare who had the reputation of being a great servant of God. I discussed my secret with her, so that she would pray in a special way to our Lord, asking him to show us what his will was. She told me that four months previously, not only had our Lord in a vision revealed to her my whole life and this particular prompting, but had directed her to tell me to write this autobiography since it would be a great light to the faithful.

Even with this I was not entirely satisfied, and so I did not take any action. First I wanted to place myself under obedience. When this is done, a mistake cannot be made and diabolical promptings are silenced. Sometimes the demons put these ambitions in our hearts to make us stumble and fall headlong into pride.

At this time Father John of Sezze was a penitentiary³ at St John Lateran and was like a spiritual father to me. I quickly related what I had in mind and what the Poor Clare nun had said, for he knew her. After carefully thinking it over in his orderly way, he warmly ordered me to do it. Once I had this advice, I sought the opinion of my confessor, Father Anthony of Aquila. He not only commanded me to write the life, but, what is more, he gave me the merit of holy obedience.

3. This term is applied to the priests who are officially appointed to hear confessions in St Peter's Basilica, St John Lateran, St Mary Major and St Paul outside-the-walls, the four Major Basilicas. For centuries priests of the Order of Friars Minor have been the penitentiaries at St John Lateran.

HIS PARENTS

MY father's name was Ruggero Marchionni, and my mother's, Antonia Maccioni. Both came from old families of Sezze, a city where respected members of the Apostolic Household lived.¹ My parents had a marvellous fear of God.

Goodness made my father like that saint, the elder Tobias, of whom Sacred Scripture says that he observed the divine law while wearing himself out in acts of worship and works of piety. Seeing myself in him I learned to acquire the devotion that was his. Very often the rosary could be seen in his hands when he was at home, away from his work, and he frequented the sacraments especially on feast days.

My father was an honest man; there was truth in his heart and on his lips as he treated everyone fairly and sincerely. That is why when conversation turned on the topic or when the occasion presented itself, he often reminded me of what is written in the two commandments of the natural law: First, "Do not do to others what you would not want done to you"; second, "Do to others what you would want done to you". To help me avoid bickering and keep a clear peace of soul he gave me this short and very useful advice: "Have eyes that do not see, ears that do not hear, and a mouth that does not talk."

From my father I learned the virtue of patience and the way to train myself in it, for he was one who seldom thought of trouble; changing events left him quite undisturbed. Not only was he calm in his dealings with those at home but still more with his neighbours. When trying situations developed he used to say: "God will take care of us." He had confidence in God in everything.

I cannot recount everything, but I also learned charity from my

1. This means that it had a part in the administration of the Papal States. In ancient times Sezze was a flourishing Latin city in the territory of the Volscians. Its fourteenth-century cathedral of Gothic-Cistercian style is artistically noteworthy.

father, since he did not hold back from giving help to the unfortunate, as far as his means allowed. Among the talents His Divine Majesty had given him was a skill in setting broken and dislocated bones. Crippled people were constantly at our home, not only from Sezze itself but from other places too. For the love of God who had given him this gift, he cared for all of them.

My mother did not take a second place to my father in goodness of life and ways. She was very dedicated to prayer and devotion. She, too, received the sacraments often and visited the churches of the city. She was especially devoted to St Francis and recited the hours which his lay-brothers say, that is the *Our Fathers*.² Among her virtues charity in relieving the needs of her neighbours stood forth. When she could not go alone she accompanied other good women in approaching wealthy and God-fearing people to ask alms for the poor. For a long time she tended a young man of wealth and of good family who had been wounded by an arrow, from which he finally died.

My mother took a lot of care in bringing up her children in the fear of God and in good habits, educating them more for heaven than for the perishable things of earth. After the death of my father she suffered many trials in her last years, but then her life ended peacefully.

2. In the Order of Friars Minor the Rule written by St Francis says in the third chapter: "Let the lay-brother say twenty-four *Our Fathers* for Matins, five for Lauds; for Prime, Terce, Sext and None, for each of these, seven; twelve for Vespers, seven for Compline." Thus, like the priests with their breviary, the brothers follow the "hours".

3

HIS BIRTH TO GOOD PARENTS AND THEIR CARE FOR HIM

IT pleased our Lord to have me first see the light of day through such good parents, and his mercy towards me started at that moment. I mention this because in line with what Jesus Christ left us in his Gospel, in the parable of the good tree bearing good fruit, it is a special grace to have parents who fear God when one considers the good education that flows from this. There are many fine examples of this in the Old and the New Testament.

According to what is found in the baptismal register, I was born on 19 October 1613, and on the 22nd of the same month was baptized and given the name John Charles.

I cannot give any account of what happened during the time I was an infant, except what my mother told me when I had grown up. When I began to walk—always a big occasion not only to parents but to everyone in the house—they used to dress me in a gray frock habit with cord and hood, out of devotion to St Francis and St Anthony of Padua. Then my mother kept this habit for me till I was older. And because I was always quiet and did not say much she used to remark as she looked at me standing so still, dressed in the habit: “Look at little Friar John who is now making his novitiate and does not speak!” Jokingly she called me by that name until I was three or four years old. All the while I grew up on the milk of love.

At this age, my grandmother on my mother’s side, whose name was Valenza Pilorci, was very affectionate to me and wanted me to stay with her. She was then old and a very exemplary lady. Those who knew her thought very much of her rare Christian virtues as well as of her family origin. She always kept her door open to the poor; she sent no one away empty-handed who asked her for an alms. So as not to embarrass those who were ashamed of their poverty, she used to send me at night with alms for them. And because her love for me was even more tender than that of

my own mother, she took very good care of me, helping and instructing me to be devout and to avoid sins.

When my years of childhood were over and I entered boyhood I went to school to learn good manners along with school subjects, and in time considered myself a man of great learning. To further this my parents sent me to different teachers since at that time there were some good ones. But I did not profit much from them since my thoughts were on games; and once I learned to read, most of my time was spent reading books about wars and battles. It was my great delight to know what heroes had done and the impressive deeds of the paladins. Even though a Jesuit Father scolded me I still did not change my ways.

Only God knows the falls I had in spite of having such a good education and being naturally inclined to devotion. All this evil came from the companions with whom I surrounded myself and from the freedom I had. As a result I am able to warn others how wrong it is to give freedom to young persons; with it they follow dangerous paths and entangle themselves in sin.

As I hurried along like a person on the way to perdition, the devil plotted a very wicked deception on me. He appeared to me in the form of our Saviour. I do not remember if I was asleep or awake, but this I can say for certain, that he had a very troubled face and showed great indignation as he told me very angrily that there was no point in my going to confession any more, for I was damned.

I believed the vision, for I was sure it had been our Lord and that out of great anger he had cancelled me from the book of eternal life because I had committed such great sins. Since my judgment was not yet mature, nor at all versed in matters like this, I did not quickly go to my confessor as I should have, but went on believing the vision for a long time. At last our Lord willed to help me and I took the matter to my mother. She told me that this vision was not really genuine but a deception of the devil to hold me tightly bound so that I would commit greater evils. This is what he aims at getting from us.

Not long after this success of the devil, our Lord willed to bring a very serious sickness upon me. The doctors gave up hope

and my family wept as for one already dead. They consoled themselves by doing what they could to help me recover my health and they gave me whatever I asked for, to please me.

One day the whole family was in the room with some other persons. They put money on the bed for me, along with a few trinkets. When they noticed I was not really interested in these things they asked me if I wanted something else. I said I wanted a cross. My father heard this. Since he was also a carpenter by trade, he immediately went and made a cross about eight inches long. When he brought it in I took it with great devotion, held it tight and kissed it many times as the object I considered the most precious of all. Then it was our Lord showed how merciful he is. In virtue of his cross he gave back my health, for from then on the sickness began to leave me.

4

VOCATION TO THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

THOUGH it was true that, as I said, I had wandered away from the path of the divine law at this time of my life, still I always felt called to the religious life and kept saying that I wanted to belong to the Order of Friars Minor. Besides the monastery of the Conventuals and that of the Capuchins, in my city there is a Franciscan monastery by the name of St Mary of Grace,¹ an isolated place inspiring devotion, about a mile away from any habitation, very well suited for prayerful and mortified persons.

My parents thoroughly approved of this desire of mine and, to enable me to put it into effect, sent me to a very good school.

1. The monastery of St Mary of Grace, built in 1567 by the Capuchins, was ceded to the Friars Minor in 1614. It was a *ritiro*, that is, a place of special seclusion and recollection. In the church one may admire the painting by Lanfranc above the main altar and the crucifix carved from wood by Fra Paolo of Val di Noto (sixteenth century). The Venerable Brother Boniface of Sezze (*d.* 1799) is buried there. After suppression by the Italian Government the church and monastery became used as a city cemetery.

My father's desire was that in the religious life there would bud forth a man of letters and an excellent preacher who would sow the seed of God's word for the faithful; and my mother's longing was for me to be a priest, celebrating Mass, so that after her death I would help her to leave Purgatory through these Masses.

Though they had the very best intentions, our Lord who is the absolute master of our hearts permitted everything to turn out just the opposite. I made greater efforts to learn; still, it happened that because of something I did, my teachers gave me such a whipping and left my whole body so beaten with lashes that for a time I was beside myself, like one who is out of his mind. Because of this strange turn of events all at home were very sad. They thought I would die. From that moment on I made use of this occurrence to have them take me back home, to take better care of me.

Once I had returned to my father's house like another prodigal son of the Gospel, my good parents used every means to distract me from the melancholy caused by the beating just mentioned. But I remained very depressed. Nothing gave me any pleasure though everyone did a lot for me.

There were two other younger brothers of mine who had no desire to go to school for fear of its discipline. They worked the land which we leased for vineyards and grain. My parents thought that by my joining them and seeing the countryside I would become somewhat happy; and that is how it was, for in being with my brothers I began bit by bit to get my mind off myself, partly due to their talk—very enjoyable, for we were all young—and partly at seeing the open country which I liked very much.

When the season for sowing came I felt a surge of devotion on seeing the oxen, as I recalled how these animals along with donkeys were part of the wonderful mystery of Bethlehem's cave, when Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary; they kept him warm with their breath as he lay on the straw of the manger. I took very good care of them and was unusually happy at seeing them, while my contentment grew so rapidly that in a short time everything gave me joy.

Though I had forgotten all except a little that I had learned at school—for I did remember to read and write a bit, although poorly—all this was as nothing compared to my restored health.

Just as the morning-star arises, so a holy vocation began to appear in my soul. Up to that time it was hidden. Now it more ardently stirred up my love for the holy Order of St Francis and his followers whom I considered angels from heaven. That is how they appeared to me.

At times I experienced coming from them, as it were, a most pleasant scent that was refreshing and left a holy and reverential fear as a spur to my devotion. I was even more strengthened on listening to them sing the divine praises to our Lord in the canonical hours. When they were in procession they called out the most tender names of Jesus and Mary to signal a start or a stop,² and when I heard their church bells ringing I stood still as though deprived of my senses.

My vocation was very sincere but I did not know the difference between the religious who are priests and say Mass, and the others who stay in the humble state and perform the lowly tasks of lay-brothers.³ When I went to the monastery church to say my prayers I often read a small book there on the life and miracles of Blessed Salvator of Horta;⁴ and besides, there was a picture of Blessed Paschal Baylon.⁵ Both were outstanding for their holiness and miracles; and they were lay-brothers, who did not say Mass. On reading the life of the one and admiring the picture of the other, a great desire to imitate them in their holy actions was inflamed in me. Many times I said to myself: "If I become a

2. The custom is still very strong in Sezze, and continues to exist in other villages, of calling out the most Holy Names of Jesus and Mary during processions to signal a halt or a going ahead.

3. The brothers are engaged in manual work while the priests apply themselves to studies and the sacred ministry.

4. Salvator of Horta in Spain (1520-67) was famous for many miracles worked in life and after death. He was beatified by Pope Paul V in 1606 and was canonized by Pope Pius XI, 17 April 1938.

5. Paschal Baylon (1540-92) was distinguished by his devotion to Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. He was beatified by Pope Paul V in 1618 and canonized by Pope Alexander VIII on 16 October 1690. Under Leo XIII he was named the Patron of Eucharistic Associations and Congresses, 28 November 1897.

brother I want to be like these saints; I want to stay in church all night and perform very austere penances!"

Once I knew the difference between the lay-brothers and the clerics, our Lord put in my heart a determination to become a lay-brother with a great desire to be poor and to beg alms for his love.

I urged a companion of mine, Peter de Vecchi, to embrace this humble state. He had made a vow to become a Capuchin. Peter had taken an interest in me and had got me to join the Sodality⁶ established by the Jesuits in their college. As a member I learned the Christian virtues, frequented the sacraments and carried out specific exercises of penance. Whenever he and I were together our thoughts about the religious life and lay-brothers and saints were of these as found in the Franciscan Order.

So that no one would bother us we used to go outside the city with others to secluded places. Peter had read a good deal and had mature judgment. He told us several stories; one of them highly praised the humility of St Francis and the heroic reason the saint had for not wanting to say Mass. Though he was the founder of a religious Order he fell into serious doubt as to whether or not he should seek the privilege of saying Mass. While he was praying over this problem an angel appeared holding a pitcher of water as clear as crystal, and said to the saint: "Francis, as you see the water in this pitcher, so you have to be if you want to say Mass and be a priest". After hearing that, he took a lot of time and thought the vision over very well. Finally he decided that he was not worthy to say Mass.

I had determined to be a lay-brother in imitation of this saint. But I was not qualified for reception. To be a lay-brother one had to be at least twenty years old,⁷ an age I had not yet reached. While I could not carry out my desire immediately, still I had no wish to go back to school and to studies for the time that still remained. I simply wanted to be in the fields with my brothers.

6. This is the *Sodality of Mary* which the Jesuit Fathers usually erect in each of their institutions. The Jesuit college at Sezze was founded in 1590 and after a short time the church of St Peter, consecrated in 1614, was built next to it.

7. This was prescribed by the *Constitutions* of that time. The age required for reception into the novitiate according to the present *Constitutions* is sixteen.

There was a divine plan in all this, for I got back some of my devotion through the talks and the guidance my good father gave me. He was always speaking of the things of God, as if preparing me more for the desert than for the world.

My grandmother died during this time and because she always kept her home open to the poor we may piously hope that our Lord has had mercy on her by opening the door of his pity to give her his kingdom.

Because it stirred my devotion to see oxen, as I said before, I gave them a lot of attention and I very badly wanted to have a pair for my own use. So I pressed my father very much for them. Against his own and my mother's will he gave in to me. They did not want the work I would perform with them to become a source of trial and suffering. Besides, my father would have been displeased if, in allowing this attachment to worldly goods, he had cooled my desires concerning a vocation; they would have been very upset at that, especially my mother.

So as not to be frightened by the penances performed in the religious life and by its rigours, I bolstered up my spirit by thinking of the great love that existed among the Friars, who were not foolish though the world thought they were. I also reflected that if a mother loves and cares for her children, they did this even more for each other because they had been born in Christ and united through love.

5

RESTORATION OF HEALTH THROUGH WORK ON THE FARM

As I said, the years of boyhood are very dangerous to the welfare of one's soul. Mine were now past and I entered the age of young manhood. Here one has a better knowledge and judgment of things and this showed in the way I went at my work of tilling the soil with the oxen. In time I became skilled at this; it was our Lord's way of letting me know that for the time being

he had called me to this work, that through it I might be separated from the world, leave bad companions who are the start of ruin for young people, and begin to live a solitary life in the mountains and fields.

The wonderful happiness that came from this life as I gave myself to it was much greater than any merchant experiences in the market-place from his hankering after riches. Now I realized that I had become the richest man in the world in this humble life that held everything one could ever desire. With the help of grace a great change for the better took place in my way of living.

I liked spiritual books and so I brought some of them with me for reading. They are very useful and beneficial in every case, for helping those who have fallen to rise again, as well as for fanning into a bright flame the fire of devotion of those who want to love God in the midst of the world.

The books that helped me most were these four: *Spiritual Mirror*, written by a Franciscan, Father Angelus Elli of Milan, and treating of the beginning and the end of human life; *The Seven Trumpets Awakening the Sinner*, written also by a Franciscan, Father Bartholomew of Salutio; *The Lives of the Holy Fathers of the Desert*, by Saint Jerome and other authors; and *The Lives of the Virgins*.

Some companions of mine joined me in the same kind of work. When we were together putting the oxen out to graze on feast days we strengthened our resolves by reading from good books. If we slept out in the open at night, as happened at certain of the busier seasons, we said the Litany of the Saints or of our Lady before going to sleep.

But what brought more joy to my heart than all else was my coming in contact with a priest of the Society of Jesus. Up till that time I had not had a regular confessor. I did not realize how necessary the direction of a spiritual father was for proceeding safely. To him we make known the stirrings of our evil inclinations and the sentiments of our heart, that he may provide us with a remedy for the one and, for the other, rules and ways of advancing. Part of the good advice he gave me was that I should become a brother in the Franciscan Order.

Although our Lord gave me very great help, such was the fickleness of my nature that every little wind of opposition still knocked me down. It was at this time that an awfully fierce temptation to impatience struck me. Farmers are usually bothered this way when the animals take a fancy and so stubbornly refuse to budge that sometimes they seem possessed. The result is that they become so impatient as to fall into the sin of blasphemy. Occasionally this temptation struck me so violently that it made me slip badly and then I felt a very great sorrow at these offences to my Lord.

6

FERVENT SPIRIT FROM GOD: VOW OF CHASTITY

WHEN I was about seventeen our Lord willed to grant me a very fervent resolve to abandon sin and myself entirely, and follow him who is really the way of truth and life eternal. This inflamed me completely with a love of him and with a longing to do great and generous things in his holy service.

May His Divine Majesty be pleased to give me the ability through grace to make him known, that he may become more widely hailed for his generosity since it reaches out to bestow grace even on sinners who have seriously offended him. This thought should be a great help to anyone to do penance over and over.

Here a comparison with new wine is very much to the point. Hardly is it pressed from the grapes when it begins to bubble and froth; then the force of fermentation bursts the hoops and blows the stoppers from the barrel and the wine begins to spill out on the ground; nor does this natural process end until the wine is entirely purified. Such was the first effect of my new determination. It worked within me and broke out, not in any ordinary, but in unusual and marvellous ways.

At night when I was in the fields, far away where no one could hear me, I began to pray so fervently that I marvelled at it. The Holy Spirit supplied words of love and sorrow through which my soul was greatly lifted above itself. With loving desires it yearned for the highest and infinite love of God its creator, sighing and crying for love, weeping at having offended him, awakening more than ever in my heart the call to the religious life.

To take me out of the Egypt of misery our Lord did not will to grant me anything beyond the fervour of his Holy Spirit, something very necessary for beginners in the school of love. In the *Canticle of Canticles* the Holy Spirit points out this truth when the soul says to her divine Spouse: "Draw me. We will follow you eagerly."¹ So slothful is our human nature that if His Divine Majesty does not draw us to himself with the all-powerful hand of grace, in every instance we find that we are failing.

Favoured as I was by our Lord with his Spirit, my devotion to the most Blessed Virgin increased greatly. After her son I had always been devoted to her as my principal patron. Once for recreation my friends and I were with some farmers in the fields on a feast day when a book on the glories of our Lady was being read. It told of the number of people who had escaped actual danger due to different devotions they carried out in her honour. So all of us began the devotion of fasting on bread and water every Saturday—something I kept doing until I entered the religious life. But I did not stop there, for shortly afterwards I made a vow of chastity to the most Blessed Virgin which I promised to keep, with her help, for the rest of my life.

Now that I had consecrated my body and soul to our most holy Mother, a terribly great rebellion rose in me, and I found myself in a violent sea of impure and shameful temptations; so fierce and threatening were the waves of these vivid thoughts and imaginations that they well meant to swallow me alive, as the whale did poor Jonas.

For my part I did all I could, though it was little, to stand firm and not to consent to these wicked temptations. I hurried

for help to the Blessed Virgin. When alone I used the discipline on myself very severely and I tried to distract these thoughts by singing praises to our Lord. Sometimes it even helped to sing popular songs, as I offered them up in my heart to the Creator.

To these temptations was added the occasion of sin coming from an old woman whose home I had to pass sometimes at a very early hour in the morning and sometimes at night, always on certain errands of charity. Though this woman was very old and had no teeth so that she slurred her speech, still the devil put her in my heart so firmly that I could not find any peace day or night. He kept placing before me the occasion, place and ease of offending God; my life was very strained and unhappy because of this and I was unable to find a remedy.

But after some time had passed our Lord willed to free me from this clear-cut danger by using the means I will now relate. We can learn from it that temptations are overcome not so much through penance as through humility. Now, one of my fellow farmers was a very good-living person and I had great confidence in him. We were often in the fields together when it turned out that we had work to do in the same region.

One evening we found ourselves on top of a mountain at a kind of shelter under a rock shelf hollowed out like a grotto. We carried on a long discussion in there before dropping off to sleep. Now I do not know whether someone said, or perhaps I had read it in the *Lives of the Holy Fathers*, that discussing one's temptations is the most efficacious way of overcoming them, since this act of humility destroys the enemy's power and uncovers his lies. Just then I happened to remember this and I made up my mind to speak of the temptation to my friend as to my own confessor. I had hardly finished telling him of my problem—and he consoled me as well as he knew how—when the diabolical temptation left my heart and the evil images disappeared from my mind. From then on, seeing the woman gave me no further trouble but rather filled me with greater disgust.

From this I came to realize that the devil sometimes avails himself of any kind of object; by varying our desires he causes our

bodily eyes to see what does not really exist. This teaches us, then, that we have to be on our guard always and must not trust ourselves when occasionally we need to speak to persons who are a temptation to us.

7

PRAYER OF INTERIOR RECOLLECTION

WITH the fervent spirit our Lord had generously given me I advanced greatly in the love of God. As holy King David says, it is our Lord who makes the soul run quickly in the observance of the divine law¹ and prepares it for a reform of habits. Sacred history tells of great sinners, grown old in their evil ways, who did penance and practised other virtues in such a way as to be the wonder and marvel of the people of every age, once their souls had been touched by the fire of the Holy Spirit.

So as to give me greater graces our Lord introduced me to another kind of prayer, more interior and heartfelt, in which the soul proceeds in a different way—a way in which it appears that the mystical new wine, mentioned earlier, becomes quite purified by the fervour of that prayer and reposes quietly in the vessel of the soul, giving it greater nourishment and better direction in the virtues through its clear light.

How much our Lord appreciated the mark of affection shown toward the most holy Virgin by the vow of chastity I made in her honour, will be seen in the heavenly gifts which he so graciously gave me during my lifetime. Though in my lower nature I felt a very strong rebellion, in the higher faculties I began to be more generous in letting myself experience a tasting of that inner spiritual recollection in him who lives in us. The result was that I sensed myself completely remade in a way very difficult to describe.

1. Psalm 118. 32.

Our Lord started showing me his mercy in this manner when one day I was praying before a painting of the Madonna in the church of the Jesuit Fathers in Sezze, a Madonna like the one painted by St Luke,² seen in St Mary Major. The image became so fixed in my heart and mind that I was completely inflamed with love of it and well could I say with the divine Spouse in the Cantic of Canticles: "You have ravished my heart", O holy Virgin and my beloved, "with one glance of your eyes".³

When I went to pray before the Madonna I was changed into another person, losing thought and intellect in the divine light. Like one dazed I rested in my enjoyment and my soul was very content.

The change that came over me through this kind of prayer was very great. By the divine grace in it I was interiorly taught to do everything for God and I came to understand that without divine help our works are really nothing and have no value, even though performed with all possible exactness. When it was work-time in the fields and the oxen were hitched to the plough, I knelt down on the ground before starting, lifted my mind and my heart to God and said the *Our Father*, the *Hail Mary* and other prayers with joined hands; and in the name of God and of Jesus, as St Paul teaches,⁴ I began my work after first making the sign of the cross as I had been taught by my father.

Though I paid attention to what had to be done I took care to keep as much control over my mind as possible, and I sang praises to our Lord so as not to listen to the temptations the devil suggested.

2. This is the Madonna of the Borghese Chapel in St Mary Major at Rome, called *Salus Populi Romani*. It is commonly attributed to St Luke, but artists judge it to belong to the thirteenth century.

3. Cant. 4. 9.

4. Col. 3. 17.

DISCUSSION OF PRAYER OF RECOLLECTION

BEFORE going on to other points I will spend a little more time discussing the kind of prayer that grew in my soul with the reception of Holy Communion. Through that heavenly and super-substantial Bread which is the very life of the soul I came to conceive a devotion to the Passion of our Lord, along with other deep sentiments.

I went to confession more frequently than I had done at first, to the Jesuit Father whom I mentioned previously, and to the Franciscans. By frequenting this sacrament I sensed within me a great lightness that disposed my soul to run to God as to its centre. This made my confessions easier each time. As a result of the short time in between confessions, my faults were fewer, they were fresher to my memory, and I was more content than when I put off this sacrament because then it was more confusion than confession.

Though I had not yet been entirely stripped of my old defects—their roots had yet to be pulled out—still with its almighty power the goodness of God worked with the most efficacious means of his grace and lifted me entirely outside them as he had done with glorious St Augustine. As I think of this now I cannot hold back the tears. In the meantime, His Divine Majesty increased this heavenly contemplation when I received him in the most Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist from the hands of the priest. And it is not a matter of imagining wonders, for the heavenly King was there in my soul as on a throne. His name is a spreading perfume,¹ ravishing hearts with its scent and drawing to itself the interior and the exterior senses of the soul in a very sweet and gentle way. Its fragrance lifted me above myself and drew me away from everything created as it melted me in love. I seemed to be no longer on earth but in heaven.

1. Cant. 1. 2.

I grew meek and quiet, patient in suffering, with a longing to suffer martyrdom for the love of that Lord who died for me and whom I had received into my soul. When I was urged by my friends and my brothers to join in some recreation, I told them after the usual time had been spent at it: "This is all I can do today, for I have received the most Holy Sacrament!"

We can now discuss what are the delights and experiences coming to one who worthily receives the most holy Body of our Lord. They are many; and among the more outstanding, one of them is the remembrance of our Lord's remarkable Passion. This is the life of the soul and the key for entering heaven to enjoy its imperishable fruit, the vision of God.

Out of an intense devotion to the Passion I began fasting and taking the discipline on Fridays, the day the price of our salvation had been paid. Whenever I was living outside in the fields with other farmers I used to get up at night during the best hours of sleep and go off where I could not be seen; there I scourged myself, all the while thinking of the terribly cruel lashes that were given Jesus Christ at the pillar, so many and so merciless that they covered his entire body and did not spare one spot. When this devotion was over I went back to my companions and as best I could tried to sleep and pass the rest of the night.

Any man who has ever been wounded by the Holy Spirit and felt the effects of his love, is ready for anything. Things he once found difficult become easy; what was once distasteful is soon made pleasant; and this flesh most of us are so prone to pamper, becomes for him a thing to be mortified by prayer, penance and discipline. In all things he praises God who continually works in us by his grace.

When I began to taste God in prayer and in the reception of the most Blessed Sacrament, my heart was set on fire more intensely and I was moved with pity and compassion towards the poor. I was kind toward everyone and I tried to take care of everyone's needs without considering that thereby I would have to do without something myself. Our Lord joined faith and hope to my charity and I firmly believed and trusted that he would be my sure provider. Among the favours I asked of him, one was

that he would have me bring back as many provisions as were needed to support our home and to help the poor.

I never hid from the poor so as to keep from giving them something, and when I went outside in the morning they were waiting where I had to pass. One morning during a very bad year there were more than usual. They all stood round me, as the poor do when they think that they are going to fare pretty well. A woman happened to come along and when she saw so many people around me—the majority were children—she got angry and scolded them. She told them they were to let me go about my way and not bother me. I turned and said to her kindly: “Lady, one does not shout at the poor of Jesus Christ, nor send them off, for they represent the Lord himself who became poor for us!”

I once refused an act of charity to a poor man since I hated him for his detestable office of inspecting the fields, and because I believe that some time before he had displeased me—I do not remember just how. Perhaps he had made me very angry. Anyway, hardly had he gone away when such remorse of conscience came over me that I could not regain my peace of mind, because in this duty of being charitable for the love of God we are not to look to the quality of people. Poverty often causes a man out of necessity to lay aside his own self-respect, even though his relatives are thereby disgraced.

The charity I showed the poor began to cause those at home to have some suspicions about me. They thought that maybe I had been stealing things, especially because, before going out to the poor, I used to go to the principal church in Sezze, St Mary, at a very early hour for my devotions. I prayed there before a very old crucifix² in the first chapel on the left. When I returned home I sensed my mother looking at me. But when they were sure of what I was doing they finally left me in peace without ever again saying anything.

The virtue of obedience was highly ennobled by Christ our Saviour in his exercise of this virtue, and wishing to exalt it to the highest place the Holy Spirit in Sacred Scripture says that obedience

2. It is still venerated there.

is better than sacrifice.³ To teach me to lose myself and to be entirely his, our good Lord got me to walk along the path of this virtue by the light of his grace.

As my teacher here, our Lord gave me my father who was very partial to this virtue and saw in it the perfection of every Christian. When I talked to him about it he would burst out in these words: "My son, I would rather see you truly obedient than apparently devout. You know, obedience is better than sacrifice, because obedience is the great sacrifice one makes of one's very self to God." When my father called for obedience he wanted me to carry it out with faith and hope, without any discussion or objection, though at times it would seem hard.

He explained this better by some examples: "Take this case: suppose I told you to sow seed on the bare rock. Though it would have no way of getting water and of striking root, still if you did this with faith and without any hesitation I would put my trust in God to send you a fine crop of grain, more than if you had put the seed in fertile and good ground. You would be like St Isidore, another keeper of oxen, who struck a rock with the stick he was carrying and water came out of it for himself and his employer in the fields when they were parched with thirst." This is the way he went along, as he quoted examples from the saints.

I enjoyed solitude very much. When I could go somewhere by myself and be able to carry out my devotions, then I was happy. For this reason I was given the name of being unsociable among the farmers who knew me. Sometimes the friendlier of them made a joke of it, especially when they saw me with a rosary in my hands. This was for old people who have one foot in the grave, they said; not for healthy and strong young people, like myself, in the prime of life.

On one occasion I tried in a kind way to correct one of these young men to make him fear God and give up his evil life. I made him think of the pains of hell and the terrible punishments the Divine Majesty metes out to sinners. His reply was an evil one, more heretical than Christian: "If the soul is a spirit, as you say, and the devil also is a spirit, then if at the moment of death he

3. I Kings 15. 22.

causes my soul to be taken, the damage will be his!" I answered that horrible blasphemy by saying that, because of his evil life, it would not be as he so wrongly thought; for, though the soul is a spirit, still it comes under the justice of God as its Creator and Lord; and though the devils have rebelled from God they still are the ministers of his justice. The soul that lives evilly and, worst of all, dies to grace, will be judged willingly or unwillingly by him, the Eternal Judge, according to his works. After this judgment, the body will also be judged.

9

MEANS GOD EMPLOYED TO KEEP HIM MINDFUL OF HIS VOCATION

IN returning to a discussion of my vocation to the religious life, we will see as though in a painting the likeness of a true father who loves his son sincerely and knows how to deal with him, now with kindness, now with strictness.

As the time kept coming closer for me to become a religious of St Francis, I think I was somewhat coolly neglectful of my original desire, at the very moment when I should have been more eager to answer the call of our Lord. But the hand of the Master, who sees everything, struck me with a long and very dangerous sickness. I suffered constant fever and very terrible stomach pains.

Our weakness is so great that, if our Lord leaves us even for a moment, we quickly return to our first undisciplined ways. This verifies what the Holy Spirit says, that if the Lord does not guard the city of our soul, in vain do we take care of it.¹

Some months had already passed during which I lay in bed without strength and without any devotion, plagued by evil. One day death appeared to me in the form we usually see in paintings, a skeleton with a scythe in its hands. Without saying

1. Psalm 126. 1.

a word, with a dark and threatening face it came terribly near me. It seemed to come so close as to take away my life with a powerful stroke of the scythe it was holding; yet it did not touch me in the least.

I was terrified and I called out loudly for help, as anyone does who suddenly sees he is attacked by enemies. At that very moment my soul was pierced, in the same way as the soul of St Paul, by a light that enlightened me completely. I understood what His Divine Majesty wanted of me: I was to keep my promise. I began to pray: "Yes, O Lord, I do want to be a religious!" I repeated these words many times over. My sickness was cured.

I went back to my ordinary work, very withdrawn to myself, very favoured with special heavenly illuminations from God. But I still did not form any resolution. And yet our Lord did not stop knocking at the door of my heart; he wanted me for what he had created me and he would make me understand his divine will by human means.

As I said before, I had some oxen that I used in my work. My affection for them was very great, not only because of my devotion to the crib but also because to me they were wonderful and gentle. One of them was a young one which I had trained to the plough. In every way I liked him more than all the others and, as we say, he could do everything but talk. Sometimes it happened at night that he became separated from the others. All I had to do was call his name and as soon as he heard me he would come running to me, lowing. For me this was a great consolation and it made me praise God in his creatures.

Now one of these oxen was given a sudden fright. Since he was hitched to the plough with others they all ran off together in their fear and did themselves a lot of damage; their feet were badly injured. After this I sensed a change inside me, as if someone had spoken in my soul and said: "Our Lord does not want you in the world any longer!"

The next time the oxen ran away I was put in the greatest danger to my life. I was hitching them to the plough, and was in front of them putting the finishing touches when suddenly they took fright and ran off at a great speed. For about a stone's throw

they dragged me away on my back, and then I lay there on the ground. When I saw the danger I was in, I loudly called out the names of Jesus and Mary. The iron plough, which must surely have hit and killed me, was miraculously raised and passed over me without even grazing me. I got up and kneeling on the ground thanked the Lord God and the most Blessed Virgin for having freed me from such evident danger and again I promised to enter religion.

I was twenty-one when this mishap occurred and, if I am not mistaken, it was the month of October. The months passed right up to February of the next year. I still had the desire to be a religious but took no steps towards carrying it out. I really did not know the reason for my being so irresolute; and I speak the truth that, the more negligent I was, the greater was the help from God and his Blessed Mother. That shows how anxious they are to help those who love them.

One morning when I reached a certain place called *Cona dell'unera*² as I was going to the fields with my oxen, saying my prayers, the Queen of Heaven appeared to me. She said: "My son, if you want to keep all your promises to me, then become a religious as soon as possible".

At this apparition I was as if out of myself for a long time, full of unspeakable consolation, burning with the love of God, and determined to leave the world.

2. He is alluding to ruins of Roman arch construction which exist in many places around Sezze. Most likely he wishes to indicate the ruins at the foot of Mt Antoniano, at the right of which one goes towards Rome along the consular road, and which are called *Cona dell'uva nera* (bunches of dark grapes). Perhaps *Cona dell'unera* comes from that.

IO

MANIFESTATION OF INTENTION OF BECOMING A LAY-BROTHER; OBSTACLES TO REALIZING THIS

I OFTEN went to the monastery of the Franciscan Fathers; my mother would take me there to go to confession. She highly praised their goodness and their ability as confessors and wanted me to tell my sins to them.

One morning I was going to confession, along with other people, to Father Bonaventure of Rome, a very prudent man. I took the time on this occasion to tell him what I was thinking of doing, namely, becoming a religious, and that I wanted to be a lay-brother. This good Father showed how very wise and practical he was for he did not give me his approval for this right away; nor did he leave me very happy when he said that this was something I was to recommend to God, something I had to examine very closely so that later I would not have any regrets.

Afterwards I talked about this to one of the lay-brothers who used to go on the quest for alms, Brother Angelus of Sezze. He had guided many another young man into his Order.¹ After a short talk with him he told me that the time had not yet come for me, but that he would commend me to God.

I had no rest till I made the entire matter known to those at home, my father, my mother and my brothers. With all the affection that bound them closely together and that still ruled our home, they gave in to me with our Lord's help, since they did not want to keep me from this worthy goal. There was one exception, my brother John Baptist, whom I loved more than the others. I calmed him when I said that I had taken a vow and that is why I was not able to do less. He should be patient, then, since each of us has to search out his own path on which to save his soul. We are not born for this world but to reign with God.

Once I knew my parents had given in to my wishes I went back

1. The Order of Friars Minor.

to school again, this time in charge of the curate of our parish of St Lawrence. His name was Don Joseph Piacentino, a very serious man, theologian and preacher. He began an inquiry to see what I had in mind. I told him that it was my determination to become a religious of St Francis, of the community of our Lady of Grace, but that I wanted to be a lay-brother, not a priest. He praised this resolution of mine very much and as if amazed and in wonderment at it, he broke out in these words which he said in Latin—words, I am told, of St Augustine: “The ignorant and the unlettered come and carry off paradise, and we, with our learning, go off to hell!”² He said he was glad I was going to school but that I should learn only what is related to the life of a lay religious, such as about serving Mass, the works of mercy, the sacraments of the Church, along with other devotions and virtues that are practised in religion.

Once my purpose of being a lay-brother became known, I was the centre of some disturbance among my parents and the others at home for, as I said, my mother and father wanted me to be a priest. However, since my wonderful old father was very happy as long as he saw all his children busy in serving God, he gave in peacefully.

Those who gave me trouble on this point were my relatives; some of them were unyielding. They had no light guiding them except for seeing the vanities of the world. Poor people! They thought it a great degradation and of little honour to my kin for me to embrace the humble state of a lay religious. My answer to them was that there were lay-brothers of St Francis from the better families of Sezze and that in the Order of the same St Francis there were great saints who out of humility did not want to say Mass, in imitation of their holy Founder; besides, it was not necessary that all the members of a religious society be priests.

Really, what caused me even greater anxiety than this was that someone in the family made my resolve known to one of my uncles, my mother’s brother, Don Francis Maccioni. He was a canon in the cathedral at Sezze, and at Rome was in the court of

Anthony Cardinal Barberini.³ He let it be known that he would not be happy at all at my becoming a religious.

That made me very worried when I heard it. I had put my hope in him as being the person who was in a position to help me more than anyone else. Now that I saw my way was cut off, there was no more peace in my heart. Most of my nights were spent in tears and sighs.

In order the better to shake my resolve this canon let it be made known through a very devout and influential person that he would sign his canonry over to me just as soon as I changed my mind. But our Lord God gave me such constancy and such a distaste for worldly things that I would not have allowed myself to give in if they had offered me a kingdom. I said to myself: "Tell me, John Charles, if the proposal were made to you, would you prefer being a Cardinal of Holy Church or a poor friar of St Francis?" The answer was: "I would give up the cardinalate without any hesitation and willingly embrace the holy poverty of religion".

There was another less dangerous attack. It was this: at the same time as I was trying to put this inspiration from God into effect, one of my very close friends began talking one day very cleverly about marriage, right in the middle of a conversation about ordinary things. Actually he was bluntly suggesting that I should marry. I would not let him say another word. I was very upset and said: "Don't ever talk to me again about what you just mentioned!" The poor fellow became mute at what I had said and left without saying a word.

3. Anthony Barberini, senior (1569-1646), Capuchin, was created a cardinal in 1624 by Pope Urban VIII, his brother.

II

OTHER OBSTACLES; THE APPEARANCE OF ST FRANCIS AND ST ANTHONY OF PADUA

NO sooner was one set of obstacles out of the way when others appeared without giving me a breathing-spell. On this sea of disturbances I was like a ship without rigging, without oars and sails, battered by the storm, guided only by the providence and counsel of God. When he wants us to accomplish great and important things, it is not his way to allow everything to go along very gently and smoothly; rather to ensure that we embrace these tasks with great determination, he permits difficulties to arise so that what we do will be well grounded on the rock of virtue.

With God's permission it happened that I fell sick again, together with my brother who was next to me in age. I thought much of this brother and he returned this esteem. As I said before, his name was John Baptist. He was nineteen years of age, very honest and of pleasing speech and manners.

My sickness did not amount to much but John Baptist kept getting worse all the time. The last sacraments, the most Holy Eucharist and Extreme Unction, were given to him. One day, when he was so sick that we thought he was surely going to die, I was with my grief-stricken mother in another room getting ready the clothes that would be needed for the deceased—there really was no longer any doubt that we would be burying him. In the midst of many tears my mother began speaking sadly to me: "My son, if your brother dies, you will not be able to become a religious since there is no one else to help at home. Your father is now an old man, your other three brothers and two sisters are very young; think how it would be without the two of you!"

Though naturally I grieved at seeing my mother so sorrowful at the expected loss of a very dear son, what she had said to me did not sadden me very much. I answered her gently and urged her to have confidence in the most Blessed Virgin, for she would

help us in this great trial just as she had done with our little brother who at birth was very ugly and after a few days became so pretty and lovable that we were all amazed. I went on like that consoling her, and then I asked her if I could not please leave the house for a while and I would come back right away.

She said I might and I went off to visit an image of the Madonna that is about half a mile outside the city, along the road just as it comes down the mountain and enters the valley, and is called *Cona dell'appoggio*. I had a special devotion to this image.¹ Whenever I passed it I said some prayers and saluted it with the *Ave Maria*, the *Salve Regina*, and the *Pater Noster* for the Infant Jesus our Lady held in her arms.

I knelt before the Madonna and with deep affection I pleaded for the health of my brother. With great faith I said: "Most Holy Mother, I will not leave here until you make him well for me so that I can keep my promise to you". With uplifted soul and peaceful mind I stayed there a long time until I understood interiorly that I had obtained the favour. I left the sacred image with great trust and went back home. There I found my brother very much better and in a short time he recovered his health with the help of our Lord.

One night during these difficulties I had a vision. It seemed that I found myself in a deep place. It was about two stones' throws in depth, its opening was round and as wide as the place was deep, but it narrowed at the bottom; it was full of brambles and of such interwoven thorn-bushes that I was unable to walk at all. There I was, right in the middle, even though I had tried hard to get out for a long time. There was no way for me to take even one step ahead.

I was covered with sweat due to my efforts and was terribly upset. I did not know what I was going to do. All of a sudden I saw coming towards me two Friars Minor of venerable appearance, wearing the habit and cord and the clerical tonsure, as the Friars do yet at St Francis a Ripa in Rome. They spoke to me with

1. To the present day this image is called the *Madonna dell'appoggio* (The Madonna of Help), and is venerated in a little church—now sadly ruined by the war—situated along the old mule-road that goes from the town to the plain.

very great gentleness and friendliness: "Son, what are you doing here, so out of breath?" I said: "Fathers, here I am trying to get out of this place, and I cannot!" Then, full of charity, they consoled me like loving fathers. At the same time they took me by the hand, one at my right and one at my left, and in the twinkling of an eye lifted me out of the pit and put me down on a wonderful plain.

Many times I told this to different spiritual directors and close friends of God. They all said that these two Friars were St Francis and St Anthony of Padua, and that this was a sign as to the Order I should enter.

Once I had to go from one piece of our land to another, both of which were near the road to Rome. After hitching up the oxen and plough I had hardly started to walk when two Franciscans overtook me. From what they told me they were going to Rome. According to their holy custom they greeted me with "*Deo gratias!*" and "*Praised be Jesus Christ!*" I returned their greeting and was very happy to see them. We walked along together and as they were full of love and zeal for the salvation of souls they began to converse very intimately with me about the kingdom of God.

When I saw their humility and detachment from the world I confided in them about my resolution to enter their Order, hoping they would give me some information on what I had to do. They gladly did so; they told me to go to the monastery of St Francis a Ripa in Rome for the octave of Easter which was not very far off. The reception of novices would take place then, and I would surely be received.

We talked about other things in the short time that we walked along together. They gave me some saintly instructions as to how to live in a spiritual way. Everything they said I stored up in my heart, for to me I had found two angels from paradise. From the moment that I had seen them I knew within my very soul that it was not by chance that I met these religious, but by a special providence of God.

One thing made me very sure of this. The oxen that I had with we were very timid, as I have noted before, and would run away

on seeing anything unusual. This time they went along in front of these friends of God quietly and meekly, as though they knew they were safe from any harm, until we reached where I had to stop. There my friends saluted me cordially and left me in peace, consoled with the blessing of God.

12

TWO JOURNEYS TO ROME TO BE RECEIVED INTO THE FRANCISCAN ORDER

THE first time I went to Rome I did so with the consent of my whole family during the Holy Year of Urban VIII, of happy memory.¹ This time one of my elder brothers, who had to go to Nettuno, gladly accompanied me a good distance of the way. He stayed with me until we met a man from Sermoneta who was also going to Rome. After giving me some money my brother left me with him, begging him to see that I did not meet any harm during the journey and to instruct me in what I had to do.

This person graciously offered his services; he promised my brother to do this for me, especially when he learned that I was going into the religious life there. He was very Christian and pleasant in his ways, and once we were in Rome he took me to a hotel near St Andrew della Valle, called *The Paradise*.² He introduced me to the manager whose name was Signor Bernardino. Then with marked cordiality towards me he left to see to his own affairs.

The first thing I did was to find out where my priest uncle lived. I went to see him, to tell him why I had come to Rome. He received me kindly and gave in easily to my becoming a religious, but a clerical religious. He emphasized the reasons why I should not enter the state of the lay-brothers, and said I would

1. This was the Holy Year of 1625.

2. The hotel still stands between the Piazza del Paradiso and the Largo dei Chiavari.

not be able to persevere in it because of the many difficulties concerning obedience.

Without settling anything on this he himself took me to St Francis a Ripa³ and spoke to the Fathers about my intentions. But, since the reception of novices was not taking place at that time, they dismissed me kindly and promised that when the next time for reception came around they would advise me by letter and would be glad to put me in the novitiate.

With this good news I went back to Sezze a very happy person. When some of the town loafers, including a few close friends, saw me, they laughed and made a joke of what I wanted to do.

I was back in Sezze only a short time when word reached me from Rome that I should come there immediately, as a reception of novices was to be held. I told this news to my family. Before she would let me go, my mother wanted me to stay home another day so that I could have a meal with my father, brothers and sisters on the morning of my departure. It was like an Easter Day for us!

While we were at table, towards the end of the meal my mother, good woman that she was, could not restrain her affection and began to show by what she said how much she felt my leave-taking. "Son, I think this will be the last time we will eat together and I do not know if I will see you again. So I beg you, for the love that I have always had for you, to leave something with me, something that you usually carry with you, to make me remember you on seeing it; in that way I will be consoled in my grief!"

I controlled myself during this sad moment, with the help of God. I wanted to comfort her and so with a smile told her that I

3. The monastery of St Francis a Ripa was built at the place where St Francis stayed on coming to Rome and where his cell is still preserved. Through a Bull of Pope Gregory IX in 1229, the monastery was given to the Order of Friars Minor. According to Father Luke Wadding, famous Franciscan historian, the Friars lived there from the year 1212.

In the church repose the bodies of St Charles of Sezze, Blessed Ludovica Albertoni, and the Venerable Innocent of Chiusi, Bartholomew of Salutio, Francis of Cisterna, and others. Next to the cell of St Francis there has been arranged an interesting *Museum of St Charles of Sezze*.

The Minister Provincial to whom John Charles went for admission to the Franciscan Order lived there.

was going only to be admitted and that I would come back before being clothed in the habit. If I remember correctly, I took my rosary and gave it to her.

When the day came for leaving, a Thursday, it turned out that Peter de Vecchi also had to go to Rome to be received into the Capuchins, in fulfilment of a vow he had taken. Because we were very close companions we decided to go together. We left for Rome at a very early hour and there we stopped at the same hotel in the Piazza del Paradiso where I had stayed the first time.

After getting something to eat we went off anxiously to see my uncle, Don Francis Maccioni. We found him at home and he said he had settled everything with the Fathers at St Francis a Ripa. I was to be received; I should certainly go there confidently and was to inform him at once if any difficulty arose. Then he took us to the hotel where we were staying and spoke to the manager, Signor Bernardino, a good friend of his. He asked him to look after me and deposited with him as much money as I needed. Then he left me there, once again telling me to go to St Francis in the morning.

Who does not wonder at the profound judgments of God and at the way he manages all things? The one person who, perhaps out of natural love, had been so against my choice as to make me weep many times, was now completely changed and was taking care of my affairs as though they were his own! What the Holy Spirit says in Sacred Scripture is certainly true, that the man who trusts in God will not be confounded.⁴

DIFFICULTIES PRECEDING HIS ADMISSION

THE following morning my friend and I went to St Francis a Ripa. After greeting the Minister Provincial who at that time was Father John Baptist of San Marcello, some of the religious later took me to the room of the same Father where the admission of novices was in progress. There I saw four Fathers Definitors¹ with the Father Provincial. They gave me an oral examination according to the Constitutions of their Order. Then they wanted to see my papers, meaning the certificate of my baptism and of the municipality where I lived. One particular was missing in these papers, an attestation to the effect that I did not belong to the Jewish race.²

A disagreement started among the Definitors over this deficiency. On this point one of them strongly opposed the others, and his word was so respected that all agreed to accept another document if signed by a notary. The very Father who had taken my part so much drew up a paper containing what I needed. Then he told me where the notary's office was, near the Ponte Sisto, in the district as you go to St Peter in Montorio. I went there with my companion who stayed with me all the while, to see how this would turn out.

This is when the devil got the upper hand. I found the office and told the notary what I wanted. Then I showed him the paper the Father had drawn up, so that he would understand my situation the better, and we agreed on five lire as the fee since this is what he asked. Two witnesses would be needed to make the document authentic. My friend, who was inexperienced in these legal matters, said he would be one of the witnesses himself and the second would be another man from Sezze who was at the hotel, but would not be actually present. I had told him as we

1. Counsellors to the Minister Provincial.

2. The Constitutions of the Order at that time forbade admitting descendants of Jews to the fourth generation.

came along the street that this could not be done. The witnesses have to be present when documents of this nature are drawn up.

The notary did not appreciate the simplicity of the young fellow but got so angry and suspicious that he began to swear at us, calling us rogues and treating us like spies who were trying to ruin him by getting him to draw up false documents. When poor Peter saw the man so upset and cursing he knelt down and asked pardon for what he had said. He had no idea that his suggestion would hurt the notary's good name, but thought it quite proper.

At this act of humility the notary became more enraged. With words worse than his anger he started to chase us out. He said he would have us whipped and put in prison like sly criminals. Then in a rage he went outside to call the police. The good Lord permitted that there should be none about just then, as only a corporal and a few others were assigned to that district.

Once I saw how badly our business had turned out I said: "Peter, my friend, this is no time to show humility but just to run and save our lives!" That is what we did. Once out of the office we more than just walked, fearing that any moment we would be taken prisoner.

After this mishap and realizing the many difficulties involved, I began to lose courage and to waver like any youngster of little courage and less experience; perhaps it would be better for me to go back home, I thought. But my friend had a lot of spirit and he bolstered up mine; he urged me to keep trying and to use every help in the difficulty so as not to fail altogether. He was determined to go to my priest uncle without delay; he would straighten out everything. And off he started.

Just as he was leaving, my uncle came looking for me. He asked me how things had gone with the admission. I told him briefly of the difficulty of my not having a good certificate and that I needed another one. He took me to a notary from Sezze by the name of Santi Cola, with whom I had gone to school. He drew up the required certificate and I went back to St Francis with my companion.

As I was going into the monastery I met the Father Guardian

of St Francis of Nazzano. He made me walk along with him. He asked for the certificate and after reading it said that it was useless because it did not have the seal. I was amazed at this. I wanted to get the opinion of the Father who had helped me before and he was just going across the garden. He told me not to worry any longer; he would settle things. I was not to return to the hotel but was to stay in the monastery and should quickly arrange for getting the clothes and whatever else was required, for he wanted to send me as soon as possible to the novitiate with the aforesaid Guardian.

Now that all these difficulties had been overcome with the help of divine grace, I gave thought to buying cloth for my habit and other necessary articles. A young artisan had been admitted with me and I gave him some things he needed, because he was poor.

The next day I had not yet left Rome, so my friend and I went to visit the church of St Mary Major. We said our prayers, and as we were going out the door some poor people were there asking for alms. Out of love of God I gave them all the money I had left. Then we went to visit our Lady of Victory and I recommended myself to her with great devotion. I begged her as a special favour to give me the grace of being able to report a victory over my enemies during the year of novitiate and I promised that I would come to visit her in thanksgiving after I made my profession. That night the friars asked me to attend Matins. A special consolation came over me in listening to them sing the divine praises, and a wonderful devotion rose within me as I heard them taking the discipline³ made of metal links.

On the morning that I had to leave Rome for Nazzano, the place of the novitiate, my uncle, Don Francis Maccioni, came to St Francis a Ripa very early. He had them call the Father Provincial. The two went aside and my uncle told him that it would not be good for me to receive the habit just then, but suggested that I

3. "Taking the discipline" is an ascetical practice many centuries old in Religious Orders. The instrument used, called a discipline, is a kind of whip or scourge ordinarily made of several strands of stout cord whose ends are tied in knots. With this discipline one scourges oneself while saying psalms of a penitential nature with other prayers.

should go back to Sezze for another year's study, or more if necessary, and then to be received as a cleric. The Father said to him: "Let us see what the young man says; if he is satisfied with this I will gladly do it". My answer was: "Very Reverend Father, if you please, I want to receive the habit now and to be a lay-brother". Then he embraced me warmly and said: "Go, my son! A blessing on you, and may our Lord be with you and accompany you!"

We thanked him then for his great charity, and left. All this happened with my companion, Peter de Vecchi, who did not want to leave till that time. This certainly proved him a true friend.

I4

DEPARTURE FROM ROME FOR NAZZANO

BLESSED be our Lord, for under his care I left Rome on the twelfth of May,¹ in the company of the Father Guardian of St Francis of Nazzano and his companion, and also with the other young man who had been admitted, as I mentioned. We started off and went along the road very devoutly as we recited the seven Psalms of David, the Litanies, the crown of six decades of our Lady,² and the most holy Rosary.

The Father Guardian wanted us to travel with eyes downcast, with only little talking, and then it should be on the things of God. Because of the lessons he kept giving us by way of instruction in holiness I did not dare raise my eyes, so as not in any way to go against what he had told us; nor did I speak at all. The young artisan, who had been about in the world and had a fine command of speech, enjoyed talking with me about innocent things; but

1. 1635.

2. The so-called crown of St Bridget consisting of six decades, to which are added three *Hail Marys* in memory of the sixty-three years that, according to a tradition, the Blessed Virgin lived on earth.

since I was not much of a conversationalist and at the same time was afraid of the Father Guardian, I for the most part refused to talk to him. Once, however, noticing how quiet I was and hardly paying attention to him, he remarked: "You, with your silence, will stay in religion and I, with my talking, do not know if I will stay". He was foretelling what was actually to happen, for he left in the middle of the novitiate.

We continued our journey with some discomfiture—the sun was hot for going along on foot, and besides each of us carried a pack on his back. The first day we reached the monastery at Fiano, called St Stephen.³ There we were welcomed with marked joy by the Guardian, Father Paul of Fiano, a very religious man. He treated us all with great charity and we spent the night there. On the following day, our Father Guardian said Mass early and we left all the priests, thanking them for their kindness, and set out for the monastery of Nazzano.

The cloister at Nazzano had an atmosphere of special devotion that touched the soul and lifted it up to God. The Friars were very happy at the return of their Superior and spiritual father. When they led him inside the bell was rung and all came together, including the novices. They knelt down to kiss his hands; then with towels they wiped away the perspiration, for really he and his companion were soaked through and through because of the hot sun and the heavy habits. After that they washed their feet with hot water mixed with sweet-smelling herbs, while they sang hymns and psalms.

In this little ceremony of charity and humility they acted with such loving attention as to enrapture one. To witness it was refreshing to body and soul. A meal of vegetables was prepared, so that with joy and gratitude in the Lord they might enjoy their holy poverty. We seculars also were treated with great charity.

Then a poor but clean room was assigned us, and our thanks went up to His Divine Majesty for having conducted us to this holy place in the woods, far from the world. Our older Fathers

3. The monastery of Fiano, dedicated to the protomartyr St Stephen, was given to the Friars Minor in 1602; it was abandoned, with so many others, following the suppression of religion by the Italian Government.

claim that this monastery was established by St Anthony of Padua.⁴

For about three days the Fathers treated us as seculars, keeping us busy at manual work in the monastery.

At last the time came for our clothing in the holy habit. Since the Father Guardian wished to hold the ceremony the following morning, he informed us through one of the Friars that if we wished to receive the habit, we should go to the refectory to ask for it for the love of God, that evening just before six o'clock. There were three of us, for one had arrived before we had. We all went gladly, to be there when the Friars assembled for the blessing of the table. When it had been given they sat down. They had us young worldlings kneel up straight in the middle of the refectory, and in a line. The first one, from Valtellina, the tallest of the three, was at the right; the second was the one who had come with me from Rome; the last was myself, the smallest of them all.

In a voice like that of a stranger, as if he had never known or seen us, the Father Guardian asked us as a group why we had come there and what was our wish. Then he asked the first one what he wanted. He answered that he desired the holy habit for the love of God; the last two of us gave the same answer. Once he had listened to our wishes he began to gesture threateningly and to scold us in a loud voice: "I have taken care of you the last few days and I can see very well that you are a lot of lazy do-nothings who are anxious to get out of work. You were dying of hunger in your own homes and now you have come here to starve us. So, go away! We are not going to keep this kind of people in our monasteries! All right, Father Master, open the door and send them away!"

It had astounded me to hear this kind of talk, but when he told the Father to dismiss us I was like one in a dream. The Master

4. According to a tradition recorded by Gonzaga and Wadding, this was in 1229. The mortal remains of the servant of God, Sister Elisabeth of Vissio (died 1615) and of Blessed Stephen Molina (died 1579), promoter of the Reform in the Roman Province, lie here. But at present this monastery does not belong to the religious.

got up from his place and without saying a word put us outside and then locked the door.

We were dismayed and stupefied. Each of us bemoaned the misfortune and bad luck that had come without any warning. Everyone had his opinion as to what was to be done. The one from Tuscany, my companion on the journey from Rome, said very decidedly that he wanted to leave and not to do anything about it. I told him that for many reasons it would not be well to leave right away and that it seemed very strange to me that these Fathers would want to insult us the way they had without telling us why; after all, we had not committed any crime that would merit being turned away shamefully, especially since they had lodged us for several days and made us spend so much money. It would be a waste! "So it seems best", I said, "to go back in through the garden gate and see what they do." This was satisfactory to them and we determined to do it. First we said the Litany of the most Blessed Virgin. We recommended ourselves to our Lady and asked her to be our help in this extreme need. We prayed until we reached the gate leading into the garden, a lattice-gate which was the exit for anyone going down into Nazzano. It was shut and none of us knew how to open it. But our Lord never abandons his servants and he took care that it came open for us quite accidentally. We went in and saw two Friars who seemed to be on a tour of inspection, perhaps because they suspected that we had left, as we would have done had we agreed with my companion. As soon as they saw us they went off without saying a word.

Now, to get into the monastery there was a little door that did not lead directly into the garden, but into a walled enclosure with its own door made of planks. This the Friars locked from the inside with a chain when they went in to pray. With the help of the other two I scaled the wall and opened the door. The others came in.

We knocked at the little door which was near the refectory. The Father Guardian sent the Master to see who was knocking there. The Master came and opened the door so little that he could scarcely see us. Then he went back to give a message to the

Guardian. I smiled at that and remarked to the others: "Would he do that if we were bandits, standing here with guns?!"

When the meal was over and grace had been said, the Father Guardian with the Vicar, Father Romanus of Rome, a man of exalted prayer, came to the door followed by some other Friars. They opened the door without letting us come inside and made us lie on the ground; and as though surprised and amazed at seeing us the Guardian began to upbraid us even more than before. "Boys, I do not know how you could be so impudent as to return to this holy place, to disturb these servants of God at their prayers. Now I told you that you are not meant for the religious life, that you have come to avoid hunger and not to serve God. But since it is late I am willing to keep you in the monastery tonight so that wild animals will not devour you. Tomorrow morning early you will leave here. The Master will see about giving you some bread as an alms and a little wine to fill your flasks, and if there is any food prepared in the kitchen at that time he will give you some of it, outside this door. Now go to bed, so that you can all walk the better tomorrow." Then he left us.

Some food was brought us, small pieces of bread and a salad. As we were hungry, this was a real help. During the night, when we wanted to get our rest, the devils began disturbing the Tuscan with frightful images. Every once in a while he screamed for help. Because of such a strange happening we were disturbed a good deal of the night and try as I would to keep him from being afraid, it was not enough to keep him quiet. As I see it, it was due to the cowardliness he had shown from the start, that the devil eventually got control of him and in time managed to degrade him completely. That is the way it turned out. He did not make use of his vocation and of the miracle that he was to see worked on himself. He was suddenly cured of a skin infection when he was clothed in the habit. He left the novitiate after it was better than half over.

CLOTHED IN THE HABIT OF ST FRANCIS

THE day came, so longed for. The Fathers had decided to clothe us in the holy habit of St Francis. That morning, as we hung between the fear of again being sent away and the hope of staying, one of the Friars was sent by the Father Guardian to take us to the refectory. He did so without saying what awaited us. There the three of us had our hair trimmed in the style of lay-brothers. When I saw my hair on the floor I fervently thanked our Lord; now I knew that my longings were being fulfilled after so many disturbing obstacles.¹

Then they took us to the church to invest us solemnly in the habit; and that this sacred function by which we were to be consecrated to God might be held with all possible devotion and lift our hearts up to the Divine Majesty, they had us attend Holy Mass and receive our Lord's most Sacred Body. We had first made a general confession.

All the Friars met in the sacristy and from there they went out in order to the high altar with the Father Guardian who was vested in cope. We three knelt on the lowest step holding lighted candles. A short sermon was given in which we were exhorted to think of the special grace our Lord was giving us in withdrawing us from the disturbances of the world and putting us in holy religion, the place of peace and quiet, where there is a better chance of serving God. We were urged to perseverance in resisting the temptations of the devils.

After the sermon the Father Guardian blessed the habits; then with the accompanying prayers he put on us the garment of penance of the glorious Patriarch St Francis. It was the 18th of

1. The trial given these three aspirants by the Father Guardian may seem strange and exaggerated. But we should remember that it was really necessary at that period to put new candidates for the Order under serious probation, because of the tendency of some families to dedicate their children for the religious life, and sometimes actually force them into it, even if they were not at all so inclined.

May, a Saturday, in the year 1635, and I was twenty-two years old. He gave us each a name: Brother Joseph to the one from Valtellina; Brother Alexius to the one from Tuscany; and to me, Brother Cosmas, a name that was changed at my profession to Brother Charles, as I will explain later. All three of us were clothed as lay-brothers.

After the ceremony of investiture the chanter immediately intoned the *Te Deum*, and while the choir sang it the other Friars came to give us the kiss of peace.

Once I had been clothed in the habit the Father Guardian put me under the charge of the Master of lay-brothers, Brother Diego of Catino,² to train me in everything required. He was a man of mature age, very wise, and possessed of marked virtue, prayer, charity and austerity. It was said of him by the Friars that he kept all the Lents of our Father St Francis, living on bread and dried grapes. After dismissing the novices at night after Matins he would stay in the church to pray and to weep over the sufferings of Jesus Christ.

And just as he walked the path of perfection and goodness, so he drew the eight of us novices along the same path. He showed us how to behave well, to speak rightly, and to direct our every action toward virtue.

He also taught us how to fight against temptations and he told us that the best way was to talk them over with a director. He gave me orders to tell him whatever happened to me. To all of us he gave the example of a gardener who stays in the orchard because someone is going to rob it. As long as the thief does not know that he is being watched by the owner, he goes ahead stealing the fruit; but when he realizes that the owner has seen him, he makes off. That is the way the devil acts when through various temptations he comes to rob us of the grace of God. As long as we act like sleeping people and do not make these temptations known

2. Catino (Rieti). Brother Diego was professed on 17 November 1608. Everyone admired him for his gentle simplicity united to rare prudence, patience, and such great meekness that no one ever saw him upset. He was elected as Master of lay-brothers many times. He died on 15 January 1657, with a reputation for sanctity.

to our spiritual fathers, then he carries out his evil work. But when he knows that he is found out by the priest we have consulted he loses his power and goes away, leaving us alone for a while.

16

MANUAL WORK

THE life of the lay-brothers in the Franciscan Order is made up mainly of prayer, humility, obedience and love in serving the other Friars by manual labour in the monastery. St Francis actually called them the mothers of the other Friars.

Our Master instructed us in acts of humility, showing us how to help in the kitchen and carry out our assignments there with the greatest possible love. In such a necessary and meritorious work the first of the seven works of mercy is exercised, which is to feed the hungry. In the Gospel this is greatly praised by Christ. That we might do this work with all possible love, he taught us to reflect how with the food we had prepared we were to feed many poor persons who were continually giving themselves over to the praise of God in prayer.

When dinner was over and we were washing the dishes in the kitchen, he wanted us to recite some prayers such as the Litany of our Blessed Lady, the Psalm *Miserere*, the *De Profundis* for the souls in purgatory, and other prayers for our benefactors; and during whatever else we did we should give ourselves to God by acts of love and of resignation to his divine will. Our service of the sick Friars should be carried out with all the perfection possible, since our holy Father St Francis commands this¹ in order to keep charity among his religious at its highest.

Our Master also had us apply ourselves with exactness to other manual work, such as sweeping the house, working in the garden and going on the quest. We should not be ashamed to carry a

1. *Rule of the Order of Friars Minor*, Chapter 6.

sack on our shoulder, but go confidently to ask an alms for the love of our Love who became poor for our sake though he was the king of heaven and earth.

This is a very profitable method of teaching beginners. In all their actions, however tiresome, they learn to find God and to enkindle their love; which is especially true of those who have been called by His Majesty to the active life. They form good habits and are disposed at all times to love God and to taste his unspeakable sweetness.

Out of holy obedience, I gladly trained myself in the exercises of humility and charity, and of prayer also. Besides the lessons my father had given me in it, obedience was very deeply impressed on my heart by the wonderful things the Father Guardian said about it: how grateful, for example, he was to God for his only-begotten Son who had been obedient even to death; to what a high degree of love and perfection it takes a person, and finally the wonderful examples we have seen of it in the lives of the saints. He spoke so glowingly of obedience that I determined to do anything he told me, no matter how difficult. I will recount some of the things that happened.

One day the Father Guardian took me with him into the town of Nazzano. When his business there was finished, we started back to the monastery. As we came into the woods by which it was surrounded, there across our path was a tree-trunk so big that two men could hardly encircle it. He told me to lift it out of the way. Without hesitating or thinking of anything else, I took my mantle off and went to take hold of it. But I hardly touched it when he took my hand and said that I would not have to do anything further about it; what I had done was enough, without looking for a miracle. The truly obedient person, he said, completely satisfies this virtue when he tries to do what he is told, in so far as he is able, even though it is above his human strength.

He also said that if we believed in obedience with simplicity, even bears and lions and other wild animals would be as gentle as lambs if we were commanded to go out and catch them.

Another time, I and a fellow-novice were planting cabbages in the garden at the bidding of the Master, and we were doing

this as it is always done, with the roots down. The Father Guardian came along, greeted us, and then asked us what we were doing. We told him that we were planting cabbages. When he saw how we were doing it, he said it was not right, but that we should have planted them with the leaves down and the roots up. He took the dibble from my hand, and put two or three plants in the ground the way he had described. My companion said that they would not take root, but would dry up, since the roots which should have been covered by the soil were exposed to the sun. The Guardian scolded him for this answer and sent him into the monastery; then he gave the dibble back and told me to continue putting in the plants as he had done. I did this with all that were left. I think anyone would have learned the virtue of obedience through the holiness of that Father who had such great faith, because those plants took hold and did very well!

May God be praised in his works, for this as for other things that are not mentioned here.

I 7

PENITENTIAL EXERCISES

THE exercises of penance that are part of the year of novitiate are strange, because in that year the Order is testing the novice and the novice tries the Order to see if it is what he wants. That is why it is the duty of the Masters along with the Guardians to use every means and device in finding out whether the young men who have taken the habit are really moved by the spirit of God. Especially do they use the means of obedience and mortification.

To be sure of a novice's motives, they do not overlook any defect, however small; they strictly correct and punish it by penances, for example, by having the novice use the discipline for the space of one or two *Miserere*; again by making him eat

with the hood up while kneeling in the middle of the refectory, or sometimes while standing with a stone around his neck, or while walking.

As I recall, I had passed half of the novitiate year in this way, when greater strictness was used and the hand of penance pressed down very hard, almost to the point of overwhelming my weak powers. I can only guess that this was the case for two reasons: first, my physical constitution had changed very much and lacked strength due to the illnesses I had gone through; and then my head also suffered from weakness because of the little sleep I was getting,¹ and so to all external appearances I looked like a worthless person who gave every sign of not being any good for the duties of the religious life; secondly, they not only wanted to see if my vocation was genuine, but even more to find out whether the spirit of prayer and mental abstraction that I had, were from God. I say that because one day on leaving the church and having to walk through the monastery cloister, where the Master and the Father Guardian were talking about this very thing—thinking no doubt that² I did not hear them—I concluded that they intended³ to use penance and obedience to see if what appeared externally was gold or silver.

First the Master took me aside privately; he was not able to impose penances on the novices publicly in front of the Superior or the community, but he could do so in a place apart, such as in the big kitchen. In the middle of the night during the winter, after Matins and meditation were over, he called us all together in the kitchen, not only to instruct us in spiritual matters, but to show us more about our work there and how to cook the vegetables.

Because I was often at fault in different things he gave me penances to correct these. Two or three times he had me take the discipline after midnight till almost daybreak. On other occasions he made me put a rock on my neck and hold it there all the time he remained with me, which would be for an hour and a half, and more often two hours.

1. What mainly kept him from getting sufficient sleep, as will be related later, were the annoyances he suffered from the devils.

To punish me if I was at fault in speech I had to drag my tongue many times along the entire length of the kitchen. Once in the summer, when I broke silence before noon during a period of prayer after None, I was given this penance which I kept at from half past two o'clock till eight. Our Lord had permitted the Master to forget all about the command he had given me. There must have been good reason why that member of my body, which the Lord had given me for honouring and blessing him, was getting such punishment.²

The Father Guardian was not slow in doing his part also, in the refectory in front of the community. He spoke to me roughly as one who had committed great faults, and he followed up what he said with penances and mortifications. Once in a while he made me take the discipline for the space of a *Miserere* with the *De Profundis*, though this was usual for all the novices. What he had me do especially was to eat bread and water, kneeling on the floor, sometimes without my hood and other times with a stone around my neck.

If the Guardian allowed me to have some soup as I knelt there, two very impolite kittens quickly ran and began eating from my plate. This mortification lasted for a long time until they were trained to behave themselves.

The novice from Valtellina, my friend, was very put out at what these cats were doing. One day he found them in the refectory while the Friars were in their rooms during silence. He shut the doors and gave them a good whipping, and while doing it he made a kind of scratching sound. After that, whenever they heard that sound they ran off at top speed and did not dare enter the refectory.

I think it was in the eleventh or twelfth month of my novitiate

2. Notice the Saint's great virtue. He always considers the strictness shown him as just, and he thanks the Superiors. St Teresa of the Child Jesus expressed the same sentiments towards her Mother Prioress, as we read in the *Story of a Soul*, Chapter 7.

These punishments and penances, as described here, appear less than human, exaggerated, and even anti-hygienic to us moderns. Still it must be remembered that this was in the seventeenth century when such penances were commonly used in all religious institutes, as also in secular ones.

year that matters got worse than ever about admitting me to profession. Though the penances and mortifications were very troublesome, still I carried them out with a lot of satisfaction since I knew they were small compared to what I deserved for my sins. I often said to myself: "Brother Charles, if you died, you would go to hell and suffer with the devils for the great offences you gave His Divine Majesty. Bear with these things gladly for a while, because it is really a great grace our Lord has given you, to suffer for a year out of love for him."

18

INTERIOR DESOLATION DURING THE
ENTIRE YEAR OF NOVITIATE

OUR Lord permitted me to be bothered by not only one kind of trouble in the novitiate year, but by many and diverse ones; not only by exterior trials coming from other persons, but by interior afflictions, especially a spirit of sadness that seemed to penetrate my very bones.

Hardly had I put on the habit of St Francis when such a deep melancholy came over me that my soul was suffocated by anxiety very difficult for me to describe; difficult, because every part of me was as though abandoned and derelict, without there being a moment of freedom or the least bit of comfort.

I no longer remembered the burning desire and great longing, that for such a long time had been mine, to wear the habit of St Francis; no longer remembered were the many graces our Lord had bestowed on me through the intercession of his most Blessed Mother. How suddenly things had changed! Happiness into bitterness, joy into tears! I was as though beside myself with sadness, buried in a dark night of anxieties, with everything contributing to making my illness even worse. When I looked at the sun its very rays filled me with gloom; the birds with their songs

only served to remind me of my affliction; everything I saw or heard made me sad.

That is why I was very much tempted to put off the habit and return to the world! And I believe I would have done so, had the chance been given me and if a special help of our Lord had been lacking.

For two or three weeks I remained in this trouble without informing my confessor, who was the Father Guardian. But as God planned it and helped me by his grace, I determined to tell him everything. I did so in confession. He listened very charitably and my courage mounted. He gave me very good advice. I was never to keep any sort of temptation hidden, for in that way it only acquires greater strength and easily makes too great an impression. I was often to reconsider the goal that had influenced me in coming into the religious life and the wonderful promises our Lord had made, who rewards good and punishes evil; that is why I should never think of going back but of moving forward courageously, since the vocation to which our Lord had called me is an excellent means of acquiring his love. For these reasons I should be joyful and make no account of these temptations.

By talking this over with my confessor I was not thereby freed from the temptation to melancholy, since it lasted all during the novitiate year. Still, I was really greatly strengthened. The awful thought of leaving left me immediately and I received a great help to keep going. In all this I noticed the power of the sacrament of penance for helping the Christian; it certainly strengthened me in overcoming these trials. They were especially severe when I thought of my brother, the one who had been so sick. Because of the love I had for him and the respect we had for each other, many times he seemed to be right there in front of me and this picture stirred me to the depths. At other times I would imagine my family sitting down at table, and all I could think of was: "Look at what they are having for dinner! And here you cannot get over your hunger!"

To this was added all the good things my father had planned for me. Now I recalled his fatherly affection and the little I had responded to it. Then there was the tenderness of my mother

who had loved me without stint, and it seemed I had never really been aware of it till then!

All these recollections came upon me at one time like a torrent and filled me with sadness. I felt it as deeply as anyone can believe, yet with God's help I overcame it. After all, I had not gone to the monastery to eat and drink and to look for consolation, but to suffer for the love of Jesus and to do penance.

But what touched me to the quick was that I began to sense that the Friars did not want to admit me to profession. I knew of no remedy except to have recourse to prayer and to resign myself to the divine will.

I9

SOME TEMPTATIONS AND ILLUSIONS FROM THE DEVIL

THERE were many wars waged openly against me by the demons and they plotted every kind of deceit under the guise of devotion. They would come at night during the time of sleep. I longed to give my body some rest, tired as it was and badly worn out by continuous pain, but they kept me terrified with the different forms they took. If it happened that I had fallen off to sleep I would suddenly awaken again badly frightened. At such times I made the sign of the cross, called upon the name of Jesus, said some prayers, especially the *Sub tuum praesidium*, and that drove them off.

At other times they assumed the human form of a religious, more specifically of another novice whom I had known in the world and for whom I had a high regard in religion. They came up to me in a friendly way, sometimes in silence, and on other occasions saying things meant to win me over.

One of them came along one time in the form of the Father Guardian, to tell me to come to his room for he wanted to speak to me. Immediately I arose and went there. The Guardian was

astonished to hear me tell this. He said it was not he who had called me and that I should go back to bed with God's blessing.

More often these evil spirits brought a fainting spell on me. They then severely vexed me interiorly without my being able to do a thing about it, not even by saying a word, or by calling upon the most sweet name of Jesus. As a boy I had used this means and it often awakened the memory of my good grandmother who, with this effect in mind, made me carry some holy object on my person.

The good Fathers taught me to say the crown of seven decades of our Lady in memory of the seven joys that were hers in this life and in which she exults in paradise.

One evening after I had finished my duties and had gone to my room, I prepared to say the above-mentioned crown. When I came to the seventh decade I became so drowsy that I could not continue this devotion. The Master had shown me how to stand on one foot and to hold the other up in the air with my cord, as a help against sleepiness in prayer. I made use of what he had taught me and I took precautions not to hurt myself if I were to fall. I stood at the foot of my straw mattress and in spite of the drowsiness finished the last decade, the one in memory of our Lady assumed into heaven and crowned with glory by the most Blessed Trinity.

I had scarcely finished it when sleepiness and tiredness enveloped me immediately and I let myself fall on the mattress. Then I realized that the entire room was lit up very brightly. This was something new. I lifted my head and opened my eyes to see from what direction this bright light was coming. At the other end of the room, near the ceiling, I saw with my very eyes the mystery I had just been meditating on; and I saw it so distinctly that I would have believed that the lady who stood in the centre with such majesty and glory was the Virgin Mary, and that those who were standing around her, and placing a crown on her head, were the three Divine Persons.

I was overcome with amazement at this vision. It seemed so unfitting that the Mother of God should confer so great a favour on a sinner. I exclaimed: "O Mother most holy, I am not worthy

to behold you on account of my sins!" No sooner were these words said than the false vision left the place where it had been. Everything about it changed. The devils were there in various forms; with a lot of noise they attacked and struck me in every way imaginable. I was like a dead person.

At the noise, a fellow novice who lived in that part of the building, came to help me. Because of the blows I had received I could not do my usual work the next day, and so I talked the whole incident over with my Master and also with the Father Guardian who called me to his room. After listening to my story, he told me that if I had not spoken the words about my being a sinner and unworthy of such a vision, the devils would not have maltreated me. But since they cannot stand humility they would have torn me to pieces, if they could. On the other hand, had I been pleased at having this vision they easily would have led me to believe that it was true; in short, under the appearance of good they would have tried to ruin my soul.

Seeing that he could not have his way this time, the deceiver just bided his time; and when I had forgotten the vision he came again under the appearance of the Mother of God with her little Child in her arms. But when he realized that I saw through his trickery, in his rage he stood over me and struck me fiercely.

He did not give up, however. He tried to set another trap at night in the church when I was favoured with mental rapture during prayer. He took human form and came so close as to touch me. Then with a little spoon he put a liquid in my mouth. This happened on two nights. I thought it over, trying to find out what it could mean. Then I spoke of it to the Master, who said it was a trick of the devil and that I would soon be sure of this. The next time I was to say to him: "Evil beast, open your mouth; I want to fill it with dung", and he would quickly flee. But if this thing were from God, it would not leave. That is what he ordered me to do.

As I was praying the following night, this false friend came with his poisonous liquid and as he approached me I said what the Master had commanded me, and I spat in his face. He fled shamefully and never again appeared in that form.

TEMPTATION TO VAINGLORY

AMONG all the trials of the novitiate I had one relief: peace of conscience. This helped me very much to carry joyfully all the heavy burdens and crosses my vocation placed on me, and to preserve union with God. It made me enjoy a paradise on earth in spite of the troubles of this world. The main thing to attend to in the spiritual life is to have a pure and tranquil conscience at all times, because when a person is without sin he reaches union with God through grace, he gains merit continuously and he is disposed for the exalted enjoyment of divine contemplation, the state of peace and consolation given by the Holy Spirit.

For some months in the novitiate year I enjoyed a peace and serenity of conscience so delicate that it was more divine than human. In this state I seemed to be living a more devout and truly Christian life, for I was not offending my Lord so much—the evil occasions for that were lacking—and still more I had a motive for serving, loving and blessing him in all things. It was like being in paradise, which we really possess in our souls here on earth when we are united to God; and it is so wonderful that even our bodies share in the happiness, as we sing with the saintly King David: “This is the day which the Lord hath made: let us be glad and rejoice therein; for he is good.”¹

While I was taking satisfaction from this peace of soul, it turned out that two of the Friars came to where I was busy with some work and they started to talk about the perfection and holiness they noticed in some of the novices. No doubt they thought I could not hear what they were saying. What I heard particularly was: “That Brother Charles of Sezze is an angel in the flesh!” I felt some natural complacency and pride at hearing this, without thinking that I should completely dismiss this sort of temptation.

When the reaction to complacency had passed and the darkness

1. Psalm 117. 24 and 29.

of mind that it brought on had lifted, I felt that I had become a devil from hell rather than an angel in the flesh! My peace and serenity of conscience left me and I was so disquieted that I did not know what to do, for all the sins I had ever committed came before me. They bit me savagely as though with sharp teeth; with frightful shrieks they cried out as a group that I had not confessed them rightly. The pain I experienced was intense because I could not receive Holy Communion even once in peace, as one thing after another came back to me.

How careful we should be in speaking, so as not to be the cause of ruining a soul and making it lose what it took a long time and much suffering to acquire! Sometimes when we are with a good person we think it is proper to speak of his virtues. If we only knew, we should be startled at the damage that can follow on such praise. It is a poison that attacks quickly and brings spiritual death.

It was about the sixth month of my novitiate that our Lord struck me so as to check the empty self-esteem that we create when we try to credit ourselves with what does not belong to us. Not only did I carry the cross of an uneasy conscience for the rest of the novitiate, but it lasted for six years without in any way diminishing.

Though I had learned and practical confessors all during this time, I could not find any rest until, as God willed, I fell seriously sick. I confessed my sins to one of the Fathers and told him of my trouble. Some of my peace was restored, but I have suffered right up to the present, even though I have made a general confession many times.

PROFESSION OF VOWS

IN the ninth month of the novitiate, while the good Lord was taking me into the home of his love along the safe way of suffering, my Master and the other Friars, all conscientious men, were reluctant to give me the votes needed for my profession. The principal reason was that I could not carry out the tasks that are assigned to lay-brothers. Only God knows how much this increased the affliction of my heart.

In the novitiate house there was a professed brother, by name Thaddeus, who thought very much of me. He worked in the garden and when he went to places nearby begging for alms he would ask the Father Guardian if he might have me as his companion. He was very displeased that the Friars had formed an adverse opinion of me and he greatly encouraged me to persevere as I had begun, and to hope in God. I looked on him as my father for the great love he showed me and for his other fine qualities.

I greatly enjoyed his method of prayer which was simply this: he knelt down, made the sign of the cross, and began the *Our Father*. After saying the first petition of that prayer, he was lifted out of himself, as it were, and withdrawn for quite a time. On coming back to himself he said the second petition and again was lifted up and withdrawn; and so it went on for the rest of the prayer. When he went into the church during the night—and he used to go rather early before the bell for Matins—I sometimes went ahead of him and secretly kept him company.

As time went on and I saw that my case was desperate, humanly speaking, and that all the Friars, including the novices, said I should be deprived of the holy habit, I had recourse for help at this difficult time to the most glorious Virgin Mother of God, my principal advocate; and then I also took some steps of my own not to be turned aside from what had begun well.

My first determination was that, should the Fathers put me out of the novitiate, I would take the habit with me and keep it out

of devotion to St Francis; the under-tunic I would leave for some poor novice who had been clothed gratis in an old habit.

The second determination was that, since it seemed very shameful to go back to the world after being dismissed, I thought of staying in some hermit's cave in the woods and doing penance for my sins. But on thinking ahead of the danger I could run into and the many difficulties of persevering in that life, I gave up the idea.

The third and last determination was to go back home and live in chastity, and as calmly as possible take everything from the hand of God and bear that mortification for love of him, with the consolation that for all the years up to then that I had lived an evil life in the world, I spent one for Jesus Christ.

While I was at the peak of my trial and swam in a sea of afflictions, His Divine Majesty did not fail to give me some relief through a lay-brother, Brother Stephen of Sezze, whom I had known at school and who happened to be at Nazzano for a while. When he learned that I was making my novitiate he came looking for me in the kitchen, to talk to me. But since the novices may not speak to anyone without the special permission of the Father Guardian or of the Master, I knelt down and kept my head bowed when he came in, until he said all that God had inspired him to say.

After a holy exhortation to keep going, he said specifically that because I was pleasing to our Lord I would be admitted to profession. So I should not doubt, but be of good cheer. He blessed me in the name of God and left for wherever obedience called him, leaving me very consoled.

At this time I recalled what a holy hermit had once told me. This man never left Sezze but stayed in a hermitage called St Lucy, a place my family knew very well.¹ He clearly said that the first eight months would be passed very happily and that I would have all the votes of the Friars, but that from the eighth to the eleventh month I would be in great danger of being sent away;

1. It still exists on the spot where in ancient times a Benedictine monastery stood. Priceless frescoes of the sixteenth century will delight the visitor.

and if the eleventh month passed, then everything would be all right and I need not have any more fear.

All these things started coming back to me and when I realized that all that he had said had been fulfilled up to then, I had great hopes for the rest if only that eleventh month would pass. I often begged our Lord that it would.

It finally did pass and then the time for the Provincial Chapter came when a good many of the Friars are changed from one monastery to another. Before any of them left, if that were to happen, the Fathers wanted to vote on the novices. So on a set day they all met in the refectory; the novices were sent off in procession to the church, with them myself more than ever full of fear.

In church I knelt down before a lovely painting of the Madonna which stood in one of the chapels. I had a special devotion to it. With a great deal of familiarity I began speaking aloud from my heart. "You know very well, O most Blessed Mother, that I came here to do what I promised you, and that is to serve you in chastity in the holy Order of St Francis. Now the Fathers want to send me back to the world. I really think that I have corresponded with my vocation and carried it out as much as I had to, and I do not know of any fault committed maliciously. Nothing is left now but your help; I humbly beg you, give it to me."

At this prayer I experienced an unusual relief and it brought a sweet tranquillity to my soul. I was completely changed by this indescribable conversation with Mary and I sensed such a marvellous peace in the depths of her motherly love that I felt I wanted nothing else but to be united to the divine will and to conform myself completely to it.

While I was being consoled by our Lord through this gracious gift of his, the Fathers sent word to have us come to the refectory. We went there at once. As we passed the high altar, one of the novices in the pair just ahead of me genuflected and then said as he turned around: "Your turn this time, Brother Charles; just wait!" And though during my prayer in church I understood what conformity to the will of God was, still my weak flesh

wanted to show its fickleness. Those words were like a sword passing through my heart and it was all I could do to catch myself and say: "The will of God be done!"

On entering the refectory we kissed the floor and received the blessing. The Father Guardian then told us to stand up, but only after he had first exhorted us strongly to be ready for whatever God had provided for each of us. Then he called one of the cleric novices, told him to prostrate on the floor, and upbraided him severely for some of his defects. And immediately, publicly, he had two Friars take the habit from him and give him his own clothes. If I remember rightly, he did the same to another novice.

Then my turn came and while I lay on the floor with more dread than you can imagine he told me of my worthlessness and inability to learn what a lay-brother should know; and that consequently he had made up his mind to do with me what he had just done to these two, but since I still had twenty days left, I should get busy in the kitchen and if I did not do well there he would carry out his intention. With this small hope left, I got up from the floor; and the Master of lay-brothers assigned me to the kitchen. With the help of God I gave entire satisfaction there.

The provincial meeting took place and among the Friars changed were the Father Guardian and the Father Vicar. Father Francis of Rimini remained in charge of the monastery for the time. In a few days the new Guardian came, Father Angelus Maria of Rome, a kindly man gifted with the love of God. He had a special way of leading souls along the path of love after the example of Christ our Lord. His rigorous penances were accompanied with such a warm cordiality that they seemed little and light, showing that they contained a special love. He was a great comfort to me.

The last day of my novitiate came and Father Angelus Maria was willing to profess me. He told me to go to my room in the morning after I had received the most Holy Body of our Lord. I could better recollect myself there and would offer myself as a holocaust with that much more fervour when I took my vows. I did this as best I knew how. I recommended myself to His Divine Majesty and to the most Blessed Virgin, as I thanked them

for the help they had given me in bearing so many trials and in conquering the infernal enemy.

It is impossible for me to say how I felt then, once I realized that my espousal to my vocation was accomplished. I experienced a marvellous composure, a withdrawal from everything created and a union with the Highest Good. In a sense I saw and felt nothing, for my soul was separated from bodily senses and transformed by the unspeakable sweetness of its Creator. I understood really that it was not I who was acting and working but rather the omnipotent Lord who was doing everything in me, while I revelled mysteriously in his uncreated love.

Oh what a good paymaster our God is, liberally rewarding us for every suffering borne for him! O holy sufferings that so happily unite our soul with God in the room of his heavenly treasures!

The time for Vespers came. All the Friars went to the church when the bell sounded. The Father Guardian was vested in a cope. He went to the high altar and there he had us two novices approach and kneel on the bottom step. After a very fervent sermon he received our profession. My name was changed from Brother Cosmas to Brother Charles at the request of my mother. All this took place on 19 May 1636, a Sunday, the Feast of St Pudentiana, Virgin. I was twenty-three years old.

22

ASSIGNMENT TO THE MORLUPO MONASTERY

AFTER my profession I was immediately given an obedience by the Provincial Superior to go to the monastery of St Mary Seconda in Morlupo.¹ This was the first place I was assigned to after the year of novitiate. Through the intercession of the

1. This monastery is called St Mary Seconda because of a tradition that the picture of our Lady there is the second painting of her by St Luke—the first being in St Mary Major. It no longer belongs to the Franciscans.

Mother of God, to whom this monastery was dedicated, our Lord was pleased to give me many favours.

Before leaving Nazzano the Father Guardian first made me ask pardon of all the Friars for not having given them a better example while I was among them, and then he went to the door with me and my dear friend Brother Thaddeus who would be with me on the journey.

His companionship was especially consoling and profitable because of his kind lessons and saintly advice, all the more welcome since he was very experienced in the religious life, besides being rather old. One of the counsels this fine Franciscan gave me was that I should try very hard to be a genuine Friar Minor, obedient, chaste and poor, so as to obtain what our Lord has promised me.

It was late when we arrived at the monastery of Morlupo, for we had walked twelve miles from St Francis in Nazzano. The porter let us in and we presented ourselves to the Guardian, Father Innocent of Rome. He brought us to the common room where all the Friars had assembled when the bell rang, to bestow on us the marks of charity shown to travellers. They were quite surprised on seeing me, for word had got around that I had been dismissed from the novitiate. Several times the Father Guardian said with a surprised air: "Are you Brother Charles of Sezze?" "Yes", I answered. "By the grace of our Lord!"

They very happily thanked His Divine Majesty. The Father Guardian showed that he sympathized with me very much; no doubt he had heard how much I had gone through. Then he saw that I was given a room.

Our Lord willed that this Guardian have a special affection for me, as a true father in Christ. More often than not, he called me son. Because of the great charity with which God had richly endowed him I returned his love very sincerely. When the occasion arose for his giving me some task to perform, he would say: "Son, do this or that". It sometimes happened that I committed a fault or broke something. "Son", he would say, "next time be careful; pay attention to what you are doing."

I think that in a person placed over others these traits are exceedingly pleasing to His Divine Majesty: gentleness in word,

kindness in treating others, and a modest gravity in giving commands. His genuine humaneness was like a holy unction that drew me to fulfilling his requests. The idea of what he wanted done no sooner entered my mind than I felt within me a special inclination to obey him; and then I did it with such love that there was no weariness about it; in fact, I experienced a refreshing comfort. It was love making the burden light and sweet.

Among the first instructions he gave me, one was that I should do my work in the monastery with charity and love, to make it meritorious; that at prayer I should be very fervent and never for any reason miss the prayers in common, regardless of how urgent it might seem.

My confessor was of the same opinion. I was put under his care to learn the spiritual life and also the different ceremonies. He was the Vicar, Father Raphael of Poggio San Lorenzo. The custom was that the Vicars of monasteries had charge of the young Friars and were their Masters and spiritual guides.

The monastery had no gardener, and until provision was made for one the Father Guardian gave me charge of the garden. I worked at it very devotedly and carefully, trying to keep myself recollected in God by meditation during my work there. By some force that could only have been supernatural I was drawn to lift up my hands and eyes to heaven, and to fasten the eye of my soul on that incomprehensible object, God, where I remained fascinated, as before a mirror, wondering at the eternal light.

When this happened to me over a period of time, my soul acquired such a light for knowing God, affection for loving him and strength in serving him, that I could well say with St Paul that nothing could separate me from the love of Christ.²

Because Jesus Christ at his resurrection permitted Magdalen to see and think of him as a gardener, I took a great liking for this kind of work; the year of novitiate had not quite changed me into a new person, for I liked this assignment very much, as I thought how, here in the garden, was grown the food for the needs of the Friars. No doubt the clever, infernal enemy wanted to use the diligence and love I showed in this assignment to turn

2. Romans 8. 35; 38-9.

me aside from the sure way of holy obedience and to make me dishonest with myself by an excessive zeal. When my superiors gave me some work other than that of gardener, such as going on the quest or performing some other duties, I began to sense an unrest coming from rebellious thoughts. This bothered me very much; still I did not notice the damage I was doing and that this was the work of the devil.

One day when the Superior gave me a different assignment, this temptation to rebellion arose stronger than ever, although I had immediately set aside what I was doing to carry out his will. This rebellion filled me with such a deep chagrin and fierce unrest that I cannot describe it.

Our Lord wanted to help me enter into myself and he began speaking to me with his usual gentleness: "Brother Charles, tell me now, what did you promise God when you made your profession?" I answered that I promised to obey my Superior in everything he commanded me, so long as it was not sinful, and not to do my own will. He replied: "Well, then, if that is so, why are you so disappointed and disquieted when the Superior commands you? Do you not see that it is a good thing for one in the religious life to have no other will but that of the Superior, and to be like a dead person in his hands?" The temptation that had tried to take away my peace and prevent my spiritual advancement vanished at these words. I became very calm and resigned to obedience. Greater elevations of soul were granted me, for our Lord listens more readily when we simply do his will in our superiors.

The monastery enclosure was in bad repair for the most part and oxen came in to cause great damage in the garden, destroying some vegetables and eating others. One night two young bulls and an ox came in. Very early the next morning the Father Vicar saw them. The Father Guardian was not in the house at the time, so the Vicar had all the Friars assemble with the exception of myself, for I had been up almost the whole night helping to care for a dying woman. The Superior had ordered me to rest and I was not to leave my room without his permission. He now sent someone to call me immediately. When I saw the Friars with sticks and

long poles in their hands, busy chasing the animals as they kept running around in their fright, a great desire to laugh came over me.

But I went over to the Superior, who commanded me in virtue of holy obedience to catch the animals. He gave me the rope himself. I went up to the beasts and in the name of God told them to stand still; they stopped, and did not move a foot, just turning their great heads towards me and staring at me. Going up to the one that was closest, I put the rope round his horns while I prayed to God, and I tied him up as easily as if he were a meek little donkey. Then again in the name of God I told him to come near me; he took a few steps and came closer and so did the other two. Then in accordance with what the Superior wanted I led them inside the monastery and put them in a stall where we had a donkey.

The owner was amazed. He marvelled, for he said he had never been able to catch the two young ones. The Superior told him that all this had come about through the virtue of holy obedience!

23

THE COOK

WHEN some months had passed, the Superior saw fit to put another Friar in charge of the garden, and he assigned me to the kitchen under the direction of a devout and charitable confrère. It was customary that the young Friars be given an older one as instructor.

This good religious had a very nice way of teaching me, and he made use of every possible means. He wanted me to profit from the kitchen work because of its being so pleasing to God. When he saw things nicely arranged and the food prepared in the way he had taught me, he would very politely bring the Father Guardian in and say: "Look at the nice kitchen Brother

Charles keeps! Everything is in its place and the food is nicely prepared and seasoned!" Father Guardian was happy and thanked God.

I greatly admired the goodness of this Friar. The love he had for Christ Jesus was extraordinary. He spurred the young Friars on to virtue by his pleasantness and at the same time he kept me in the good graces of the Superior. When he noticed that I had done something which could offend the others, he very tactfully had me change it.

This Friar showed great charity not only towards us religious but also to the poor. One point of the lessons he gave me was that I should never refuse an alms to any poor person, especially the one I met first; and if I had nothing to give, then I should say something to console him and recommend him to God by saying the *Our Father* or the *Hail Mary* or the *Hail, Holy Queen*.

Whenever he went out on the quest he left me to take care of the kitchen. On his return he would empty out the sacks of bread into a bin. He always noticed that there was only a little bread left of what he had put there. I had given it to the poor who came in great numbers because of the bad times. "What have you done, Brother Charles?", he used to say. "I did what you taught me to do!", I would answer, smiling, without a further word, for I wanted to praise the name of our Lord who generously took care of our needs as he had promised in the Gospel.

There is something similar to this I would like to tell, that happened to both of us when we were sent on a journey, and I recount it that you may see the providence of God. We travelled along very happily the first day, and in the evening reached a monastery where we were warmly welcomed. Very early the next morning after our prayers, we left without asking for some food to take with us. We had scarcely walked three or four miles when a pauper came up, barefoot and ragged, asking an alms for the love of God. It made me sad to see him in that condition and I gave him a piece of the bread I still had. Since we two friars had been walking about three stone-throws apart, my companion had not seen the beggar. Further on we stopped for lunch and he asked for some of the bread. I told him a poor

man had come up to me, and I had given it to him. Instead of being upset he thanked our Lord and we continued our journey in peace of soul.

We became very hungry and tired. After we had walked about a third of a mile further I thought I heard someone calling out. My companion also heard it, even though he had gone ahead again. When we turned round we saw a rather old and serious-looking man coming our way. He stopped as he reached us and greeted us in the name of our Lord. Then from under his mantle he took out a beautiful bottle of wine and a loaf of bread. He asked us to be so kind as to take them and strengthen ourselves for the rest of the trip. We heartily thanked him and our Lord. Shortly after, we reached our monastery of St John Baptist of Piglio, on the vigil of the feast of St Anthony of Padua. When we had arranged the business that had brought us there under obedience, we returned to Morlupo. I continued in my kitchen work there with greater diligence.

As much as I could I tried to understand and grasp what my confrère taught me. Our good Lord helped me to learn how to do things, though they were not done with the exactness and neatness with which my teacher did them. Anyway, since this was the kitchen of poor Friars, they were easily satisfied, for they were given more to mortification than to tasty food. They lived together very peacefully, feeding more on the spiritual food of devotion than on bodily food.

The work delighted me in that I was close to God, far from worldly concerns. Really, for beginners such as I was, not very solidly grounded in virtue, this kind of work is an excellent means of keeping oneself recollected and at the same time enabling one to carry out the works of charity; for especially in the kitchen is fulfilled one of the seven works of mercy, to feed the hungry. I was feeding many servants of God. Really, whoever has the spirit of humility will not look upon such work as beneath him, but will value it as a great favour of our Lord.

To keep myself recollected I would devoutly represent to myself certain events of the life of Jesus Christ. Sometimes I found myself in the poor cave of Bethlehem where the awesome

mystery of the birth of our Lord took place, and I said to myself: "Come on, Brother Charles, this morning we will work in the kitchen for the most glorious Virgin, our Mother, from whom we have received such great favours, even that of her bringing forth the Divine Word and Saviour of the world; and we will work also for our special advocate, St Joseph and all who were there, such as the shepherds".

On other days I imagined the coming of the Magi. On seeing the appearance of a new star in the East, they were inspired by God and came with many people to adore the promised Messiah, the eternal King, now newly born. I considered it a great honour to serve them spiritually in my work, and I would have gladly shown them every mark of love possible, since they suffered many discomforts on that long journey.

At other times I pictured myself making meals for our Lord, for his holy Apostles, and for those whom he had chosen as the foundation of the Church. I considered that all this was being done for the Son of God from whom I had received my existence and its continuation, and who had redeemed us with his most Precious Blood.

Mentally I would put myself in the company of my Angel Guardian and of St Martha, and going ahead with some work I alternately recited with them the Litany of our Lady and other prayers, along with a few ejaculations. While doing the dishes I said with my lips and my heart: "Jesus, Mary, wash my heart and my soul that I may praise and bless you!" And while sweeping: "Jesus and Mary, cleanse my heart and my soul that I may always praise and bless you!"

As I became used to my work, my soul too grew accustomed to it and I experienced delightful consolation and wonderful sweetness in God. I now realize well what I did not then realize: these lowly tasks were the means of leading my soul to its true goal, God; there I stayed and rested in the ecstasy of a mental union, and resting, tasted the peace and joy of the Holy Spirit.

O my confrères,¹ we should employ every talent we have to gain such a large profit. If we look at it rightly our Lord has

1. He is addressing the lay-brothers of his Order.