Introduction

THE VERY title of this book is a challenge. Has there ever been an age more loquacious than ours, one more extroverted, one more concerned with the surface of things? Facing the issue squarely, this book deals with silence, with that inner silence of the soul which the Psalmist has in mind where he says that we should "listen to what the Lord God will say" (Ps 84: 9).

The inner life is the theme of this book. It deals with its very essence. Archabbot Benedict Baur shows the way to his readers on the strength of a life-long experience. As the head of one of the most renowned Benedictine communities of Europe, as an ascetic writer, scholar, and educator, and particularly as a retreat master, he has long won an international following. There could be no safer guide for those who wish to penetrate more deeply into the mysteries of divine revelation, so as to master the confusion of a progress-mad civilization.

Modern man finds it difficult to pursue such a path. Our age is no longer familiar with the language of mystery. Modern man rarely listens to what God has to tell him. He is overwhelmed by a constant stream of words poured out from printing presses and loudspeakers. Most of the outpouring leaves no impact on the minds so widely dulled that independent thinking becomes difficult. The Christians are no exception. They, too, are caught in the noisy stream. They, too, have widely lost the faculty of listening to their inner voice.

St. Paul has said we should not "be conformed to this world" (Rom 12: 2), and he knew what he was talking about, for in his day, just as in our own, people were exposed to influences causing instability and fidgetiness. In his

day, too, Christians were traveling on the road of least resistance, adapting themselves to the wavering standards of the majority.

It was because of this very danger that St. Paul wanted them to be "transformed in the newness of their minds, that they might discern what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

To be transformed in such newness, in St. Paul's day as in ours, means *agere contra*, to free oneself of the prevailing trends, to gain a foothold in the realm of the spirit. There is no other remedy in the midst of the distractions and futilities of a mankind bent on seeking salvation by its own efforts, and trying to make the relative values absolute.

More than ever the trend of our age is toward activism. Modern man seems determined to assert himself in building a dream world of his own, divorced from God, and the achievements of technology appear to justify his shallow optimism. Yet, the uneasy feeling underneath, what the French aptly call a *malaise* persists. For modern man is as much, nay, even more lost amidst the world's whirl than man was in St. Paul's times.

The danger signals in many fields of public endeavor are obvious enough to those who have eyes to see. The soberminded realize that the only antidote is to "cast off," as St. Gregory of Nazianzum says, "the dead works and give place to the Spirit." To help achieve this end is the purpose of this book, which points the way to Christians who are not Christians in name only, to gain a knowledge of their faith that reaches into the depth rather than being confined to the surface.

Those who follow the path Archabbot Benedict Baur indicates will find that they need a new incentive to overcome the mere routine of their religious life. The mainspring of their soul must be wound again. What they have lost by conforming to the world, all too intensely, must be regained by again conforming to the inner voice which

they have not harkened to in the midst of an anthill of worldly preoccupations. In again surrendering to the divine, rather than to the natural order, by becoming integrated once more with the sacramental rather than with the profane life, they will attain the inner kingdom of God which means life eternal.

Fundamentally, there is nothing new in Archabbot Baur's approach to the inner life, but he says things long familiar to us by using a language adapted skillfully to our present-day needs. His message is the message of Christ, which he conveys succinctly and in terms so simple and straightforward that the impact becomes unavoidable and yet wholesome to a rare degree.

He but echoes the words of the Psalmist: "Incline my heart, O Lord, unto thy precepts, turn away my eyes that they may not behold vanity, and quicken me in thy way" (Ps 119: 36–37). He wants his readers to realize that they must turn away from, and rise above, the visible sphere of life to gain access to the realities of another world not visible. He wants us to appreciate fully the meaning of Scripture's word that faith is "the evidence of things that are not seen" (Heb 11: 1). In an age when the dominant perspectives are what we might call centrifugal, turned away from the center of creation, away from God, he wants the right order to be restored, by again making our perspectives fully centripetal, converging on the eternal light which is God.

To "taste of the heavenly gifts and become partakers of the Holy Spirit" (Heb 6: 4) is the goal of Christian living. To achieve it, we must become vessels of divine grace, engender "the blazing fire" (Ps 103: 4) in our souls, be "fixed on things divine," as the Secret prayer of the Mass against the persecutors of the Church puts it. If the spring of living water is kept alive, there never will be a drought. If on the other hand the spring has become a mere spurt, the effectiveness of our efforts to fertilize the pastures of our soul is bound to become questionable.

St. Macarius, the *Golden Legend* tells us, once found a skull in the desert sand.

"Whose head have you been?" he asked.

"A pagan's," the voice came back from the skull.

"And where is thy soul?"

"In Hell!"

"How deep in Hell?"

"As deeply down as the earth is lower than Heaven."

"Are there," the Saint finally asked, "any souls thrust down into Hell even more deeply than yours?"

"Yes," the voice of the skull replied. "The souls of those who were redeemed by Jesus Christ, but held their privilege cheaply."

Christians who do not want to be classed among those holding their privilege cheaply cannot help but concentrate on that inner voice to which perhaps they have not been listening with sufficient attention. Is it not a consoling thought that they can become true reformers by being non-conformers? The redemption of mankind always depends on the few who in the midst of the world's turmoil know how to practice silence with God.

Such silence entails a *metanoia*, a change of heart, a turning away from things ephemeral to things eternal, and the turn must be resolute. We cannot, as Irenaeus once expressed it, be "*mate hexo mate eso*," which means: neither within nor without. We must be within first, then only can we be without as well. Only if we do not remain merely human beings, but keep alive in ourselves the conviction that we are truly images of God, can we achieve spiritual maturity. What else could spiritual maturity be but holiness? What could holiness really mean if not being whole, fully developed by attaining the realm of the spirit?

There is that wonderful phrase in the letter to the Ephesians (I: 23) which sums up all this in the statement that the Church is the body of Christ, "the fullness of him who is wholly fulfilled in all." St. Paul has expressed the same

thought when he said that we "should bear the likeness of the heavenly as we have born the likeness of the earthy" (I Cor 15: 49). That and no other is the program of the inner life. It means the integration of our lives in the life of God, becoming "one spirit with him" (I Cor 6: 17).

Archabbot Baur shows in this book how such teachings can be applied in practice. From a lifetime of monastic and ascetic experience he tells us how we can "do it ourselves." And he bids us to have courage, just as our Lord said to His disciples: "Be not afraid, little flock" (Luke 12: 32). If we will but "lower our net" (Luke 5: 4) at His word, "a catch" will be ours, namely, a deeper insight into our faith. Then we will tap its sources, reach its innermost precincts.

Clearly this purpose cannot be achieved if we attempt to ride two horses, to carry water on both shoulders, to be on good terms with God and the godless world at the same time. We must be determined to choose with Mary of Bethany "the best part" always, "the only thing that is needful" (Luke 10: 42). Neutralism in this confused age will never do. We must be "stewards of the mysteries of God" (I Cor 4: I) and face the challenge which is ours today. By grasping its full significance we should become wholehearted followers rather than being just perfunctory, half-hearted believers.

Only in practicing that "silence with God" which Archabbot Benedict Baur so eloquently and with such deep conviction propounds, dare we hope to become partners of God in "renewing the face of the earth" (Ps 103: 30).

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