

## PROVING ONESELF IN TIME OF SICKNESS

*The Question Which Sickness Raises for Man as a Whole*

We shall be attempting here to develop only one single line of thought, that namely concerning the unity, the wholeness of man and the bearing which sickness has upon this.

Christian theology and philosophy recognise the unity and the wholeness of man. Naturally when we Christians assert that man consists of body and soul we are quite right. Indeed a sick man could say with justice that he experiences this duality in his own being only too clearly. But for all this man, that is to say that objective entity with which each of us is directly confronted as a matter of his own personal experience, is originally one, one with a unity which is not the mere outcome or result of a chance combination of two prior entities. It follows from this that what we *experience* as soul is in reality our own being which is objectively speaking a single and whole entity as viewed from within. And what we call our body is ultimately this same entity in its oneness and wholeness as experienced from without. This is not to deny that this being of ours in its oneness and wholeness, which we are faced with in our concrete living experience, has not behind and beyond this experience two metaempirical or metaphysical elements in it such that the distinction between them cannot be obliterated and they cannot be identified one with the other. But the objective reality which we encounter directly when we apprehend ourselves as a matter of authentic experience is always the whole and single entity, always man in his oneness. In apprehending this single objective reality that is ourselves we do not always penetrate to the same level of reality in it. But it is no less true that in apprehending it we never apprehend merely one constituent element in this whole in such a way that it does not necessarily bring the other constituent element to our awareness as well.

It is not possible at this point to describe the various approaches which Christian theologians and philosophers have devised in order to give intelligible [276] expression to this basic unity of man, or the various attempts which have been made to express this, without falling into the errors of materialism on the one hand, which seeks to deny and existence of the soul as a distinct principle, or into those of an abstract and overspiritualised approach on the other, which tends to deny the reality of the body. But whatever the differences in approach may be, for Christian theologians and philosophers the body is neither the prison of the soul nor a mere container for it, but rather an integral element in man as a unity. Similarly the soul is not a thing which controls the body rather as an operator controls a machine, but this too is rather an integral element in man as an unity which, as one might express it, only achieves its true identity in virtue of the fact that it is itself embodied, and has a body belonging to it, complementing the body so as to constitute the true spiritual reality. Body is not something added on to the soul. Rather it is a concretisation of it, the projection of soul as basic life-force into an already existing sphere of space and time. Thus in a certain sense it is that in the soul which causes it to exist in that concrete dimension of space and time in which it comes (figuratively speaking) to its due fulness and flowering.

For this reason when the Christian intends to confess that in which he believes the final perfection of the whole man to consist he speaks of the resurrection of the flesh, and for the same reason we recognise that we are redeemed through the physical death of the Lord, through his Blood, precisely because the act of obedience and love performed by the Lord in its inconceivable sublimity could only really be achieved in and through what became of the physical side of his nature, his flesh. And for the same reason in its further projections too, in

its application to our own soul, salvation history becomes intelligible, acquires a body, in a human word, in the community of the Church as a visible historical entity, in the gestures of the sacraments which touch the body.

What is the significance of all this for sickness and for those who suffer it? We have seen that the man whom we experience in ourselves and whom we name according to our experience is not a compositum made up from body and soul as from two separate pre-existing entities, but is rather a being who is completely one and whole right from the origins and prior to any such distinction, so that any account we can give of body and soul in man presupposes this prior unity of his as something that is already given. Now it is in accordance with this that on the Christian interpretation [277] when an event such as sickness befalls man it always affects him as a whole, as a single entity, one in which body and soul can indeed be conceptually distinguished, yet the unity of which is objectively speaking indissoluble.

Again the experience of so-called physical sickness contains (even though one can often only understand this with difficulty) a statement concerning the sick man as a person who is spiritual and free, a statement about the tasks which his own sickness imposes upon him whether he has already managed to fulfil these or has failed to measure up to them: tasks of courage, of honesty with himself of patience, the task of turning the experience to good account in the religious sense, finally the task of integrating this intervention from without which we call sickness into the single overall meaning which a man has to find in his own existence, a task at which he may already either have succeeded or failed. By the time one becomes aware of sickness in one's self as an objective fact one has already taken up a definite attitude towards it, and this taking up of an attitude is an integral element in the sickness itself.

Admittedly – and in considering the indissoluble unity to be found both in man himself and in his sickness this is the obverse side of the coin – there is no stage in sickness or aspect of it in which man's awareness of himself is confined solely to the spiritual side of his being, or to the level of personality. Something which seems to belong purely to the realm of the spirit and the mind when we are ill can in fact be something extremely physical, something which does not belong to the level of personality at all, but has impinged upon us from without. When a sick man is suffering from the extremes of depression and even despair this may be not so much the expression of his basic attitude as a person but rather a symptom of the external affliction as this impinges upon his personhood, the reflection of something external and alien to his real personality. And it may be that in the same man who seems to be in such a distressed state spiritually speaking what seems to be merely physical and material in his power of resistance, the hold he keeps on life, is in fact to a large extent only the embodiment of a spirit that is fundamentally sound, at one with itself and also with that which has been imposed upon it because it is at peace with God.

It can also be the case that the body has more to tell us about the spirit and the spirit more about the body than either can tell us about itself. Our concrete experience of sickness is never such that we are in a position [278] unequivocally to distinguish between the spirit and the body as two completely separate compartments. We can never say with certainty 'This factor has come upon me from without and is my lot which I must accept and bear. *That* factor, on the other hand, in the sickness I am suffering from is something intrinsic to myself, something which is the outcome of, my own free action, for which I myself bear the responsibility'. It is, of course, true that a diagnosis which distinguishes between the physical and the spiritual factors in an illness is, provided it is prudently conducted, quite legitimate, and, indeed, necessary from a therapeutic point of view. But however true this may be, when it comes to the ultimate judgment, we can never have any absolute certainty as to which of the various symptoms from which the sick man suffers are to be ascribed to the affliction visited upon him *ab externo*, and which are the outcome of his own free acts as a person.

Now all this means that what is true of man in general applies in a special and heightened sense to the sick man: he is made aware of experiencing himself yet at the same time the ultimate significance of this experience remains obscure to him. Man experiences himself as mystery, as a question to which he has no answer. He experiences his own existence as obscure and almost inexplicable not because it is lacking in objective reality, because there is nothing real behind the experience, but because the depths of being in this self which he experiences exceeds his powers of penetration.

But if man experiences himself as mystery, if he accepts this mystery silence and is submissive enough to accord its full value precisely to in his experience of himself which is too much for him to question, if accepts this question to which he can find no answer not as something which is devoid of meaning and dark, but rather as a light which is too blinding for his eyes, a light which only the eyes of another, of him whom we call God, are strong enough to look upon, then the sick man is at one with God. For he has submitted himself to God, to him to whose charge the indivisible unity of action and passion, the lot that is sent us and the acts which proceed from ourselves as free beings, must remain committed in order that we can come to terms with our sickness even when it remains a mystery.

In sickness man is brought face to face with himself in a particularly uncompromising way. He achieves a state of isolation with himself. And yet he does not know exactly what this state is into which he has fallen, [279] whether he is to regard himself as the controller or the controlled. But he does become aware of this: that that which is under his own control and which he decides upon for himself has, in its final outcome, to be decided for him by another, and that which he recognises as his own act of control and decision is something which in his sickness he experiences as subject, once more, to the silent and more remote control of another, which presides over his own controlling act.

Sickness sharpens a man's awareness of both factors in his life, both that he is in control and that at the same time he is subject to control from without. But he must accept that these are two distinct aspects of what is ultimately one and the same situation, namely the state of being ill, just as body and soul are two distinct elements in the single entity that is man himself, and just as an openness to outside influence and the power to direct himself are intrinsic to his own nature. And if he does this, if he accepts his sickness as a single reality involving both action and passion but ultimately a mystery beyond our own personal control, then both the sick man himself and his sickness are in God's hands. Then the sickness acquires a redemptive value.

### *Patience*

In offering these few brief considerations on the time of sickness I should like to say something about patience. The relevance and appropriateness of this to the situation of the sick will surely be apparent to all. At the same time, however, we should not be too ready to discourse about the sick and the patience they should exercise, for this is not a subject on which the healthy should have much to say.

As soon as the subject of 'patience' is introduced one is immediately reminded of the opening words with which Cyprian of Carthage introduced his treatise on patience seventeen hundred years ago, to the effect that the listeners must already have what the speaker is trying to recommend to them, namely patience, for without this he would not have any listeners at all. And in fact, if one were totally devoid of patience in any sense, then one would never be able to acquire it either, because the very act of acquiring it in itself entails the exercise of patience over a long period. Some degree of patience, therefore, must be numbered among the basic attitudes of man, one that is deeply rooted in his nature. The reason for this is that it must, to a certain extent, support itself. It must already be there in order that it may be

summoned up. It must be [280] ready to hand in order that the higher degrees of it may be sought after.

Patience derives from something which is fundamental to the nature of man as such, namely that he is both a person endowed with spirit and simultaneously a being subject to the limitations of time. Beings that are of their nature eternal have no need of patience. They have no further perfection to achieve beyond their present state. They do not look for anything further because the sheer eternity with which they are endowed means that their natures are already in the state of their due fulness and perfection. Again beings which are non-spiritual do not need patience because their consciousness is always limited to the present moment, and precisely in virtue of this fact they know nothing of continuous change as such, of the past and future as these affect them, even though they themselves are constantly undergoing a process of development and change.

But we are beings who are both endowed with knowledge and subject to time. We carry our past with us, and in our cognitive faculties we already reach out for that which has still to come in the future. We actually and consciously live through the process of change to which we ourselves are subject. The interplay of past and future acquires reality as our experience. Not only are we unable to hold back the process of transition and change, we cannot even conceal from ourselves our own inability to do this. Our existence is governed by a single and uninterrupted process of change. We are empowered to see this existence of ours as a whole and to recognise as a law of its very nature that it must constantly press on to further developments. To recognise and accept this fact is what we might call 'existential' patience, patience at the existential level. We patiently accept the fact that our existence is subject to change in this way, and yet that it retains its unity throughout the process of change. But the very fact that we are this kind of being and cannot avoid being so, that we have this kind of nature and cannot escape from it – this in itself, once more, presents us with a task to accomplish, one in which it is possible for us to fail; something which we must do for ourselves, exercising courage and faithfulness, being consciously and deliberately true to our own nature in order to achieve it. For a person endowed with, freedom and with spiritual faculties has in his make-up factors which are given, inevitable and inescapable, *and* at the same time other factors which are mysterious and unpredictable. It is this that sets him the task of exercising his freedom responsibly.

[281] Man, therefore, must freely and consciously come to terms with this special quality in his own nature. He must recognise and accept himself as a being subject to constant and purposive change, and at the same time endowed with cognition. He must not suppose that he is able to interrupt this change, must neither attempt to hold himself back at the stage which he has already achieved, nor attempt prematurely to achieve a stage which still awaits him in the future. In other words he must patiently accept the change to which his existence is subject for what it is, and recognise that it has a meaning and is directed towards a goal. Only then can he be said to be patient with this existential patience of which we have been speaking.

The point to be realised is this: What man has to recognise and accept with this elemental kind of patience is not simply those factors arising here and there in his life which are disagreeable, and which seem to him to be part of a meaningless lot imposed upon him from without. What he has to tolerate and endure with patience at its deepest and most elemental level is rather *himself* – himself considered as one who is on the way to some future goal, one who may neither stop and remain where he is, nor suppose that he is journeying into an empty and indeterminate void without any ultimate point of arrival. Our impatience with everyday vexations is simply a sign of the fact that at a deeper level of our life we have not succeeded in freely attaining to the virtue of this existential patience and making it our own.

There are those who seek to cling on to the circumstances of the present moment with its

pleasures, its successes, its seeming self-sufficiency even though all these are, of their nature, precisely transient and fleeting; those who cannot let go of what belongs to yesterday until what belongs to tomorrow has already been proved to be harmless and reassuring; those who cannot freely enter into new situations which seem to be more arduous or to hold out less promise, who cannot entrust themselves to the darkness or to that which is under the control of another; those who take fright at the silent power which presides over and controls our lives, and which is God, even though he alone knows and decides where this transitory existence of ours began and where it will end. Such as these are incapable of attaining for themselves this virtue of existential patience. They betray the fact that they do not possess this virtue by the impatience which they exhibit in their daily circumstances, and when they meet with the shortcomings, the pains and toils which belong to human life even at its most commonplace and everyday.

[282] On the basis of this too we can understand why sickness above all and pre-eminently should be the situation in which the genuineness of patience is put to the test and proved. For in sickness a still higher degree is demanded of us of that patience which we have to exercise in any case in our everyday lives. And hence it is a situation which really reveals whether we possess this virtue of existential patience or not, or, to put it more modestly and more accurately, whether we have the *will* to possess it.

It might be supposed that sickness is a pause, an interlude that temporarily suspends the process of change in our human lives, one in which nothing happens, in which one is condemned to a sort of suspended animation, in which one becomes feeble and poor, and so that sickness is a kind of suffering which should not exist, so that the most that can be said is that we must painfully reconcile ourselves to it in order to prevent it from being even worse. But the process of change and progress in human existence is carried further precisely in sickness itself. Sickness takes us out of that state which we had regarded as stable and constant, out of a life which had seemed so full and fulfilling, so unvaryingly right for us, and therefore fixed and unchanging, out of our work, which had acted as an opiate masking our secret existential *Angst*, out of the business of everyday, out of the state of health which we had taken for granted. In sickness we are carried beyond all this into a state which is unmistakably transitory and not enduring, a state of pain and enfeeblement in which we are manifestly no longer in control, but rather at the mercy of unknown and alien forces. In this sense the real process of change and transition in human existence is accelerated in sickness. And once we have been forced out in this way from a state which only seemed to be fixed and stable, the question presents itself insistently and in a manner which cannot be denied of whether this is a sign that our existence is meaningless and destined soon to collapse into a void of nothingness, or rather a sign that it is being controlled and directed towards an ultimate goal of blessedness. Thus in sickness we are still more inescapably faced with the question of whether or not we do possess the virtue of existential patience.

Patience, therefore, is a quality that is inherent in the very nature of human existence. Now when man finds himself summoned by this to exercise patience freely and consciously as a virtue he can, of course respond by taking refuge in doubt, and this doubt can in its turn be [283] disguised as an optimism that is over-facile and out of place. Another way in which he can evade the question is simply to employ the resources of chemistry and drugs to suppress it and silence it in his heart. But to the question of how to exercise and acquire this virtue of patience as the outcome of a consoling and strengthening faith both of these answers would be false. Impatience in sickness is tantamount to admitting and disclosing the fact that one is deficient in that deeper existential kind of patience in which one keeps one's eyes fixed trustfully upon the underlying unity which persists throughout all the process of change in one's life; in which one recognises that this underlying unity points one on to the still deeper and more mysterious fact that that life is being directed and controlled by a power beyond

one's comprehension, a power that one accepts precisely in its incomprehensibility as loving and benevolent, and that one calls God.

Of course impatience in the sick may simply be due to a nervous condition without being in the least a manifestation of the basic attitude of the sick person's innermost heart. And no one can say exactly which of these two conditions is making itself felt in the painful restlessness of the sick at any given point, or how far such restlessness is due to either condition. Not even the sick person himself can say unequivocally whether his impatience is to be taken as a sign of the former condition or of the latter. Our patience or impatience too is something which, in the last analysis, only God can judge. But for all this there is one thing that we can and must do: we must examine our consciences with regard to the impatience which manifests itself on the surface of our everyday lives during sickness, and see from this what sort of patience in the truest and deepest sense we have managed to achieve. We must recognise that we are called in a special sense to this elemental kind of patience, and must be responsive to this call. It is a patience that takes the form of a certain gentleness and quietness of attitude (and so of holiness too: for it is the outcome of grace) in recognising and reconciling ourselves to the constant change and transition to which we are subject, and which runs as a single uninterrupted process beneath the surface of our lives. We must submit trustfully and without any clinging to the past to this process of transition, in which our lives are carried gently yet relentlessly onwards to that final goal in which their ultimate consummation can be attained. For provided this existential patience has been transformed into the virtue of patience, i.e. into a conscious and deliberate acceptance of, and submission to this [284] process of change and transition in a spirit of faith and love this can bring us the fulness of blessing in which our ultimate perfection consists.

Man has to learn freely to accept himself as a creature of God in his eternity, a creature which is at once subject to time and endowed with self-knowledge, and which therefore has to direct itself towards its own due consummation through a process of transition in time. To achieve this without either clinging on to the present or succumbing to anxiety (*Angst*) about the future – that is what it means to turn existential patience into a consciously exercised virtue of patience. Patience in our everyday affairs and patience in time of sickness have to be practised and so to bear witness to the fact that we have patience at this deeper and more elemental level within us too. The former kind of patience has to be nourished and strengthened by the latter, and so to prove that it is authentic and true.